

AI INDEX: ASA 26/04/98
9 MARCH 1998

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos): Prisoner of conscience left to die

Amnesty International is appalled to learn of the death of prisoner of conscience Thongsouk Saysangkhi in mid-February, months after the organization alerted the Lao authorities to his deteriorating health.

In December 1997 the human rights organization received information that 59-year-old Thongsouk, a diabetic patient, and the two prisoners of conscience arrested and detained with him -- Feng Sakchittaphong and Latsami Khamphoui -- were seriously ill and in need of hospital treatment.

"Appeals to the Lao authorities to help these sick men have clearly fallen on deaf ears," Amnesty International stated. "That Thongsouk Saysangkhi should have been allowed to die, just for writing letters advocating peaceful political and economic change in Laos, is totally unacceptable."

Since their arrest in 1990 for their peaceful political opposition, Amnesty International has been calling for the release of these men. The organization has also consistently asked the Lao authorities to improve their conditions of detention which fell far short of minimum international standards and constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

At various times they have been held in small cold cells with no beds, forbidden to talk to each other, allowed out of their cells only once a fortnight to bathe, and have been threatened with beatings by prison guards. There are no medical facilities available at Prison Camp 7, which is in a remote area of Houa Phan province. Their families have only rarely been given permission to visit them.

"It is too late for Thongsouk and his family, but how much more suffering do Feng Sakchittaphong and Latsami Khamphoui and their families have to undergo before the Lao authorities give them the medical treatment they need," Amnesty International said.

At the very least, the authorities should now take immediate steps to ensure that the two men do not suffer the same fate as Thongsouk. If they need hospitalization, then they should be released and transferred immediately. For months the Lao Government ignored appeals and requests for information concerning Thongsouk's health. Now that it has been learnt that he has died in custody, it is incumbent upon the government to immediately lift all restrictions on access to family and medical visits to the two other men.

ENDS.../

For further information on the imprisonment of Thongsouk Saysanghi, Latsami Khamphoui and Feng Sakchittaphong, see *Lao People's Democratic Republic: Prisoners of conscience suffering in isolation*, November 1996 (ASA 26/02/96).