

Vietnam Must Release Religious Freedom Advocate

By Maran Turner

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The president of Vietnam is at the Vatican today meeting with Pope Benedict XVI. This meeting takes place amid allegations that Catholics are still being persecuted by the Vietnamese government. One issue that is sure to be a sticking point is Vietnam's continued detention of a Catholic priest, who has recently suffered two strokes while in custody.

The Rev. Nguyen Van Ly, 63, has been kept in solitary confinement since his trial on March 30, 2007, where he was convicted of disseminating propaganda against the Vietnamese government. Ly, who has spent more than 16 years in prison since 1977, has been repeatedly punished not for propaganda-spreading, but rather his advocacy to improve religious freedom and respect for human rights.

Ly is a prisoner of conscience, and his health is in jeopardy. In order to ensure he receives consistent medical care and is allowed to spend time with his family, Ly must be released. More importantly, were the Vietnamese government to release Ly on humanitarian grounds, it could help pave the way for improved relations with the Vatican and the Catholic community in Vietnam.

The Catholic priest is among Vietnam's best known imprisoned activists. Though he started out as a religious freedom advocate, Ly quickly concluded that democracy only sure way to protect freedom of speech and religion, a belief that led him to cofound Bloc 8406, an organization advocating a multiparty democracy in Vietnam.

During his period of detention in the early 2000s, Ly was regarded as a prisoner of conscience, and his case received international attention and garnered the support of members of the U.S. Congress. After several years of international pressure, Ly was released and was free for two years before being arrested again in 2007.

Today, the priest's case is still a priority for U.S. policymakers. In July, 37 U.S. senators sent a letter to Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet calling his attention to the "serious flaws" in Ly's case and calling upon the president to release Ly. The letter also respectfully requested information on Ly's health and welfare.

Nine days after the senators inquired, Ly suffered his first stroke. His family was not informed until a month and a half later. During this delay, the quality of medical attention he received is not known.

Four months later, on Nov. 14, Ly was found unconscious on the floor of his cell after having collapsed from a second stroke. He has since been held in a hospital in Hanoi, where he is surrounded by at least five guards at all times. As a result of the strokes, Ly is partially paralyzed, and his prognosis is uncertain. Though some family is permitted to visit him in the hospital, fellow priests who have come to pray with him have been turned away.

Debilitated as the strokes have left him, Ly still knows who he is and is aware enough to request that the hospital staff not refer to him as a prisoner. Voicing his objection with only the soft tone he can muster, he says, "I am not a prisoner. I am a prisoner of conscience."

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