

URGENT ACTION

THREE ACTIVISTS SENTENCED TO PRISON IN SECRET TRIAL

According to sources, three Lao human rights activists, Soukan Chaithad, Somphone Phimmasone and Lodkham Thammavong, were sentenced to between 12 and 20 years' in prison following a secret trial held in April 2017. Arrested in March 2016, and held incommunicado for over two months, they are prisoners of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released.

Credible information has emerged that **Soukan Chaithad, Somphone Phimmasone and Lodkham Thammavong** were tried in secret, on unknown charges, in early April 2017 and sentenced to 18, 20 and 12 years' imprisonment respectively. They are all currently detained in Samkhe Prison, located on the eastern outskirts of Vientiane, the capital city of Laos.

The three human rights activists were arrested in March 2016 and detained incommunicado for over two months. On 25 May 2016 they all appeared on state television in a report that confirmed that, due to their social media activity, they had been arrested for allegedly being a threat to national security. During the report, Soukan Chaithad said that he would "change his attitude and stop all activities that betray the nation", and added that his confession had not been coerced by the authorities.

The three activists had been working in Thailand before returning to Laos in February 2016 to renew their documentation. Prior to their return, they had participated in a peaceful demonstration of around 30 people outside the Lao embassy in Bangkok on 2 December 2015, Lao national day, and had posted a number of messages on Facebook criticising the Laos government for corruption, deforestation and human rights violations.

Other than the national television appearance in May 2016, the case has been shrouded in secrecy and no details about the trial or charges have been made public. Apart from one brief family visit to Somphone Phimmasone in September 2016, Amnesty International does not know whether their families have been allowed to contact them. It has further been reported by media sources that they have been denied legal representation.

Please write immediately in Lao or your own language, calling on authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Soukan Chaithad, Lodkham Thammavong and Somphone Phimmasone, who are prisoners of conscience held solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights, to freedom of expression and assembly;
- Ensure that while detained they are treated humanely, in full accordance with international standards, including being allowed regular and frequent access to families, lawyers and adequate medical care;
- Make public the full details of the charges and criminal proceedings against them, and order an independent and efficient investigation into their enforced disappearance and bring those responsible to justice.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 28 JUNE 2017 TO:

Prime Minister
Thongloun Sisoulith
Prime Minister's Office
Lane Xang Avenue
Vientiane
Lao People's Democratic Republic
Fax: + 856 21 213560
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs
Saleumxay Kommasith
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
23 Singha Road
Vientiane
Lao People's Democratic Republic
Fax: + 856 21 414009
Email: cabinet@mofa.gov.la
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:
Minister of Justice
Xaysy Santivong
Ministry of Justice
Lane Xang Avenue
Vientiane
Lao People's Democratic Republic
Fax: + 856 21 414102

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA 184/16. Further information:
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa26/4603/2016/en/>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Lodkham Thammavong and Somphone Phimmasone, who are a couple, were arrested at home in Ban Vang Tay Village, Nong Bok District, Khammuan Province on 5 March 2016. Soukan Chaithad was arrested on 22 March 2016, reportedly at the Ministry of Public Security office in Savannaket City, western Laos, where he had gone to renew his passport. The arrests and detention may have amounted to enforced disappearance, as the fate and whereabouts of the three were concealed for over two months after their arrest, until their appearance on state television.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a one-party state under the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. The human rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are severely and arbitrarily restricted in the country. In September 2014, a new Prime Ministerial Decree on management of information through the internet was enacted. Since its enactment at least two people have been arrested in relation to information posted online, one of whom has since been released. The other, Bounthanh Thammavong, is a Polish national of Lao descent, was convicted of criticizing the ruling party on Facebook and other anti-government activities and sentenced to four years and nine months in prison, which he is currently serving.

Laos signed the International Covenant on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances in September 2008 but has not yet ratified it. The most well-known enforced disappearance case in recent years involved leading member of civil society Sombath Somphone, who was last seen at a police post in the capital Vientiane in December 2012. The government has acknowledged his disappearance but has failed to ensure a full and independent investigation. Sompawn Khantisouk, an entrepreneur who was active on conservation issues, remains disappeared since being abducted by men believed to be police in 2007.

Name: Soukan Chaithad (m), Lodkham Thammavong (f), Somphone Phimmasone (m)
m/f: both

Further Information on UA: 184/16 Index: ASA 26/6270/2017 Issue Date: 17 May 2017