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Vietnam releases leading dissident from prison

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HANOI, Vietnam — Vietnam released one of its leading democracy activists from prison Monday after the dissident Catholic priest spent three years and suffered two strokes in solitary confinement, his lawyer and sister said.

Authorities released Father Nguyen Van Ly from a prison near Hanoi at 4 a.m. and drove him in an ambulance back to his hometown of Hue, his sister, Nguyen Thi Hieu, told The Associated Press.

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In 2007, Father Ly was sentenced to 8 years in prison for disseminating anti-government propaganda during a dramatic trial in which police muzzled him for shouting anti-communist slogans and accusing Vietnamese officials of practicing "the law of the jungle."

Father Ly is one of Vietnam's best-known human rights activists and has spent more than 15 years in prison since 1977, according to Freedom Now, a Washington-based group that serves as Ly's international counsel.

"We're beyond delighted that Father Ly has been released," said Maran Turner, Freedom Now's executive director. "But Vietnam still has many human rights challenges. The government is still imprisoning many other activists."

In recent months, Vietnam has sent 16 democracy activists to jail in one of its harsher crackdowns on dissent. Some observers have speculated that the crackdown is part of political jockeying ahead of next year's Communist Party congress.

Turner said she was not sure why the government had decided to release Ly now.

"It's hard to understand what moves governments to finally do the right thing," she said. "This has been a long time coming."

Vietnamese government officials could not immediately be reached for comment.

Officials at the U.S. embassy, which has pressed for Ly's release, said they had seen reports that Ly was paroled so that he could seek medical treatment.

"If those reports are true, it would be a welcome humanitarian gesture," said David Moyer, an embassy spokesman. "We don't yet have any specific information about the conditions of his release."

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Father Ly is partly paralyzed on the right side of his body but can walk with a cane, according to his sister, who said he is staying at the Archdiocese of Hue, where priests planned to call doctors to assess his health.

He suffered strokes in July and November and for a time was unable to walk, Turner said. Before his release, he received treatment in a Hanoi hospital, where he was watched by five guards, she said.

In July, 37 U.S. senators sent a letter to President Nguyen Minh Triet calling for Ly's release.

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Vietnam frees dissident priest in poor health

HANOI (Reuters) - Vietnam freed one of its highest-profile political prisoners on Monday, releasing outspoken Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly five years before his sentence was up, a U.S.-based advocacy group said.

A spokesman for the U.S. embassy in Hanoi said he was aware of reports that Ly had been paroled for medical treatment and said: "If these are true it would be a welcome humanitarian gesture."

A perennial thorn in the side of the ruling Communist Party, Ly has spent some 16 years in prison over the past three decades for advocating greater human rights in the one-party state.

The 63-year-old cleric's latest jail term started in early 2007 when he was sentenced to eight years in prison followed by five years of house arrest for spreading propaganda against the state, but his health deteriorated and last year he suffered two strokes that left him partially paralysed.

Maran Turner, executive director of the rights group Freedom Now, said a nephew of Ly's had told her the priest was released around 4 a.m. on Monday and spent the day driving from Hanoi to his home town of Hue in central Vietnam.

"He spoke to Father Ly this morning. He (Ly) is now back in Hue with his family," she said by telephone from the United States.

She said Ly's health had "deteriorated substantially" during his imprisonment, which included long stretches in solitary confinement, and said it may have been a likely factor in his early release.

There was no immediate explanation of Ly's release from the government and calls to the Foreign Ministry's press office, which handles queries from foreign media, were not answered.

The U.S. and other Western governments have called repeatedly for Ly's release. In July, a group of 37 U.S. senators urged Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet to set the cleric free.

During Ly's four-hour trial in 2007, he was denied access to a lawyer and was silenced by security guards when he attempted to speak, Freedom Now has said. Ly's freedom comes within days of the release of dissident lawyer Le Thi Cong Nhan who served out her three-year sentence. Nhan was also convicted of conducting propaganda against the state, a crime that human rights advocates say the government wields as a tool to silence dissent.

There was no apparent link between the releases of two of the country's best known political prisoners.

In recent months, Vietnamese courts have imprisoned at least 16 people in what some analysts say has been an unusually harsh crackdown on dissent.