

EXTERNAL

AI Index: ASA 26/01/98

UA 38/98

Fear for safety / Possible prisoners of
conscience

6 February 1998

LAOSThirty-three un-named men and women

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of 33 men and women who have been placed in incommunicado detention at two unknown detention facilities in Vientiane since 31 January 1998. One of the men, a preacher, is believed to be held in solitary confinement - he has been arrested on several previous occasions but never charged.

The 33 men and women were part of a group of 44 people arrested at a Bible study meeting being held by the evangelical Churches of Christ. The others arrested included the organizers of the meeting - three Americans working for the NGO, *Partners in Progress*, and a French and Thai national - all released on 4 February and given seven days to leave the country. Six Laotians, including three children and one pregnant woman, have also been released.

In an official report on the arrests, the authorities alleged that the real purpose of the meeting was not religious and that those attending had "*wrongly slandered the Lao Government, attempting to interfere in internal affairs of Laos*" and that the meeting "*disparaged other religions*", contrary to the constitution.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Official authorization must be obtained to hold meetings in Laos. Whereas the authorities allege that the meeting held on 31 January was not authorized, *Partners in Progress* staff believed that they had obtained written authorization from local authorities which they thought to be sufficient. Previous Sunday Bible study meetings held regularly in Vientiane had attracted no interference from the authorities.

Article 26 of the Lao Constitution guarantees freedom to "*profess or not to profess any religion*". However, in their justification for the arrests, the Lao authorities have cited Article 9[10] which prohibits "*acts of division amongst religions*".

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/express/airmail letters in English, French or your own language:

- urging that the authorities make public the names and whereabouts of the 33 men and women arrested on 31 January 1998 and the precise charges against them;
- urging the authorities to guarantee their safety and ensure that they are treated in accordance with international minimum standards;
- urging that they be allowed immediate access to families, lawyers and doctors;
- expressing concern that they may be prisoners of conscience detained solely for exercising their rights to freedom of belief and worship.

APPEALS TO:

Sisavat Keobounphan
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
Vientiane
Laos

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Vientiane, Laos

Salutation: Your Excellency

Major General Asang Laoli
Minister of Interior
Ministry of Interior
Vientiane
Laos

Telegrams: Interior Minister, Vientiane, Laos

Salutation: Dear Major General

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Laos accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 20 March 1998.