

Sick Vietnamese priest returned to prison for anti-government writings

BANGKOK - An ailing priest who is one of Vietnam's most well-known democracy activists has been returned to prison, more than a year after he was sent home to seek treatment for a brain tumor, a prison official said.

Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, 64, was escorted by police July 25 from his home at a church in central Hue city to Ba Sao prison outside the northern capital of Hanoi, said the official, who asked for anonymity, citing policy, several news agencies reported.

The priest's eight-year prison sentence for subversion had been suspended in March 2010 to allow him to seek treatment for his illness. The Asian church news agency UCA News reported that Father Ly's condition was unknown when he was taken away.

However, the official said the priest, who uses crutches to help him walk, was in "normal health condition" after making the 300-mile trip from Hue to the prison.

"His health is better than the time when he was released, but for a man who had suffered strokes, it's hard to recover fully," the official said.

The government accused Father Ly of distributing anti-government writings.

An official told the Associated Press that the priest's one-year medical parole expired March 15 and that he defied a court order to return him to jail. The official said authorities forcefully removed the priest from his residence within the compound where Hue Archbishop Etienne Nguyen Nhu The resides.

Father Ly was released from prison in March 2010 to seek treatment for a brain tumor and three strokes he suffered during his three years in prison.

He has been in and out of prison and house arrest for years, most recently for helping found a group called Bloc 8406, which promotes multiparty democracy.

A longtime supporter of religious freedom and human rights, Father Ly was sentenced to eight years in prison and five years of house arrest in March 2007 for alleged anti-government activities. He has denied the charges.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom condemned the Vietnamese government's action.

"Father Ly should be immediately and unconditionally released," said Leonard Leo, commission chairman. "Less than one week after the United States helped to mediate Vietnam's dispute with China over the South China Sea, Vietnam ignores our government's consistently stated concerns about the treatment of Father Ly, a frail Catholic priest who has peacefully advocated for the fundamental right to freedom of religion, by seizing him without any warning."

Human rights organizations worldwide also called for Father Ly's immediate release, citing health concerns and violations of basic human rights.