

PUBLIC

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Fear of torture/fear for safety

LAO PEOPLE'S
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Pastor Maw Karl Mua (m), ethnic Hmong, US national
Thierry Falise (m), Belgian national
Vincent Reynaud (m), French national
Four Lao nationals (names unknown)

On 4 June, four unnamed Lao nationals and three foreign nationals were reportedly arrested by local security services in Phoukout district, Xieng Khouang province, northeast of the capital Vientiane. Their current whereabouts are unknown. They are at risk of torture and Amnesty International is gravely concerned for their safety.

French photographer Vincent Reynaud and Belgian journalist Thierry Falise were researching a story into a group of rebel fighters from the Hmong ethnic group and their families when they were arrested. They were reportedly accompanied by a pastor from the Hmong ethnic group, Maw Karl Mua, who is also a US national, and four local guides, whose identities are unknown. There are unconfirmed reports that at least one person may have been killed when they were apprehended by the Lao authorities. It is not known where they are being held.

It is believed that the seven detainees are being interrogated by security services in order to find out the exact location of the rebel group of Hmong fighters, which is being hunted down by the Lao and Vietnamese armies. It is feared that the detainees may be tortured or ill-treated during interrogation. The four Lao nationals arrested are at particularly high risk of torture. Amnesty International has numerous first hand and other reliable reports of widespread torture and ill-treatment in police custody and prisons in Laos, particularly of ethnic Hmong.

In February and April 2003, there were two publicised attacks on civilian buses travelling between Vientiane and the town of Luang Prabang. Over 20 people were reportedly killed, including several foreign tourists. Although the attacks are unconnected to the Hmong group in question, they indicate a probable recent upsurge in rebel activities. The Lao authorities have consistently denied the involvement of ethnic Hmong in the bus attacks, instead labelling them as 'robberies' perpetrated by 'bandits'.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Hmong ethnic minority group in Laos were allied to the US during the Viet Nam war and its spill-over fighting in both Laos and Cambodia, and 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. Sporadic Hmong resistance continues, and there are also continuing allegations of serious human rights abuses against those Hmong perceived as still being opposed to the Lao government.

The plight of the group of several hundred fighters and their families visited by Vincent Reynaud and Thierry Falise was also highlighted in a recent article in *Time Asia* magazine following an earlier visit to Laos by different journalists who managed to locate them. The group, who are lightly armed with ancient weapons, are reported to be too frightened of official Lao government retribution to put down their arms and are literally fighting for survival. The group includes the elderly, women and children. They reportedly have no access to desperately needed medical attention and sufficient food and other basic services. Amnesty International

has recently called on the Lao authorities to give all groups of Hmong fighters access to UN specialist agencies and others to provide these services in line with Laos's obligations under international humanitarian law. It is widely believed that Vietnamese forces are assisting in military operations against Hmong opposition at the invitation of the Lao authorities.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, French or your own language or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of four Lao nationals, whose identities are unknown, Pastor Maw Karl Mua (an ethnic Hmong and a US national), Belgian national Thierry Falise and French national Vincent Reynaud; who were arrested on 4 June 2003;
- urging the authorities to make public the identity of the Lao nationals, the whereabouts of all those arrested and any charges against them;
- urging the authorities to ensure that none of those arrested will be tortured or ill-treated in detention;
- calling on the authorities to give the seven detainees immediate access to lawyers, relatives and any necessary medical treatment;
- calling on the authorities to release those detained immediately and unconditionally if they are held solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association.

APPEALS TO:

Bounyang Vorachit

Prime Minister

Office of the Prime Minister

Rue Sisavat

Vientiane

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Telegram: Prime Minister Bounyang Vorachit, Vientiane, Laos

Fax: + 856 21 212408 (c/o Ministry of Information)

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Somsavat Lengsavat

Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

That Luang

Vientiane

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Telegram: Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane, Laos

Fax: + 856 21 414009

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of Lao People's Democratic Republic accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 23 July 2003.