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Viet Nam: All elderly prisoners of conscience must be freed immediately

To mark 1 October, the United Nations Day of Older Persons, Amnesty International is publishing a short report on Viet Nam, "In place of veneration, incarceration: Elderly prisoners of conscience".

"Locking up old men for years on end for nothing more than publicly speaking out against government policies is legally and morally wrong," Amnesty International said today.

The report documents some cases of elderly prisoners of conscience from various backgrounds. They are all between 61 and 86 years old, some are suffering from serious health problems. As elderly citizens they rank among the most vulnerable members of society. None of them have committed or advocated violence.

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience held by the Vietnamese authorities, especially elderly ones, who have been detained solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs. The organization is deeply concerned about conditions of detention in Viet Nam, especially access to adequate medical care, which is of particular concern for elderly prisoners.

Some elderly prisoners of conscience in Viet Nam are held under house arrest for long periods of time under laws which are in clear breach of international human rights standards that Viet Nam has signed up to. Those under house arrest are not given the chance to challenge the legality of their detention in a court of law.

"These elderly prisoners should be freed immediately and unconditionally and they should be allowed to return to their families and friends in order to live out their remaining years in conditions of dignity and respect that they deserve," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

Elderly prisoners of conscience include Nguyen Dinh Huy, 71, a former English and History professor who is married with three children. He founded the Movement to Unite the People and Build Democracy, an organization advocating peaceful political change and respect for human rights, without state authorisation. He was arrested in November 1993 for planning an international conference in Ho Chi Minh

City on democracy and human rights and then sentenced to 15 years imprisonment. He had previously been detained for "re-education" without charge or trial for 17 years before his release in January 1992, and has spent 26 of the last 28 years in prison. He is reported to be suffering from Parkinson's Disease.

The Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, an 86 year old Buddhist monk and Supreme Patriarch of the unofficial Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam, has spent most of the time since 1977 under house arrest because of his outspoken defence of human rights and in particular the right to practice religion freely. Although his situation has been alleviated in recent months, he has not been formally released from administrative detention.

Dr Nguyen Dan Que, 61, a long-standing human rights activist, has been detained in *incommunicado* detention since March 2003 after he issued a statement which was published abroad about the lack of freedom of information in Viet Nam. He is facing charges of "spying" which carry a lengthy prison term, and possible death penalty. He has previously spent a total of 18 years in prison for exercising his right to freedom of expression and association. Dr Nguyen Dan Que suffers from health problems requiring medication.

For the full text of the report, please go to:

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa410322003>

Public Document

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