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Viet Nam: Crackdown on dissent continues

Amnesty International's growing concerns about the human rights situation in Viet Nam are illustrated in a report released today about the espionage case against the nephews and a niece of Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, who was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in October 2001 for his public criticism of the government policy on human rights and religious freedoms.

"The very serious charges of espionage which can carry the death penalty in Viet Nam have been levelled at the relatives of Father Ly in a vindictive attempt to further punish this family for providing information about their imprisoned uncle to the outside world," said Amnesty International today.

This case and the recent re-arrest of long-time dissident and prisoner of conscience Dr. Nguyen Dan Que are part of an on-going crackdown against all forms of dissent in Vietnam which has seen the detention and imprisonment of dozens of government critics.

In an unexpected move however, the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Phan Van Khai, held a widely publicised meeting with Thich Huyen Quang, the head of the unofficial Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Amnesty International welcomes this development.

"The Vietnamese government must follow up this unprecedented meeting with concrete steps to ensure that all its citizens, regardless of their views and beliefs are permitted to practice their fundamental rights of freedom of religion and expression guaranteed by the Vietnamese Constitution and international human rights agreements to which Vietnam is a state party," the organization said.

Despite the ground-breaking events in Hanoi last week, Amnesty International understands that Thich Huyen Quang is not being permitted to return to his home temple in Ho Chi Minh City. Instead he is being obliged to return to *de facto* house arrest at a pagoda in Quang Ngai province where he has lived under tight surveillance for over 20 years without charge or trial.

The UBCV Secretary General and anointed successor to Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do, is also currently being held under house arrest in Ho Chi Minh City. According to reports, he is due to complete the term of his house arrest or 'administrative surveillance' on 1 June 2003. Thich Quang Do is regarded by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. The organization keenly awaits his release and anticipates that he will then enjoy in full his rights of freedom of movement, expression, and association.

"Thich Quang Do's release will be a good indication as to whether the Vietnamese authorities are serious about respecting the rights of perceived religious dissidents or if the meeting of Phan Van Khai and

Thich Huyen Quang was simply an empty and cynical gesture from the authorities towards a sick and elderly man and his followers," the organization said.

Background

Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV)

The Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam was formed in 1951 and was prominent in the anti-war movement in South Viet Nam during the 1960s. It was banned by the present government in 1981 but many members of the church both in Viet Nam and overseas continued to follow the teachings of its monks. Attempts by the Vietnamese government to control all religious institutions in the country have not deterred the UBCV followers from practising their religion. Many UBCV senior monks have been and remain in prison or under house arrest.

Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly

In October 2001, Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment plus five years probation on release after a trial lasting only half a day. The accusations against him included "defying an administrative order of confinement issued by a state agency and undermining the unity policy" under vaguely worded provisions of national security legislation used to criminalise peaceful dissent. He has previously spent 10 years in prison. Father Ly now faces another long term of imprisonment solely for the peaceful expression of his dissenting political and religious beliefs. He is regarded as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International.

To download the full text of the report "*Socialist Republic of Viet Nam: The espionage case against the nephews and niece of Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly*", please go to:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa410042003>

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