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Public Statement

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Viet Nam: Early release of cyber-dissident Le Chi Quang

Amnesty International learnt today of the early release of cyber-dissident and prisoner of conscience Le Chi Quang who was serving a four-year prison sentence for the peaceful exercise of his fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association.

"We are profoundly relieved that Le Chi Quang has been freed more than two years before his release date. This young man, who suffers from chronic ill-health, should never have been arrested and imprisoned in the first place" said Amnesty International today.

His original sentence, in November 2002 for "carrying out propaganda against the State", included a three year period of house arrest on release. It is unclear as to whether Le Chi Quang will have to serve out this term.

In contrast to this welcome release, the authorities continue to tighten regulations and controls over the use of the Internet.

In January 2004, the Ministry of Public Security issued 'Decision 71' which included requirements for users of Internet cafés to provide personal identification information before logging on. The decision also prohibits using the Internet to store "state secrets", an ill-defined and 'catch-all' concept in Viet Nam. The 'Decision' further increases pressure and responsibility on Internet café owners for the contents of messages sent from their establishments and the websites accessed by their users.

"Whilst the authorities realize that the 'information highway' is essential to Viet Nam's economic development, they are also scared by its use by the government's critics outside of their control" said Amnesty International. "How many cyber-dissidents will have to be arrested and locked up and how many families destroyed?"

Amnesty International calls on the Vietnamese government to respect the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association of its people guaranteed both by Viet Nam's own Constitution and international treaties to which the country is a state party.

Background

Le Chi Quang was one of a number of high-profile individuals openly critical of government policies and advocating peaceful political reform arrested in the last three years. The dissidents are characterized by their use of the Internet to propagate their ideas and to contact overseas Vietnamese groups. Many of them have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms. They are all regarded by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience.

Three high-profile dissidents remain in pre-trial detention. All three have been held for periods in excess of time stipulated by Vietnamese law and face charges, including espionage, which carry lengthy prison terms.

Pham Que Duong, 73, a former high-ranking military and communist party official was arrested in December 2002. It is believed that his trial will take place before the end of July 2004.

Tran Khue, 68, a distinguished former literature professor was also arrested in December 2002. His trial is also believed to be imminent.

Dr Nguyen Dan Que, 62, an endocrinologist and one of Viet Nam's best known dissidents was arrested in March 2003. Dr Que has been imprisoned on two separate occasions previously for a total of 18 years because of his advocacy for peaceful political reform and criticism of government policies. He is being held 'incommunicado' and has not been permitted visits by his wife and family members since his arrest. He also suffers from serious medical problems.