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Viet Nam: Release 13 activists jailed on baseless charges, stop crackdown on dissidents

The conviction and heavy sentencing of 13 peaceful Catholic activists in Viet Nam today flies in the face of justice and is part of an escalating government crackdown on freedom of expression, Amnesty International said.

A court in Nghe An province today sentenced the 13 activists to between three and 13 years' imprisonment on charges of undertaking "activities aimed at overthrowing" the government. One other activist was given a suspended sentence.

"We urge the Vietnamese authorities to release the activists immediately and unconditionally," said Rupert Abbott, Amnesty International's Researcher on Viet Nam.

"To misconstrue the activities of the activists as trying to overthrow the government is baseless – they have been imprisoned only for exercising their right to freedom of expression."

The 14 activists who stood trial – 12 men and two women – were first arrested in mid-2011 on suspicion of ties to the US-based political party Viet Tan, a group calling for peaceful political reform in Viet Nam, which the Vietnamese government has labelled as terrorist.

Among the activists are students, bloggers, community workers and supporters of prisoner of conscience Cu Huy Ha Vu, who was imprisoned in April 2011 for allegedly "spreading anti-state propaganda" after calling for a multi-party system in online articles.

"Last year saw the Vietnamese government step up its crackdown on government critics and peaceful activists," said Abbott.

"The convictions of the 14 activists illustrate a deeply worrying trend, and suggest that the crackdown is set to continue in 2013," he said.