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Viet Nam: High cost of lifelong commitment to human rights

Dr Nguyen Dan Que, a distinguished medical doctor and long-time human rights activist, was sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment on 29 July 2004. This is the third time he has been imprisoned for his beliefs. Since the 1970s, he has courageously and persistently exercised his fundamental rights to freedom of expression and has paid a terrible price, spending more than 19 of the last 26 years in prison.

This has not only been a tragedy for himself and his family, but also for those advocating respect for human rights who have tried to engage in open discussion on political and social issues in Viet Nam. Dr Nguyen Dan Que's concern for human rights in Viet Nam predates the end of the Viet Nam War, beginning in the 1970s before the reunification of North and South Viet Nam in 1975 and the current government coming to power. He spoke out, together with other leading intellectuals about conditions of detention in the then South Viet Nam.

Dr Nguyen Dan Que was born in April 1942 in northern Viet Nam, then occupied by the Japanese army, who, for the duration of the Second World War, replaced the French -- the colonial power in the region. He studied medicine at Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) University, graduating at age 22, when he joined the teaching staff of the university medical school. He was awarded United Nations scholarships for in-service training in Europe in the late 1960s and early '70s.

He returned to Viet Nam in 1974 to join the teaching staff of the Saigon University Faculty of Medicine as Assistant Professor of Endocrinology. He is a specialist in radiotherapy. After the end of the Viet Nam war in 1975, he became Director of Cho-Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City. He openly expressed criticisms of the new government's healthcare policies, which led to his dismissal in 1976 from the hospital.

After his dismissal, Dr Que formed an organization called the National Front for Progress and is reported to have published two underground newspapers concerning human rights, social welfare and healthcare. This led to his arrest on 18 February 1978 on charges of "rebellious against the regime" and forming a "reactionary" organization.

The Vietnamese authorities have never tolerated the founding of independent organizations and media, especially those critical of government policies. Dr Que was detained without trial until his release 10 years later in 1988.

Undaunted by 10 years imprisonment, he was determined to continue advocating for human rights. In January 1990, he became an international member of Amnesty International, campaigning for the release of prisoners of conscience outside his own country. He wrote thoughtful letters to the governments of Cuba, Greece and Indonesia.

Later that year, Dr Nguyen Dan Que founded a political movement in Viet Nam called the High Tide of Humanism Movement (*Cao Tran Nhan Ban*). This movement was based on calls for peaceful political change. A manifesto of the movement issued on 11 May 1990 called on people in Viet Nam and abroad to sign a petition demanding non-violent political, social and economic change for Viet Nam. Dr Que was arrested again on 14 June 1990 because of this, and was detained for almost 18 months before being brought to trial on 29 November 1991.

He was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment under national security legislation for "activities aimed at overthrowing the people's government." The accusations against him included the circulation of documents, and recruiting members for an organization that was alleged to have called for the abolition of socialism in Viet Nam and which criticized the government in the international community. He was also accused of using his membership with Amnesty International for political activities against the government.

Dr Que was released early from prison in September 1998, along with 12 other prisoners of conscience, under a special amnesty marking National Day on 2 September. These releases were unprecedented in Viet Nam's history of using the judicial system to criminalise peaceful

political dissent and raised hopes that the authorities' policy on freedom of expression and association was undergoing a fundamental change.

These hopes were not realized as imprisonment, or detention under house arrest, of political and religious dissidents continued. Dr Que has increasingly received international recognition for his lonely struggle. He has been the recipient of numerous international human rights awards and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in successive years in the early 1990s.

Following his release in 1998, the authorities asked Dr Que and his family to leave Viet Nam and resettle in the USA. They declined to do so and Dr Que took up advocacy on human rights once more, issuing statements that were published abroad, despite his being under surveillance and facing harassment by the authorities. Dr Que was rearrested on 17 March 2003 outside his home and on his way to an Internet café, just four days after he had issued a statement via the Internet asserting that there was no freedom of information in Viet Nam. This statement was published abroad.

This year, the authorities have announced that a series of large prisoner amnesties would take place, with the initial release of as many as 10,000 prisoners. The first amnesty will, as in 1998, mark Viet Nam's National Day on 2 September and will be followed in 2005 with amnesties in February, May and September. Dr Que should never have been imprisoned simply for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. Notwithstanding, Amnesty International calls on the Vietnamese authorities to make Dr Nguyen Dan Que a beneficiary of this amnesty.