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Viet Nam: Freedom for elderly prisoners of conscience

Amnesty International warmly welcomes reports that several prisoners of conscience will be released in the coming days. Those due to be released include Dr Nguyen Dan Que, Nguyen Dinh Huy, Thich Thien Minh and Father Nguyen Van Ly. They are being released as part of a general amnesty for over 8,000 prisoners to mark Tet, the Lunar New Year.

"These four human rights advocates have been incarcerated for a total of 88 years since the late 1970s," said Natalie Hill, Deputy Asia Director at Amnesty International. "Given the harsh conditions in Vietnamese prisons it is remarkable that they are still alive."

Amnesty International has been campaigning for these prisoners of conscience for many years and some of the credit for their release must go to the thousands of Amnesty International volunteers worldwide. From Thailand to Portugal, members have held vigils and written to the Vietnamese authorities and their own governments to ensure that these prisoners have not been forgotten.

"The Vietnamese authorities have at long last realised that locking up elderly men for decades, for doing nothing more than peacefully criticising government policy, is both a tragedy for those concerned and a stain on Viet Nam's reputation," said Natalie Hill.

Nguyen Dinh Huy, 73, a former English and History professor, was the founder of the Movement to Unite the People and Build Democracy (MUPBD). He was arrested in November 1993 with 11 other MUPBD members for planning an international conference on democracy and human rights in Ho Chi Minh City. He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment under national security legislation and has suffered from ill health for many years. He had previously spent 17 years in prison for "re-education" without charge or trial.

Father Nguyen Van Ly, 58, a Catholic priest, was arrested in May 2001 and was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in October 2001, under national security legislation. Peaceful activities he carried out in the practice of his religious beliefs over a number of years are believed to be behind his imprisonment. These included repeated calls for more religious freedom and criticism of the government's human rights policies. This was his third period of imprisonment.

Dr Nguyen Dan Que, 62, a distinguished doctor and former Director of the Cho-Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, has spent 20 of the last 26 years in prison for criticizing the government's human rights record. He was most recently arrested in March 2003 and has been held in incommunicado detention. He is in poor health, suffering from kidney stones and high blood pressure. He was arrested after issuing a statement, published abroad, asserting that there was no freedom of information in Viet Nam.

Dr Que was sentenced to two-and-a-half years' imprisonment after an unfair trial on 29 July 2004.

Thich Thien Minh, 51, a Buddhist monk also known by his secular name Huynh Van Ba, was arrested and imprisoned in 1979, after protesting at the government takeover of the pagoda where he lived. The pagoda was then razed to the ground. He was accused of "trying to overthrow the government" and sentenced to life imprisonment. He has been subjected to long periods of solitary confinement and was reportedly shackled hand and foot for a continuous three-year period.

"Whilst we are delighted by the anticipated release of these men, unfortunately many other prisoners of conscience remain behind bars in Vietnamese prisons," said Natalie Hill.

These include Dr Pham Hong Son, Nguyen Vu Binh and Nguyen Khac Toan, who are part of a loosely-connected group of intellectuals and formerly high-ranking communist party members. The group has been openly critical of government policies, circulating petitions and using the Internet to communicate with overseas Vietnamese opposition groups. Amnesty International calls upon the Vietnamese government to release all remaining prisoners of conscience immediately and without condition.

"The Vietnamese have the responsibility to uphold the right of freedom of expression for everyone in Vietnam," said Natalie Hill. "We trust that the fundamental rights of those released will be respected and that they will be allowed to live freely without harassment or intimidation."

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