

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 41/011/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 109
26 April 2005

Viet Nam: Release all prisoners of conscience immediately

Amnesty International warmly welcomes reports that two prisoners of conscience will soon be released as part of an amnesty for more than 7500 prisoners. The amnesty marks the 30th anniversary of the end of the Viet Nam War on 30 April.

Among those to be released are Reverend Pham Ngoc Lien, a 63-year-old member of the Catholic Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC), who has spent the last 18 years in prison, and Le Thi Hong Lien, a young woman teacher for the Mennonite Christian Church, who has reportedly suffered beatings and abuse during 11 months of imprisonment .

"The anticipated release of these two people, both in poor health, is long overdue and a welcome, positive step," Amnesty International said. "However, we once again call for the Vietnamese authorities to release all prisoners of conscience and to stop incarcerating political and religious activists for exercising their fundamental human rights to freedom of expression, association and religion".

"Unless substantive changes are made to the law, all Vietnamese people remain at risk of arrest simply for peacefully expressing their political and religious beliefs."

"Despite releasing these prisoners of conscience, the Vietnamese authorities are continuing to flout domestic and international law by using security legislation to imprison people for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and religion, despite guarantees in the Vietnamese Constitution and international human rights law. It is time for the authorities to take responsibility for upholding and protecting the human rights of everyone."

Background

Reverend Pham Ngoc Lien (Tri) (63), is a member of the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC), who has been imprisoned for the last 18 years. He was among a group of 23 Roman Catholic monks and priests arrested in May 1987 during raids on Thu Duc monastery, near Ho Chi Minh City, for holding training courses and distributing religious books without government permission. In October 1987, he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment plus five years' house arrest on release under national security legislation for "conducting propaganda to oppose the socialist regime and undermine the policy of solidarity". The other 22 monks arrested were also sentenced to between four years and life imprisonment; all have been released except for Reverend Pham Ngoc Lien (Tri) and Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Huan), who have been adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International for many years. To Amnesty International's knowledge, Brother Nguyen Thien Phung is not included in the current amnesty and will remain in Z30A prison, Dong Nai province.

Le Thi Hong Lien, 21, a teacher for the Vietnamese Mennonite Christian Church, was arrested in June 2004 along with a number of other members of the Mennonite community. On 12 November, she was sentenced to 12 months in prison on charges of "resisting a person performing official duty" for her role in a protest. Members of the Mennonite Church, and other religious organizations that are not sanctioned by the state, have suffered official harassment and imprisonment for many years. Le Thi Hong Lien had taken part in a number of demonstrations against the government's policies on religion, and had been arrested many times. She is reported to have been subjected to beatings and abuse during her imprisonment, resulting in a serious deterioration in her physical and mental health. In February she was transferred to Bien Hoa Mental Hospital under the charge of prison guards.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>