

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

15 December 2025 ASA 26/0542/2025

LAOS: AFTER 13 YEARS, RENEWED INTERNATIONAL ACTION NEEDED TO ENSURE JUSTICE IN SOMBATH SOMPHONE'S ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

On the 13-year anniversary of the enforced disappearance of Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone, we, the undersigned civil society organizations and individuals worldwide, urge once again United Nations (UN) member states and Laos' development and international cooperation partners to demand the Lao government promptly resolve Sombath's enforced disappearance and deliver justice and an effective remedy and reparations to him and his family.

Despite calls by civil society organizations for states to use the fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Laos in April 2025 to express their concern over the Lao government's protracted failure to determine Sombath's fate or whereabouts, only one -- Canada -- recommended the Lao government conduct a credible investigation into Sombath's enforced disappearance.

We deplore this silence over Sombath's enforced disappearance, as it is likely to continue to facilitate the Lao authorities in their determination to shield the perpetrators of such a serious crime from accountability.

We note that various individuals who occupied high-ranking positions in the government when Sombath disappeared retain important official roles in the country's political sphere today. These individuals could and should play a proactive role in clarifying Sombath's fate and achieving truth and justice.

For example, Thongloun Sisoulith, who served as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Laos at the time of Sombath's enforced disappearance, is now the country's President and the General Secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party -- effectively, the supreme leader of Laos. Chaleun Yipaoher, then-Minister of Justice, is now one of the National Assembly's Vice-Presidents. Thongsing Thammavong, then-Prime Minister, is currently a National Assembly member. These and other influential individuals hold the key to resolve Sombath's enforced disappearance - a case that has been described by the International Commission of Jurists as "eminently solvable."

UN member states and Laos' development and international cooperation partners should press the government to establish the fate or whereabouts of Sombath and all other victims of enforced disappearances in the country, identify the suspected perpetrators of such serious crimes, and provide victims with an effective remedy and full reparations. To date, no case of enforced disappearance in Laos has been resolved and no perpetrators have been identified or brought to justice.

In its September 2025 report, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances emphasized that the disappearance of community leaders such as Sombath resulted in a collective impact on the groups to which they belonged, including by weakening community ties, depriving them of leadership, and increasing their vulnerability to "cultural erosion and environmental exploitation." The Working Group further stated that Sombath's disappearance created a chilling effect on public participation, noting reports of "serious risks and fear" of retaliation when his name is mentioned.

We urge the Lao government to promptly ratify, without reservations, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which it signed in September 2008, and fully implement it into national law, policies, and practices.

We continue to stand in solidarity with Sombath and his family and urge UN member states to support our calls for truth, justice, and accountability for all cases of victims of enforced disappearance in Laos.

Even if 13 years have passed, the Lao government is obligated to answer the question we and many others have been asking since 15 December 2012: “Where is Sombath”?

BACKGROUND

Sombath Somphone, a pioneer in community-based development and youth empowerment, was last seen at a police checkpoint on a busy street in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, on the evening of 15 December 2012. Footage from a traffic CCTV camera showed that police stopped Sombath’s vehicle at the checkpoint and that, within minutes, unknown individuals forced him into another vehicle and drove him away in the presence of police officers. CCTV footage also showed an unknown individual arriving and driving Sombath’s vehicle away from the city center. In December 2015, Sombath’s family obtained new CCTV footage from the same area and made it public. The video shows Sombath’s car being driven back towards the city by an unknown individual.

For further information, please visit: <https://www.sombath.org/>

ORGANIZATIONS:

1. Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)
2. Amnesty International
3. Asia Democracy Network
4. Asia Human Rights & Labour Advocates (AHRLA)
5. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)
6. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
7. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
8. Center for Prisoners' Rights
9. Commission for Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)
10. Day of the Endangered Lawyer
11. Defence of Human Rights
12. Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND)
13. Focus on the Global South
14. Fortify Rights
15. Fresh Eyes, UK
16. Human Rights Watch

17. International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED)
18. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
19. International Federation for human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
20. International Organising Committee of the Asia Europe People's Forum
21. Lao Movement for Human Rights
22. League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI)
23. MADPET (Malaysians Against Death Penalty and Torture)
24. Maldivian Democracy Network
25. Manushya Foundation
26. Mekong Watch
27. People's Watch
28. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights
29. Transitional Justice Working Group
30. Vietnam Committee on Human Rights
31. WH4C (Workers Hub For Change)
32. World Organisation against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

INDIVIDUALS:

1. Shui Meng and Sombath Somphone's family
2. Andy Rutherford
3. Anne Sophie Gindroz
4. Barbara Williams
5. David JH Blake
6. Kasit Piromya
7. Keith Barney
8. Lara Patriarca
9. Libby Blake
10. Linda Gehman Peachey
11. Murray Hiebert
12. Philip Alston
13. Randall Arnst
14. Rini Astuti
15. Rishabh Ghotge
16. S.Y. Chin
17. San Yuenwah

18. Sibilla Patriarca
19. Sriprapha Petcharamesree
20. Titus Peachey
21. Vitit Muntarbhorn
22. Walden Bello