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Viet Nam: Crackdown on activists must end

Yet another politically motivated trial in Viet Nam has turned citizens who have only peacefully expressed opinions into prisoners of conscience. Today, three leading members of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) were sentenced to prison terms of between three and five years in what the prosecutor in the Ho Chi Minh City People's Court described as a warning to other "hostile forces."

Le Nguyen Sang, 48 years old, a medical doctor and leader of the PDP, was sentenced to five years imprisonment, while journalist Huynh Nguyen Dao and lawyer Nguyen Bac Truyen, both 39, were sentenced to three and four years in prison respectively.

The three men were charged with "conducting propaganda" against the state under article 88 of the penal code for taking part in setting up the party, communicating online with a government critic abroad, and spreading leaflets critical of the government. The trial, reportedly closed to international observers, lasted around four hours.

Tomorrow, on 11 May 2007, two prominent human rights lawyers face trial in the Ha Noi People's Court. Nguyen Van Dai, a member of the online pro-democracy group Bloc 8406, and Le Thi Cong Nhan, a spokesperson for the Progression Party, are also facing charges under article 88. Four days later, on 15 May, Tran Quoc Hien of the United Worker-Farmers Organization (UWFO) and a Bloc 8406 member, is to stand trial for charges reportedly under article 88.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about this politically motivated campaign by authorities to silence dissenting voices which has gradually intensified since the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Ha Noi in November 2006. On 30 March 2007, Catholic priest Father Nguyen Van Ly and four associates were found guilty of "conducting propaganda" against the state. Lawyers, trade unionists, religious leaders and Internet dissidents with links to emerging pro-democracy groups have been targeted; many are facing trial.

In breach of international human rights law the Vietnamese penal code criminalises peaceful dissent. Amnesty International reiterates its calls on the authorities to urgently reform provisions relating to national security and ensure they are either removed or brought into line with international law. The organisation also repeats its calls on the Vietnamese authorities to honour its international human rights obligations by releasing all prisoners of conscience.

Background

Over 20 people have been arrested and detained since November 2006 in the on-going crackdown. So far, eight have been convicted, six of them sentenced to prison terms.

The rights to freedom of expression and assembly are guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The covenant is binding on Viet Nam, which is a state

party since 1982. Yet, peaceful government critics have been charged with above all article 88, for “conducting propaganda”, but also for “spying” (article 80) and “undermining the unity” (article 87), all criminal offences in the penal code’s Chapter XI, which relates to national security.

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