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Vietnam: Protest Trial of Dissident Charges Include Testimony to U.S. Congress

(New York, December 30, 2003) -- The international community should protest the trial of a Vietnamese dissident on spying charges scheduled for December 31, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said today.

In a joint statement, the two human rights organizations called for Nguyen Vu Binh's immediate and unconditional release.

According to Vietnamese sources, Nguyen Vu Binh -- a 35-year-old journalist, writer and advocate of peaceful political reform -- will be tried on spying charges on December 31. The case against him includes slandering the Vietnamese state for abuse of human rights in written testimony to the U.S. Congress in July 2002.

Political trials of this kind in Vietnam routinely conclude in a matter of hours, without due process and with heavy jail sentences handed down to those convicted, decided in advance by the Vietnamese government. Under article 80 of Vietnam's Penal Code, spying is punishable by 12 to 20 years' imprisonment, a life sentence, or the death penalty.

"Nguyen Vu Binh faces a summary trial and hefty jail term for speaking out against abuse," said Rory Mungoven, global advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "The U.S. Congress, which heard testimony from Binh last year, has a responsibility now to protest his case."

Binh, who received the prestigious Hellman/Hammett writers' award in 2002, was a journalist at the official Communist Party of Vietnam journal, Communist Review (Tap Chi Cong San) for almost 10 years. In December 2000 he resigned from his post to attempt to form an independent political party -- the Liberal Democratic Party. He was also one of several dissidents who attempted to form an Anti-Corruption Association in 2001.

Binh was arrested on September 25, 2002 and has since been held in incommunicado detention. His wife and family members were refused access to him in prison. One month before his arrest, Binh criticized a controversial border treaty with China in an article entitled "Some Thoughts on the China-Vietnam Border Agreement," which was distributed on the Internet.

"Vietnam should stop criminalizing free expression by arresting democracy activists on charges of spying and other vaguely-worded 'national security' crimes," said Daniel Alberman, Southeast Asia

researcher from Amnesty International. "Nguyen Vu Binh has never advocated the use of violence."

Binh was earlier detained on July 20, 2002, when he was brought in for several days of questioning by the Public Security Ministry after he signed a group petition to the government and sent written testimony about human rights violations in Vietnam to a briefing sponsored by the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in Washington, D.C.

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