

## **Vietnam Frees Two Dissidents From Jail: Vietnam Releases Two High-Profile Dissidents From Jail in Lunar New Year Amnesty**

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The Associated Press

Jan. 31, 2005 - Vietnam announced Monday that it would release two of its best-known dissidents from prison following intense pressure from international human rights groups and the United States.

Roman Catholic priest Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly and physician Nguyen Dan Que were set to be freed along with 8,323 other prisoners before the Lunar New Year holiday, or Tet, which begins Feb. 9, Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang announced at a press conference.

Both have been outspoken advocates of religious freedom and democracy and have openly criticized the government for its poor human rights record. Four other inmates jailed for violating national security laws were also released.

"We are absolutely delighted at this turn of events," said Jared Genser, of Washington-based Freedom Now, an organization that represented the two dissidents' families. "It's clear Nguyen Dan Que and Father Nguyen Van Ly benefited from a massive push from around the world to secure their releases."

Ly angered Vietnamese authorities when he gave written testimony in 2001 to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urging the United States not to ratify a bilateral trade agreement until the communist government improved its human rights record.

He was sentenced the same year to 15 years in prison, but the term was reduced to 10 years in 2003. His case drew attention from the U.S. Congress, and Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas sent a letter to the Vietnamese government earlier this month calling for Ly's release.

"This is a move in the right direction," Brownback told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. "But the Vietnamese government still has a lot of work to do to ensure very basic human rights and religious freedom."

He said the U.S. Congress would continue to press Hanoi on the issue, which will remain "a big bump in the road" between two countries' expanding relations if Vietnam's human rights record does not improve.

Meanwhile, 54 U.S. lawmakers sent letters in October to President Tran Duc Luong calling for Que's release. A month later, the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention said his detention violated international civil rights laws.

Que, a former Nobel Peace Prize nominee, has been in and out of jail for nearly 20 years since 1978.

His latest arrest was in 2003, days after he had written articles posted on the Internet criticizing government curbs on the media. He was sentenced to 30 months in jail for "abusing democratic rights to infringe upon the interests of the State."

Others granted amnesty included Nguyen Dinh Van Long and Nguyen Dinh Huy, pro-democracy advocates jailed for attempting to overthrow the communist government; Thich Thien Minh, a Buddhist monk who belongs to the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam for participating in activities that encourage that the government be overthrown and Pham Minh Canh, jailed for criticizing the government; and Nguyen Long Sy, also jailed for attempting to overthrow the government.

Last year, the U.S. State Department ranked Vietnam as one of the most repressive countries in the world for religious freedom. The designation could result in economic sanctions against Vietnam if the situation does not improve. President Bush has a March 15 deadline to decide whether action is necessary.

Only a handful of government-approved religions are allowed to operate in Vietnam, but several outlawed churches continue to exist. Hanoi maintains that only lawbreakers are punished and that no one is jailed for their religious beliefs.