

Vietnam Releases Christian Prisoner, Allows U.S. Evangelist to Address Pastors

Pro-Democracy Advocate in Vietnam Released from Prison

A Protestant prisoner of conscience who had called for democratic freedoms in Vietnam was released earlier this month after serving a three-year sentence for “propagandizing to destroy the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.”

Attorney Le Thi Cong Nhan’s sentence had been reduced by one year after an international outcry over her sentencing. She was released on March 6. Remaining in prison for another year is her colleague, Christian lawyer Nguyen Van Dai.

The 31-year-old Cong Nhan had also supported a labor union that sought to be independent. Now serving an additional three-year house arrest sentence, Cong Nhan said in a surprisingly frank interview with Voice of America’s Vietnamese language broadcast on March 9 that she has no intention of giving up her struggle for a just and free Vietnam and accepts that there may be a further price to pay.

Cong Nhan, arrested in March 2007, received a Vietnamese Bible from a visiting delegation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom – with official permission from

Vietnam's minister of Public Security – early in her incarceration, but she had to struggle constantly to retain it. Twice she went on a hunger strike when authorities took the Bible away from her.

She had become a Christian shortly before her arrest, and she told Voice of America that while in prison she was able to read the entire Bible.

“In prison the Lord became my closest friend, my teacher, and the one who carried my burdens with me,” she said. “When I was released from prison, I received many words of praise and of love and respect – I became a bit worried about this, as I do not consider myself worthy of such. I believe I must live an even better and more worthy life.”

Her prison experience has confirmed her calling and faith, she said.

“As a direct result of my prison experience, I am more convinced than ever that the path that I have chosen is the right one,” Cong Nhan said. “Before prison I was just like a thin arrow, but now I have become a strong fort.”

Luis Palau Allowed to Speak

While Christians in several parts of Vietnam are still subject to abuse from local officials, the country's national authorities have continued to allow high-profile Christian

events. On March 17, renowned U.S. evangelist Luis Palau was allowed to address more than 400 pastors in a day-long event at the New World Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City.

Palau, who had arrived in Hanoi with his entourage on March 13, had addressed nearly 200 Hanoi area pastors at an evening event at the Hanoi Hilton on March 14. The two events were streamed live on , a popular website that reports on Protestant news in Vietnam. Hundreds of Vietnamese in Vietnam and abroad were estimated to have watched the presentations.

The events were deemed significant, if not historic, by Vietnam's Christian leaders. Very rarely is a prominent foreign Protestant leader allowed to address Vietnamese leaders, especially one from the United States.

The events were significant also in that they brought together leaders from virtually all segments of Vietnam's fractured and sometimes conflicted Protestant groups, Christian leaders said. The gatherings included leaders of open churches and house churches, registered and unregistered churches, and urban and even ethnic minority groups from Vietnam's remote mountainous regions.

Two representatives of a Mennonite church headed by activist pastor Nguyen Hong Quang, however, were

turned away by police.

Palau and Mike

McIntosh, pastor of San Diego mega-church Horizon Christian Fellowship, strongly challenged the Vietnamese church leaders to strive for unity. The assembled pastors were challenged to put aside past conflicts and suspicions for the sake of the Kingdom of God in Vietnam, with Palau saying that unity was a requirement for God's blessing on their churches and nation.

Some Vietnamese leaders responded by expressing remorse for their divisions and committed to start working toward reconciliation.

Organizers and

participants said they hope such short events will lead to larger gains. Though the Luis Palau Association had originally planned for a two-day event for 2,000 pastors, most agreed this was an unprecedented first step toward a bigger goal.

With an invitation from all segments of the Protestant community in Vietnam in hand, the Luis Palau Association is prepared to help organize evangelistic festivals in Vietnam in 2011, the centenary of Protestantism in Vietnam.

"There is still a long way to go, but we are seeing miracles piling up," said one senior Vietnamese leader. "It could happen!"

One prominent overseas

Vietnamese leader wondered if Palau's visit to Vietnam could be compared to

Billy Graham's visit to Moscow during the Soviet Communist era.

Also sharing

testimonies during the March 17 event were Rick Colsen, a top Intel executive,

and John Dalton, Secretary of the Navy under President Clinton.