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Viet Nam activist prison sentence condemned

Amnesty International has condemned the eight-year prison sentence handed down to a Vietnamese pro-democracy activist and former Communist Party official for posting articles on the internet calling for democracy.

Vi Duc Hoi was convicted of "spreading anti-government propaganda" by a court in northern Lang Son province on Wednesday. He was also sentenced to five years of house arrest after his prison term.

Hoi, a member of the Bloc 8406 network of pro-democracy and human rights activists, had written extensively about corruption and injustice in Viet Nam.

He was arrested on 27 October 2010. Before his arrest, public security officials had raided his home on 7 October.

"This verdict and sentence is a shocking testament to how the Vietnamese authorities show complete disregard for freedom of expression when it comes to people who peacefully challenge government policies," said Donna Guest, Deputy Director of the Asia-Pacific Region.

Vi Duc Hoi joins at least 30 other peaceful dissidents currently serving long prison terms; others are awaiting trial. Amnesty International considers all of them prisoners of conscience.

"It is difficult to understand why the authorities feel so threatened by peaceful dissidents such as Vi Duc Hoi. Rather than locking them up, they should be allowed to contribute to civil society and promote free speech and human rights," said Donna Guest.

Hoi joined the Communist Party in 1980 and held key positions within the organization. But he was expelled from the party in 2007 after he started calling for democratic reforms.

Vi Duc Hoi was previously arrested in April 2008 for his part in protesting the Beijing Torch Relay in Viet Nam, and was publicly denounced by a 300-strong party rally the following June.

Article 88 of the national security section of Viet Nam's 1999 Penal Code is frequently used to imprison peaceful dissidents and government critics.

"The Penal Code is long overdue for reform to bring it into line with international treaties which Viet Nam has ratified, and claims to uphold," said Donna Guest.