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Viet Nam: Catholic Priest should be unconditionally released

A Vietnamese human rights activist and Catholic priest who was temporarily allowed to leave detention yesterday should be unconditionally and permanently released, Amnesty International urged today.

Father Nguyen Van Ly, who is serving an eight year jail term for spreading “propaganda” against the state in 2007, was yesterday released for a period of 12 months on humanitarian grounds to receive medical treatment.

Ly, 63, has already served three years in prison. He is one of the founders of the internet-based pro-democracy movement “Bloc 8406” and participated in banned political groups.

“Father Ly should never have been detained in the first place. His release should be unconditional and permanent and he should be allowed to receive proper medical care,” said Amnesty International’s Viet Nam researcher Brittis Edman. “This small positive step is happening against the backdrop of a deteriorating human rights situation, with 16 dissidents imprisoned in the last six months alone, and dozens more currently detained for criticism of government policies.”

Nguyen Van Ly’s health has rapidly deteriorated in prison. He suffers from partial paralysis following a stroke in November last year and doctors have also discovered a brain tumour.

He will remain under surveillance during the temporary release period while he lives at a house for retired priests in the diocese of the Archbishop of Hue, in central Viet Nam, where he has previously stayed.

The peaceful pro-democracy activist has been jailed three times since the 1970s. Amnesty International first adopted Father Ly as a prisoner of conscience in December 1983, and following subsequent arrests.

Amnesty International continues to urge the government of Viet Nam to amend or repeal national security provisions of the Penal Code which are used to silence and detain activists. These provisions are in direct breach of international treaties ratified by Viet Nam. The authorities must allow peaceful dissent, debate, freedom of speech and assembly consistent with Viet Nam’s obligations under international law, and release all prisoners of conscience.

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