

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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LAOS: Amnesty International calls for immediate release of five Prisoners of Conscience arrested three years ago

On the third anniversary of the arrest of five members of the Lao Students Movement for Democracy : Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, Khamphouvieng Sisaath, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh, Bouavanh Chanhmanivong and Keochay, Amnesty International today called for their immediate and unconditional release.

The organization considers the five Lao students to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely because of non-violent expression of their political beliefs. Amnesty International fears for their safety in detention where they are at risk of torture and ill-treatment.

The arrested were part of a group of about 30 young people who attempted on 26 October 1999 to raise banners calling for peaceful political change in the country. According to eye witnesses who were interviewed by Amnesty International, the attempted protest was crushed immediately by police.

Since their arrest in 1999, the Lao authorities have consistently refused to reveal the fate and whereabouts of the five men, or to publicly acknowledge their detention. In November 1999 a spokesman of the Lao Foreign Ministry was quoted as saying: "I have checked the report thoroughly and stand firm that there was no protest or arrest of anyone in the past two weeks. There might have been some drunken people scuffling or making noise that caused outsiders visiting Vientiane to think they were protesting".

Only in June this year did Lao officials, during talks with European parliamentarians in Strasbourg, admit that the five had been sentenced in June 2001 and are now being held in Samkhe Prison, Vientiane. No information was provided on the charges the men faced or the length of their sentences.

Background

Conditions in Lao prisons are of grave concern to Amnesty International. In its July 2002 report on 'Laos: Torture, ill-treatment and hidden suffering in detention', Amnesty International provided details about arbitrary detention of political prisoners, the lack of access to medical facilities, and appalling cruelty by prison officials. Anyone detained in Laos is at risk of torture and ill-treatment. There are no human rights monitoring groups permitted in the country, and international experts are denied access to Laos.

Laos is a poor country. Access to education and health care is restricted, and life expectancy at birth is very low. State control over civil society is extremely tight. The attempt by

the students to demonstrate in October 1999 was the first such recorded protest since the foundation of the Lao People's Republic more than 20 years earlier.

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