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Former Viet Communist gets 2-year term

Hanoi gives two other dissidents lighter punishment

By Kristin Huckshorns
San Jose Mercury News - August 23, 1996

Hanoi - A former Communist Party loyalist who turned against the party was sentenced Thursday to two years in prison, a court official said. But in an apparent attempt to quell attacks on its hard-line attitude toward dissent, the government imposed lighter sentences on two other outspoken critics, including prominent academic Ha Si Phu.

Le Hong Ha, 69, a former top official in Vietnam's Internal Security Ministry, received a two-year sentence after a one-day trial in Hanoi that was closed to foreign reporters.

In the most closely watched case of the three, the court handed down a one-year prison term to Phu, 56, whose given name is Nguyen Xuan Tu. However, it was made retroactive to the date of Phu's arrest, last Dec. 5 so he will be released in three months.

The court also gave a 15-month suspended sentence to Nguyen Kien Giang, 66, a former party member who began to speak out against its policies in the mid-1960s. Giang's ill health and the government's desire to appear reasonable may have spared him a prison term, according to one source.

The government saves its harshest retribution for Ha, the former high-ranking party cadre. He was arrested nine months ago for allegedly revealing state secrets. Observers familiar with the case said Ha actually was being punished for his vocal support of another jailed communist-turned-dissident, Hoang Minh Chinh.

The outspoken Phu, a scientist and writer from Da Lat, 48 miles northeast of Ho Chi Minh City, also was arrested at that time during an eight-month crackdown that preceded the party congress, held in late June. Phu's arrest came after he gave an interview to a Vietnamese-language radio station in Orange Country. In that interview, Phu said the U.S. government should not grant Vietnam most-favored-nation trading status until "democracy is well developed." He subsequently was charged with revealing state secrets.

His case had drawn the attention of international human rights groups and overseas Vietnamese organizations.

"A conviction of Ha Si Phu would have brought another round of international condemnation," said a Western diplomat who did not want his name used.

"Overseas groups did not care as much about Hong Ha. In his previous life within the party, he himself put a lot of innocent people in jail."