

Laos: On fourth anniversary of enforced disappearance, civil society demands to know: “Where is Sombath Somphone?”

Bangkok, 15 December 2016: On the fourth anniversary of the enforced disappearance of prominent Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone, we, the undersigned organizations, condemn the Lao PDR government’s ongoing failure to adequately investigate Sombath’s disappearance. We urge the authorities to act to conduct an effective investigation with a view to determining his fate or whereabouts. In particular, we condemn the Lao PDR government’s inaction after the discovery of new video evidence made public 12 months ago.

Sombath was last seen at a police checkpoint on a busy street of the Lao capital, Vientiane, on the evening of 15 December 2012. Sombath’s abduction was captured on a CCTV camera placed near the police checkpoint. CCTV footage showed that police stopped Sombath’s car and, within minutes, unknown individuals forced him into another vehicle and drove away. The CCTV footage clearly shows that Sombath was taken away in the presence of police officers. The footage also showed an unknown individual driving away from the city in Sombath’s car.

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. At a minimum, this should have prompted a review of other CCTV cameras along the main route the car was taking back into the city.

Since this new evidence was made public by Sombath’s family, the Lao authorities have failed to take any initiative with regard to the investigation, or present any new findings. Police issued their last report on the case on 8 June 2013. After four years, it is apparent that the government has not undertaken a serious and competent investigation into Sombath’s enforced disappearance.

We also call on the Lao authorities to provide information on the fate or whereabouts of 10 other activists who are victims of enforced disappearance. Authorities detained two women, Kingkeo and Somchit, and seven men, Soubinh, Souane, Sinpasong, Khamstone, Nou, Somkhith, and Sourigna, in November 2009 for planning to participate in pro-democracy demonstrations. Uniformed men abducted and caused the enforced disappearance of Somphone Khantisouk, an outspoken critic of Chinese-sponsored agricultural projects in Luang Namtha Province, in January 2007 and there has been no trace of him since.

The arrest and abduction of Sombath Somphone and the 10 other activists, followed by the Lao PDR government’s refusal to acknowledge their deprivation of liberty, or provide information on their fate or whereabouts amounts to enforced disappearances under Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). Despite signing the ICPPED on 29 September 2008, Laos is yet to ratify the convention. The government should immediately ratify the ICPPED and adopt national legislation to effectively implement its provisions and ensure that no one else faces enforced disappearances in the future.

The Lao PDR government’s ongoing failure to undertake adequate investigations into all cases of enforced disappearances violates its obligations under Article 2(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Laos is a state party. The ICCPR states that governments must provide an “effective remedy” for violations of rights guaranteed by the Covenant, including the right to liberty and security of person.

We call on the Lao PDR government to end its denial of basic facts around Sombath's enforced disappearance and immediately conduct a competent, impartial, effective, and thorough investigation into his disappearance, as well as all other cases of enforced disappearances.

We urge individuals, institutions, and governments around the world to join our call and demand the Lao PDR government answer the question: "Where is Sombath Somphone?"

1. ActionAid International
2. Afrika Kontakt
3. Airavati
4. AKSI for Gender, Social and Ecological Justice
5. Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)
6. Alyansa Tigil Mina - ATM (Alliance Against Mining)
7. American Friends Service Committee
8. Amnesty International
9. Armanshahr/OPEN ASIA
10. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)
11. ASEAN Youth Forum
12. Asia Europe Labour Forum (AELF)
13. Asia Europe People's Forum - International Organising Committee
14. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)
15. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
16. ATTAC France
17. Auriga NUSANTARA
18. Awami Workers Party Pakistan
19. Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)
20. Bangladesh Krishok Federation
21. Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM)
22. Bank Information Centre
23. Blue Dalian
24. Boat People SOS
25. Bytes for All
26. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
27. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
28. CCFD-Terre Solidaire
29. Center for the Study of Rural Change in Mexico (CECCAM)
30. Center of Human Rights Law Studies (HRLS)
31. Christian Development Alternative (CDA)
32. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)
33. Civil Rights Defenders
34. Coalition against Land Grabbing (CALG)
35. Comité pour le Respect des Droits Humains Daniel Gillard
36. Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)
37. Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (COMFREL)
38. Community Resource Centre Foundation (CRC)
39. Democratic Education Support Committee
40. Development and Peace
41. Dhoritri Foundation for Information Education
42. Doustourna Network
43. EarthRights International
44. Ecologistas en Acción
45. Empowering Singaporeans
46. Equitable Cambodia
47. EU-ASEAN FTA Campaign Network
48. Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières (ESSF)
49. Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND)
50. Fian International

51. FIDH – International Federation for Human Rights
52. Focus on the Global South
53. Front Line Defenders
54. Fundación Solón
55. Future Light Center
56. Global Witness
57. HAK Association
58. Hawaii Institute for Human Rights
59. Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF)
60. Htoi Gender and Development Foundation
61. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)
62. Human Rights Defenders Alert – India (HRDA)
63. Human Rights Defenders Forum (HRDF)
64. Human Rights Lawyers Association (HRLA)
65. Human Rights Watch
66. Human Rights Working Group (HRWG)
67. Inclusive Development International
68. Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF)
69. Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF)
70. INDIGENOUS
71. Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation
72. INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre
73. Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC)
74. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
75. International Peace Bureau
76. Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw)
77. Justice for Iran (JFI)
78. Korean House for International Solidarity (KHIS)
79. Land Core Group
80. Land Research Action Network (LRAN)
81. Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR)
82. League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI)
83. LILAK (Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights)
84. Malaysian Against Death Penalty and Torture (MADPET)
85. MARUAH
86. Mekong Monitor Tasmania
87. Mekong Watch
88. Metta Development Foundation
89. Minidram
90. Monitoring Sustainability of Globalization
91. Moroccan Human Rights Organization (OMDH)
92. Network for Social Justice and Human Rights
93. Network for Transformative Social Protection (NTSP)
94. Odhikar
95. Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee
96. People's Empowerment Foundation
97. People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)
98. People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR)
99. People's Watch
100. Peoples' Network for Constitutional Reform
101. Perkumpulan HuMa
102. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA)
103. Philippine Misereor Partnership Inc.
104. Philippine Network Against Torture
105. Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement
106. Progressive Voice
107. Project SEVANA South-East Asia

108. Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation
109. School for Wellbeing Studies and Research
110. SILAKA
111. Singapore Anti-Death Penalty Campaign
112. Solidarité des Jeunes Lao en France
113. Sombath Somphone and Beyond Project
114. Stiftung Asienhaus
115. Strey Khmer
116. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)
117. Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR)
118. The Sombath Initiative
119. Think Centre
120. Togetherness for Equality and Action
121. Toward Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA)
122. Transnational Institute
123. Union for Civil Liberty (UCL)
124. Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR)
125. Vimutti Women Organization
126. Women Peace Network – Arakan
127. World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)
128. World Rainforest Movement (WRM)
129. Yayasan HAK
130. Young Leadership for Social Change Programme
131. Youth for Peace
132. #ReturnOurCPF