

## ***dpa* : Vietnam defends Internet restrictions, denies thwarting free speech**

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HANOI, June 19, 2003 (dpa) - One day after a court sentenced a leading Internet dissident to 13 years in prison, Vietnam defended its tight control over cyberspace and said the communist government does not suppress freedom of speech.

“We don’t agree with critics saying that Vietnam restricts Internet usage,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Phan Thuy Thanh said Thursday in a press briefing.

Nevertheless, she added, the Internet must be regulated.

“Information against the state of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, threatening security, stability or social order or violating Vietnamese traditions and values cannot be allowed to be floating on the Internet.”

Her comments came a day after the Hanoi People’s Court sentenced Phan Hong Son, 36, to 13 years in prison Wednesday on charges of espionage.

One of at least six “cyber-dissidents” imprisoned for their Internet writings, Son was arrested in March 2002 when police raided his home and seized his computer and other papers. Earlier that month, Son had posted a translation of a U.S. State Department essay titled “What Is Democracy” on a website.

The harsh sentence drew condemnation from international human rights groups and local diplomats who said it showed Vietnam's dim view of human rights.

However, the Vietnamese spokeswoman said Son was arrested because he violated Vietnamese law forbidding contact with foreigners working to destroy the communist government, and said the harsh sentence was not a human rights issue.

"In Vietnam, the fundamental freedoms of the citizens, including freedom of speech, are clearly stipulated in the constitution and are guaranteed in practice," she said.

The government tightly controls all print and broadcast media, and a state-run firewall monitors Internet use and blocks up to 2,000 sites, mainly pornography and web pages run by anti-communist Vietnamese exile groups abroad.

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