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Viet Nam: Rights denied in cyberspace

(26 November 2003, Hong Kong) At least 10 people in Viet Nam have been arrested and some sentenced to long prison terms for using the Internet whilst criticising the government or sharing information with overseas Vietnamese groups. Amnesty International today criticized the Vietnamese government for using national security as a pretext to stifle freedom of expression and other human rights in cyberspace.

"In Viet Nam, pushing the 'send' button can result in dire consequences including years in prison and family and friends put under 24 hour surveillance," warned Amnesty International in a report published today.

"Amnesty International regards all those detained solely for the peaceful expression of their opinions as prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release," the organization says in the report: "Socialist Republic of Viet Nam: Freedom of expression under threat in cyberspace".

Brothers Nguyen Vu Viet, Nguyen Truc Cuong and their sister Nguyen Thi Hoa, whose prison sentences are due to be appealed on 28 November 2003, were arrested for having provided information via Internet and telephone to overseas Vietnamese groups about religious freedoms in Viet Nam, and the situation of their uncle, long-standing critic of the government's religious policies, Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, who is himself a prisoner of conscience.

"The vindictive response of the authorities to the activities of these three young people, including the denial of their rights to freedom of expression and privacy by highly intrusive surveillance and monitoring of Internet messages and mobile phone conversations, are a serious breach of human rights that are enshrined in Viet Nam's own Constitution," emphasized Amnesty International.

"Why are the Vietnamese authorities so threatened by the freedom of information and exchange of ideas that the Internet makes available?", asked the organization. "How can the sharing of information, which is already in the public domain and criticising the government, be interpreted as 'espionage' resulting in lengthy prison sentences?"

In December 2002, cyber-dissident and businessman, Nguyen Khac Toan, was charged with 'espionage' and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for passing information via e-mail to overseas groups about recent demonstrations and for assisting farmers writing petitions and protesting to the authorities about corruption and land confiscation.

"The Vietnamese government appears unwilling to recognize that the Internet can only be a tool for development and prosperity if the right to freedom of expression and information is respected fully in both law and practice," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

Amnesty International is increasingly concerned about human rights in cyberspace for people in Viet Nam, in particular the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, information, peaceful assembly and the right to privacy. The Internet has provided people critical of the government with more opportunities to peacefully express their opinions. However, the relative ease with which dissenting voices can be traced in cyberspace, combined with the absence of privacy protection, has increased their risk of arrest and prosecution.

Whilst recognizing the Vietnamese government's legitimate responsibility to protect its citizens, Amnesty International believes that national security should not be used as a pretext to stifle criticism, freedom of expression, and human rights generally, in cyberspace.

In the recent crackdown on dissent in Viet Nam, at least 10 individuals have been arrested for exchanging e-mails with contacts in the Vietnamese diaspora, posting articles critical of the government on the Internet and expressing dissenting opinions. Six of these cyber-dissidents have been sentenced to long prison sentences after unfair trials. Others include well-known dissident Dr Nguyen Dan Que, who was arrested in March, 2003 and has been denied all access to his family or lawyer to this day. He has reportedly also been charged with espionage but has not yet been tried.

In today's report, Amnesty International outlines the history and development of the Internet in Viet Nam and the parallel development of control mechanisms over those who use it. The report details the cases of 10 cyber-dissidents making reference to international standards of fair trial and protections of freedom of expression and related rights which Vietnamese authorities are obliged under international law to uphold.

The report examines international human rights standards in relation to rights associated with the Internet and refers to emerging international principles specifically related to human rights in cyberspace.

For the full text of the report, please go to:

"Socialist Republic of Viet Nam: Freedom of expression under threat in cyberspace"

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa410372003>

Also on 26 Nov, **Amnesty International launched its new Asia-Pacific Website**, a virtual base for campaigning in the Asia and Pacific region. Using this new website, the organization will reach out to a far larger Asian audience, posting regular reports and campaigning materials and attracting new members and supporters across the region, from Sri Lanka to the Pacific.

The new website will report on human rights violations across the region including launch postings and articles on arrests for using the Internet in Vietnam, rape in police custody in Sri Lanka, beatings of Indonesian asylum seekers by the Malaysia authorities and executions in China. The site includes a call for action and shows Amnesty International membership in the region campaigning to defend their rights, and the rights of others.

Launched initially in English language, the site will in future have postings in regional languages.

To view Amnesty International's new Asia-Pacific Website please go to:

<http://www.asiapacific.amnesty.org>

To arrange an interview, please contact Amnesty International's office in Hong Kong, on:
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For Amnesty International feature story on the freedom of speech and the use of internet worldwide, please
go to: www.news.amnesty.org

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