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Viet Nam: Ailing dissident priest jailed again

Amnesty International has urged the Vietnamese authorities to immediately and unconditionally release a Catholic priest who was returned to prison yesterday while on parole to treat serious health problems.

Police arrested Father Nguyen Van Ly, aged 64, yesterday in the central diocese of Hue before an ambulance transported him to prison. Authorities claim he was returned to prison for distributing anti-government leaflets during his parole.

He had been serving an eight-year prison term for “conducting propaganda against the state” when a stroke and a brain tumour led to his temporary release in March 2010.

“Father Nguyen Van Ly is in very poor health and should never have been arrested in the first place. He is a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for his peaceful pro-democracy work,” said Donna Guest, Amnesty International’s Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

“The Vietnamese authorities must release him without delay, and in the meantime reveal his whereabouts and grant him immediate access to family members, his lawyer and adequate medical treatment.”

Father Ly was sentenced to eight years in prison and five years of house arrest in 2007. The publisher of the secret dissident journal To Do Ngon Luan (Freedom and Democracy), he co-founded the online pro-democracy movement Bloc 8406 and has helped to set up other banned political groups in Viet Nam.

Father Ly had been serving his jail term in Ba Sao prison, near Ha Noi in northern Viet Nam, when he suffered a stroke in November 2009. He did not receive a proper diagnosis or adequate medical treatment and was only transferred to a prison hospital in Ha Noi some two weeks later. Despite being partially paralyzed, he was returned to his prison cell on 11 December 2009.

On 15 March 2010, he was granted a one-year “temporary suspension” of his sentence to seek medical treatment for a brain tumour.

Since the 1970s, Father Ly has spent some 17 years in prison – amid harsh conditions and often in solitary confinement – for calling on Vietnamese authorities to respect freedom of expression and other human rights.

“Father Ly is one of dozens of activists serving long jail terms for their peaceful criticism of the Vietnamese authorities,” said Donna Guest.

“Peaceful dissent and the promotion of democracy are criminalized in Viet Nam, and these prisoners of conscience are being held in deplorable conditions.”