

Vietnam Frees Dissident From Jail

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(HANOI) Pham Hong Son, a high-profile dissident in Vietnam convicted of espionage, was released from jail Wednesday but will remain on probation for three years, a U.S. lawyer working on the case has said.

Son, 37, was freed as part of an amnesty gesture made in advance of Vietnam's National Day celebrations, which take place Saturday. But Son will remain under surveillance and will be limited by travel restrictions during his three-year probation, said Daniel Silverberg, a volunteer attorney from Freedom Now, an organization based in Washington that has been working on Son's case.

"He was put into a police car and driven home," Silverberg said. "One of his first requests was to visit with his mother, and he was denied permission."

Son's case attracted international attention when he was arrested on espionage charges for having translated and circulated over the Internet a document titled, "What is Democracy?" The original article was from the Web site of the U.S. Department of State.

In 2003, Son was sentenced to 13 years in jail for spying, but the term was then reduced to five years on appeal.

The United States, the European Union and international human rights groups have voiced strong objections to the conviction.

Silverberg said it was still unclear how many restrictions would be imposed on Son, but he said that Freedom Now would continue to lobby the government to let Son enjoy freedom without conditions.

"In our minds, legally, this is not freedom," Silverberg said. "Obviously, we're pleased that he's been released from prison where he shouldn't have been," he said. "But to the extent that we're hearing reports that he's going to be subject to house arrest or to severe restrictions, it's unquestionably troubling."

On Monday, Le The Tiem, vice minister of public security, announced that Son was among more than 5,000 inmates that would be released in a general amnesty. He confirmed that Son would continue to be on probation for three years, but did not clarify what limits would be imposed on his freedom.

The minister did say, however, that Son would become an "ordinary citizen" with the "rights and obligations" of other people.

Vietnamese Dissident Released

Agence France Presse

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Prominent Vietnamese dissident and pro-democracy activist Pham Hong Son has been released early from prison as part of a presidential amnesty, his wife said. "He is here with us," Vu Thuy Ha told AFP by telephone from her home in Hanoi.

Son, a 37-year-old businessman and trained doctor, was released several months before the end of a five-year sentence for espionage. Authorities told journalists he would start a three-year sentence under house arrest.

"He faces three years of surveillance at home," Ha said. "There is a huge crowd of police in front of the house. It is terrible ... All neighbors are staring at us."

Son was arrested in Hanoi on March 27, 2002, a few weeks after translating and publishing online an article entitled "What is democracy?" from the US State Department website.

He was charged with spying after communicating with "political opportunists" in Vietnam and overseas and sending anti-government and anti-Communist Party documents abroad, according to state media at the time.

He was sentenced to 13 years' jail in June 2003 despite protesting his innocence. Two months later, the term was cut to five years.

Ha said she went to his jail in Thanh Hoa province Wednesday morning, two hundred kilometers south of Hanoi, but then learned her husband had been taken home by police on a different road.

Asked about his health, described during his detention by several human rights organisations as very poor, she said: "He is OK."

She said earlier that Son would see doctors for a thorough examination.

"He is very happy to be released but he heard today about the death of his father (few days ago). He asked whether he could visit his mother immediately, but police refused."

His release followed sustained diplomatic pressure on Vietnam and comes as the communist country is seeking to join the World Trade Organisation later this year. Restrictions on Son's freedom have raised concerns among human rights activists.

"We find it extremely disturbing," said Daniel Silverberg, a lawyer with US-based Freedom Now which has supported Son's case, among other Vietnamese dissidents, in recent months.

"We will call on the government of Vietnam to release him unconditionally," he said. The organisation has already submitted a petition to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention regarding Son.

On Wednesday Sophie Richardson, deputy director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch joined with several human rights organisations in urging the Vietnamese authorities to free Son and other dissidents.

"Like many others, Pham Hong Son should never have been arrested in the first place," Richardson said. "While Son may have been released from Vietnam's appalling prison system, his fundamental freedoms will continued to be curtailed."