

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Laos: Use of starvation as a weapon of war against civilians

Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the sharply deteriorating situation of thousands of family members of ethnic minority groups, predominantly Hmong, involved in an armed conflict with the Lao military in jungle areas of the country.

Reports have reached the organization of scores of civilian deaths, predominantly among children, from starvation and injuries sustained during the conflict. It is known that several of approximately 20 rebel groups with their families are surrounded by Lao military and prevented from foraging for food that they traditionally rely on to survive. The organization has written to the Lao government to express its concerns and has urged that the situation be addressed in cooperation with the international community.

Amnesty international condemns in the strongest terms the use of starvation as a weapon of war against civilians as a clear and serious violation of Geneva Conventions that Laos has ratified.

The organization is also very concerned at the reported use of anti-personnel mines by the Lao military. Amnesty International opposes the use of weapons which are inherently indiscriminate and prohibited under international humanitarian law.

The organization calls upon the rebel forces to immediately cease any indiscriminate attacks on civilians, especially the use of bombs in crowded locations, and stop the practice of permitting children in rebel groups to participate in combat. Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions relating to internal armed conflict, as is the situation in Laos, refers and applies to both government and non-government forces alike.

Amnesty International welcomes the recent decision adopted by the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination with regards to Laos during its recent periodic review procedure and urges the Lao government to meet the recommendations of the Committee in full. These include the guaranteeing of free movement for ethnic minority civilians and permitting access to specialist UN agencies throughout the country to ensure that those who need it receive appropriate humanitarian assistance including food and medical care.

Background

A number of ethnic minority groups, especially the Hmong, were allied to the US during the Viet Nam war and its spill-over fighting in both Laos and Cambodia. They have a long history of resistance and aspirations of independence from Lao government control. Following the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975 and the fall of the former regime, as many as a third of the Hmong ethnic minority are believed to have fled the country. Most of these refugees resettled in the USA, but a large

number spent many years in refugee camps in Thailand.

Laos ratified Additional Protocol II to the four Geneva Conventions in 1980. This Protocol explicitly provides for the protection of those not involved in fighting and those who choose to lay down their arms and forbids attacks on civilian populations as well as individual civilians. Those who cease to take part in hostilities "shall in all circumstances be treated humanely". Article 5 of the Protocol sets out strict rules protecting those detained in relation to armed conflict. Children, especially, must be provided with the care and assistance they require.

Amnesty International has called on the Lao government to sign the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (Ottawa Treaty). This entered into force on 1 March 1999, and forbids the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention and transfer of anti-personnel weapons.

Public Document

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