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Germany expels Vietnam ambassador diplomat after kidnapping

Berlin warns 'shocking' case could exert 'huge negative influence' on bilateral relations

by: Stefan Wagstyl in Berlin

Berlin is expelling Vietnam's **ambassador and its** intelligence agency station chief after a former senior official of the Hanoi government was allegedly kidnapped and smuggled out of Germany.

The **two men were official was** given 48 hours to leave on Wednesday after what Berlin said was the abduction late last month of Trinh Xuan Thanh, who faces charges of financial mismanagement in Vietnam. The 51-year-old former executive of PetroVietnam, the state oil company, is accused of causing losses of €150m.

Mr Thanh, who was simultaneously fighting extradition and seeking asylum in Germany, turned himself in to police in Hanoi on Monday, according to reports quoting the Vietnamese public security ministry. But the German foreign ministry said there was "no serious doubt" that Mr Thanh had been kidnapped with the involvement of the Vietnamese embassy.

Germany warned that the "unprecedented and shocking" case could potentially exert "a huge negative influence" on bilateral political and economic relations. "This is . . . an extreme breach of trust," said Martin Schäfer, the foreign ministry spokesman.

Berlin demanded that Hanoi immediately return Mr Thanh so that the extradition case and asylum claim could be handled in line with German and international law.

Mr Thanh, who was last seen in Vietnam in the summer of 2016, was kidnapped on July 23 by armed men in Berlin's Tiergarten, a central park

popular with tourists, in full view of passers-by who reported the incident to the police. Berlin police declined to give details, but said: “We are investigating a suspected case of kidnapping and abduction.”

After Mr Thanh surfaced in Hanoi on Monday, German foreign ministry officials summoned the Vietnamese ambassador and gave Hanoi until noon on Wednesday to agree to return Mr Thanh. Once the deadline passed, they condemned the incident with unusual force. German officials are particularly incensed because they discussed the case at a high level with their Vietnamese counterparts less than a month ago, during the G20 summit in Hamburg, which Hanoi, a non-member of the grouping, attended as a guest.

Mr Thanh was a politically influential figure in Vietnam before he fell from grace last year. According to a report by the state-run Vietnam News Agency, from 2007 to 2013 he was managing director and later chairman of PetroVietnam Construction Corporation (PVC), a subsidiary of the state-run oil group.

The news agency report said he “showed irresponsibility and negligence in the leadership and management of the corporation’s operation, and violated legal regulations on business administration, incurring losses of nearly 3.3tn Vietnamese dong (US\$145m)”.

He left the oil group to climb the political ladder and became deputy chief of staff at the ministry of industry and trade before taking the post of deputy head of Hau Giang province in the Mekong delta, in southern Vietnam, reported Vietnam News Agency. Mr Thanh was elected to the National Assembly in May last year but was dismissed after a month and was later expelled from the ruling Communist party.

After Mr Thanh disappeared from Vietnam last summer, an international arrest warrant was issued, the public security ministry said this week. In Berlin, Mr Schäfer confirmed that the Vietnamese authorities had been seeking Mr Thanh.

Mr Thanh could not be contacted for comment. The Vietnamese embassy did not respond to three phone calls or reply to an emailed request for comment.

Vietnam is a modest economic partner for Germany, with two-way bilateral trade totalling \$9bn, but both countries have pledged to raise this to \$20bn. As

a developing economy, Vietnam is a ready market for German machinery and infrastructure equipment manufacturers, headed by Siemens, the electrical group.

Germany has a sizeable ethnic Vietnamese community dating back to the Cold War era when Hanoi sent students for training, some of whom settled in the German capital.

FT 3-8-17: This story has been amended since publication. A previous version incorrectly said that Vietnam's ambassador to Germany would also be expelled from the country