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Laos: Return Sombath Somphone

Ahead of International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances on 30 August, Amnesty International calls once more on the Lao government to ensure the safe return of Sombath Somphone. The human rights group calls also on other countries to do more to demand that the civil society leader, a victim of enforced disappearance, is found and returned safely to his family.

Sombath's disappearance is examined in detail in Amnesty International's report "*Caught on Camera*". He was taken away on the evening of 15 December 2012 in the presence of security personnel at a police post in the Lao capital Vientiane, and has not been heard from since. His disappearance was recorded on closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage that his family was able to copy. The Lao authorities' likely involvement in Sombath's disappearance has been compounded by the police's failure to conduct thorough investigations, which suggests a cover-up. Other countries' offers of external assistance, including to analyze the original CCTV footage, have been rejected.

Amnesty International has made a series of recommendations to help ensure Sombath's safe return. But over two months since the human rights group issued its report on his case, it appears that no progress has been made in achieving a positive resolution.

Calling again on the Lao authorities to find Sombath and return him to his family, Amnesty International reiterates its recommendation for the government to establish a new, independent commission to undertake an impartial investigation into Sombath's disappearance. The new commission should seek external technical assistance for its investigations and provide detailed information about the progress of investigations to Sombath's family.

Sombath's disappearance has focused international attention on the disturbing situation of freedom of expression and related rights in Laos, and has raised questions about the success of other countries' efforts to encourage the Lao authorities to respect and protect human rights. Laos receives hundreds-of-millions of dollars in development aid each year. The human rights situation in Laos will be considered at the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Period Review in 2014, while the Lao government is lobbying for a seat on the Council from 2016-18.

Amnesty International again calls on other countries – including Australia, EU member states, Japan and the US – to use their leverage and continue to demand publicly Sombath's safe return. They should demand that the Lao government answers the many outstanding questions around Sombath's disappearance, explains why investigations have been inadequate, and establishes a new commission to investigate the case. Should the Lao government fail to address these questions and ensure that adequate investigations are undertaken, other countries should explore initiating their own investigations into Sombath's disappearance and persons suspected of being responsible, and attempt to bring such individuals to justice in their own national courts.

Further, Amnesty International calls once more on the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights to investigate Sombath's disappearance, and seek to coordinate expert support for any investigations undertaken by the Lao authorities. The apparent failure of the regional rights body to take any action on the disappearance of a world-renowned civil society leader in an ASEAN member state is raising further questions about its credibility, with Laos set to chair ASEAN

in 2015.

Until Sombath Somphone is back safely with his family, his case will not be forgotten, calls for his return will persist and the Lao government's reputation will continue to be affected adversely.

Notes:

For background, see:

"Laos: Caught on Camera: The enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone", Amnesty International Report, 13 June 2013.

"Laos must ensure return of disappeared civil society leader", Amnesty International Press Release, 13 June 2013.

"Lao citizen abducted, not seen or heard from: Sombath Somphone", Amnesty International Urgent Action, 18 January 2013.

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