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Anger Said to Lead Man to Immolation

Vietnamese Publisher Called 'Very Upset'

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The man who burned himself to death on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Monday was a Vietnamese newspaper publisher who was "very, very upset" about treatment of his countrymen in Germany and was seeking to demonstrate his anger, a law enforcement official said yesterday.

An acquaintance said, however, that Nguyen Kim Bang, 56, was more depressed about his recent falling out with a newspaper in California, where he had worked for five years until moving to the Washington area about two months ago to help start a newspaper in Falls Church.

The publisher of that new publication, the Capital Voice, gave D.C. police three letters allegedly written by Bang, one to President Bush and two to relatives, but the letters offered no obvious explanation of why he doused himself with a flammable liquid and set himself on fire, according to the law enforcement official. He said the letter to Bush appeared to thank him for the

treatment that Vietnamese people have received in the United States.

But the Falls Church publisher, Bach Hac, and other friends told police that Bang was unhappy about reports that former Vietnamese boat people now living in Germany had been beaten by right-wing extremists, said the law enforcement official, who asked not to be identified.

"He felt they were not being treated properly," said the official. "He said he wanted to do something on behalf of the [boat] people in Germany . . . [He was] a nice, intelligent man who was hurting."

Bach Hac, reached by telephone, declined to comment, saying only that the situation was "very complicated and I can't talk with you."

Another acquaintance, who asked not to be identified, said that while Bang was concerned about the treatment of the Vietnamese in Germany, he seemed more bothered by what had happened at the Vietnam Daily News in San Jose.

According to the friend, Bang started the newspaper and had allowed others to serve as publisher and editor while he "set the type and

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laid out the pages." But a conflict developed and Bang eventually left for Washington, where he told the friend that he was "so depressed."

"He didn't say what had happened," said the friend, but he did say that "he tried to help people but somehow he doesn't get any [help] back."

Officials of the San Jose newspaper could not be reached for comment. But Lina Nguyen, who described herself as a helper at the paper, said earlier yesterday that Bang was "a very Vietnamese guy."

"He lives only for Vietnam," she said. "He wanted to do something for Vietnam. He loved Vietnam . . . But I can't imagine he burned himself there [in Washington]."

In the 1960s, some Buddhist monks in Vietnam immolated themselves publicly as a protest against policies of the South Vietnamese government.

The law enforcement official and several acquaintances said that

Bang was a boat person himself. Thang Nhut Tran, an activist in the Vietnamese community in the Washington area, said he believed that Bang had spent "a couple of years" in a reeducation camp after

"He wanted to do something for Vietnam."

— Lina Nguyen

South Vietnam was overrun by the North Vietnamese army.

Tran said he saw Bang recently and "he was not happy. The way he talked, he was very depressed."

The incident Monday began shortly before 2 p.m. on the Lower West Terrace of the Capitol, overlooking the Mall. Witnesses said that initially they thought it was a flag-burning protest and that only as the flames died did they see a human form.

The victim was burned beyond recognition. Officials found a Toyota key in his pocket and later matched the key with a white pickup truck parked nearby. The truck had no tags, however, and police sought to find the owner through the vehicle identification number.

Bach Hac, the Falls Church publisher, contacted police after a friend suggested the unidentified man might be Bang, the official said. Bang, who had a wife and five children in California, had been living with the publisher because he had no where else to live, the official said.

Vietnamese in Magdeburg, Germany, have been the targets of attacks by "skinheads," while thousands of others have lost their jobs as East and West Germany merged. The head of a relief organization, Rupert Neudeck, said the Soviet airline Aeroflot has agreed to fly Vietnamese from Germany to their homeland, with former East German companies paying the fares.