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Vietnam upholds Catholic lawyer's conviction

by Joachim Pham

NCR Today

Hanoi — An appeals court in Hanoi today upheld the sentence given to a jailed Catholic lawyer, who is on hunger strike, while international human rights groups called on Vietnam to release him.

The People's Supreme Court upheld the jail term of 30 months for lawyer and dissident Joseph Le Quoc Quan for charges of tax evasion. His firm was also fined 1.29 billion dong (approximately US \$61,000), local sources said.

Attorney Ha Huy Son, who supported Quan in court, told the BBC's Vietnamese section that he is disappointed by the appeal court's decision that has been approved.

Church sources stated that only Quan's mother and wife were allowed to be at the four-hour appeal trial, while hundreds of Quan supporters stood outside in the cold and rain.

Sources say supporters had attended a special Mass at Redemptorist-run Thai Ha Church and then marched to the court.

They wore T-shirts with Quan's photo that read "Freedom for Le Quoc Quan" and raised banners saying, "We are always with you" and "Justice and truth for Quan."

"We are very concerned about the unfair trial. We demand the government release him soon," a young man said. They also sang "Prayers of Peace" by St. Francis Xavier.

Security officials prevented people from entering the court by erecting barriers on streets leading to it. Police also took photos and video of supporters.

Sources said during the trial, Quan, who is kept in a prison in the capital, suddenly was faint due to his poor health. He started his hunger strike Feb. 2 to demand jail authorities provide him access to religious books and to a priest for confession and communion. He is also on hunger strike as a way to protest the appeals court that had the power to uphold his sentence.

Quan, 43, who was director of a law firm based in Hanoi, was arrested Dec. 27, 2012, on charges of evading corporate income tax; he was not tried until Oct. 2, when he was sentenced to 30 months imprisonment and a fine of 1.2 billion dong.

In its statement issued after Quan's conviction last October, the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi said, "The use of tax laws by Vietnamese authorities to imprison government critics for peacefully expressing their political views is disturbing."

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The blogger and human rights lawyer is well-known for taking active part in pro-democracy activities and giving legal support to local Catholics petitioning the government to return church properties. His firm also provided legal aid to factory workers and poor people.

Many Catholics, including relatives of jailed activists and people of other faiths, gathered at churches on Sunday in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to pray for Quan to be tried fairly.

On Feb. 17, Human Rights Watch issued a statement saying the appeals court "should strike down the political conviction of Quan on trumped up charges of tax evasion."

Brad Adams, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division since 2002, said, "People in Vietnam and around the world are scrutinizing Vietnam's human rights record like never before, looking for the signs of improvement the government itself has promised. A truly independent court would overturn Le Quoc Quan's conviction, restore his full rights to practice as a lawyer, and allow him to resume his work as one of Vietnam's most determined human rights defenders."

The article pointed out that "in 2006-2007, Quan spent five months in Washington, D.C., as a fellow of the National Endowment for Democracy, which is funded by the U.S. Congress. He did research on civil society in connection with his interest in an economic development path for Vietnam that would benefit the nation's poorest."

It said Quan was first arrested in March 2007, four days after returning to Vietnam, for alleged subversion, and released in June that year: "He was arrested again Dec. 27, 2012, nine days after the BBC published his article criticizing the retention of Article 4 of Vietnam's constitution, which makes the Communist Party preeminent in national political life."

Having been imprisoned for 14 months already, Quan faces about 16 months' more jail time.

[Joachim Pham is an *NCR* correspondent based in Vietnam.]

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