

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 26/003/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 128

Embargo Date: 26 July 2002 01:00 GMT

Laos: Torture, ill-treatment and hidden suffering

"I have been a prisoner for 17 years and seven months and have never been sentenced or tried. I have been illegally imprisoned by people without morals who have destroyed my spirit..." (letter from a foreign national detained without charge or trial in Laos)

In a new report issued today, Amnesty International described how prisoners in Laos are frequently stripped of the most basic human rights; "Individuals are at the mercy of a system which lacks transparency, clarity or reason," the organization said.

Basic safeguards are almost wholly absent and allow for frequent arbitrary detention and torture. A foreign national who was arrested in 2000 reported that immediately after arrest, police did not even attempt to question him, but repeatedly beat him for an hour about the head, chest and body, while he was handcuffed.

"While Lao law does list a number of rights for the accused, those in charge decide to whom it applies and when," Amnesty International said.

"Individuals without money, influence, perseverance, or in some cases just luck, can spend more than a decade in detention without trial. Even when the court orders release, prisoners are often not free to go until they have paid 'prison fees' for 'expenses' during their detention."

In many cases reported to Amnesty International, there have been no court proceedings at all. Access to lawyers depends on whether the detainee has enough money.

Torture is thought to be widespread and routine in Lao prisons. Common methods of torture reported to Amnesty International include: punching and kicking with hands and feet, beating with sticks or truncheons, and long term shackling in wooden stocks. The organization has also received reports of death threats and mock executions, solitary confinement, suffocation, near-drowning, use of electric shocks, burning with cigarettes and extremes of temperature.

Torture and ill-treatment is meted out to prisoners, regardless of their nationality. Even though Australia is a major donor country to Laos, an Australian, Kerry Danes, was tortured after he was arrested in December 2000. Lao nationals under arrest are even more vulnerable.

Anyone arrested and detained in Laos is at risk of serious human rights violations. There are no human rights monitoring groups in Laos, and no access for international experts, while diplomats are often not even informed that their nationals have been detained.

The lack of medical care in Lao prisons is also grave. A total lack of care has led to the deaths of inmates in at least two prisons. French citizen, Francis Prasak collapsed in prison at about 3.30 pm on 5

January 2001. He was holding his chest and begged to be taken to hospital. Prison guards reportedly ignored repeated pleas for help from Prasak and his fellow inmates -- his condition worsened and he died several hours later.

A person who had been detained in Phonthong prison told Amnesty International: "There is no healthcare - only aspirins, so you get aspirin for a headache, and aspirin for malaria, and aspirin for anything." Food rations are also insufficient, lacking nutritional value.

The international community has a major role to play in bringing about change in Laos. All channels should be used to pressure for transparency, application of the law and international standards, and access for independent human rights monitors.

Background

Laos is a very poor country; access to health care and education is restricted, and life expectancy at birth is very low. The government greatly restricts the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. The only legal party is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the communist party which controls the government. Opposition to the government is not permitted and the state retains control of the media, religious organizations and trade unions.

For a copy of the report go to:

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/asa260042002>

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