

AI INDEX: ASA 41/01/99

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 GMT 7 JANUARY 1999

VIET NAM: A small step forward for human rights

The release of 13 prisoners of conscience in 1998 was a small step forward for human rights protection in Viet Nam, but much remains to be done, Amnesty International said in a new report published today.

The organization welcomed the early release of these prisoners, but emphasized the urgent need for legal reform to protect human rights in the future.

“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,” the organization said.

Large scale prisoner amnesties were announced in Viet Nam in September and October 1998, and several prominent prisoners of conscience, including Dr Nguyen Dan Que and Professor Doan Viet Hoat, were released. Yet the laws under which they were arrested and sentenced remain in place.

Vietnam’s criminal code makes no distinction between peaceful political and religious dissent, and armed opposition to the state. Peaceful government critics can be charged under Viet Nam’s stringent national security laws, and sentenced to long prison terms.

“Vietnamese law criminalizes the right to freedom of expression,” Amnesty International said. “The law has become an instrument used to limit people’s rights, instead of protecting them.”

Amnesty International’s new report “Viet Nam: A step forward for human rights?” provides details of the prisoners released under the 1998 amnesty program, and of the legal problems surrounding human rights protection in the country. It also highlights the cases of religious and political dissidents who are still detained in Viet Nam.

Lack of access to the country for human rights monitors means that constructive dialogue with the Vietnamese authorities remains impossible. Amnesty International submitted a copy of the report to the Vietnamese government in advance of publication, inviting comments. No response was received.

“Ability to accept constructive criticism is an important test of any government’s political will to protect the rights of its citizens and residents,” Amnesty International said.

“We invite the Vietnamese government to open a dialogue with us on issues of mutual concern. Action is needed now to ensure that the recent step forward for human rights in Viet Nam not merely an isolated incident, but marks start of new era.” ENDS...\

To receive a copy of the report, or to arrange an interview, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on (44) (0) 171 413 5566.