

PUBLIC

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25 June 2003

Further Information on UA 165/03 (ASA 26/004/2003, 11 June 2003) Fear of torture/fear for safety

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC	Pastor Naw Karl Mua (m), ethnic Hmong, US national [corrected name] Thierry Falise (m), Belgian national Vincent Reynaud (m), French national Four Lao nationals (names unknown)
new name:	Pa Fue Khang (m), ethnic Hmong Lao national

On 20 June, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the arrest and detention of the four Lao nationals. Their names and whereabouts however, have not been made public. There are concerns for their safety and that of their driver Pa Fue Khang, as Amnesty International has numerous first hand and other reliable reports of widespread torture and ill-treatment in police custody and prisons in Laos, particularly of ethnic Hmong.

The four Lao nationals were guides accompanying three foreigners - two European journalists and an ethnic Hmong pastor - who were researching a story on a group of ethnic Hmong rebels. They were all arrested by local security officials on 4 June in Xieng Khouang province. When the journalists and their guides failed to arrive at a pre-arranged location, their driver, Pa Fue Khang returned home. He was later arrested by local security officials, when he returned to the location around 4 June. His current whereabouts are unknown.

French photographer Vincent Reynaud, Belgian journalist Thierry Falise, and US national Naw Karl Mua were finally allowed their first consular visits on 15 and 16 June. They were reported to be in good health. Thierry Falise has been allowed a five-minute meeting with his wife, who said that he had lost weight. He has previously suffered from serious health problems which may be exacerbated by poor conditions of detention. Naw Karl Mua suffers from stomach problems.

The three foreign nationals are detained in Vientiane, but the Lao authorities have not revealed the location, and there are continuing concerns about the conditions under which they are held. The Foreign Minister has been quoted as saying that the two Europeans were detained for their alleged involvement in the death of a security officer during an incident which took place on 3 June and not for their journalistic research of the ethnic Hmong rebels.

No charges have yet been made against any of those arrested. The authorities have reportedly stated that an investigation will be completed by the end of June.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Hmong ethnic minority group in Laos were allied to the US during the Viet Nam war and its spill-over fighting in both Laos and Cambodia, and have a long history of resistance and aspirations of independence from Lao government control. Following the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975 and the fall of the former regime, as many as a third of the Hmong ethnic minority are believed to have fled the country. Most of these refugees resettled in the USA, but a large number spent many years in refugee camps in Thailand. Sporadic Hmong resistance continues, and there are also continuing allegations of serious human rights abuses against those Hmong perceived as still being opposed to the Lao government.

The plight of the group of several hundred fighters and their families visited by Vincent Reynaud and Thierry Falise was also highlighted in a recent article in *Time Asia* magazine following an earlier visit to Laos by different journalists who managed to locate them. The group, who are lightly armed with old guns and weapons, are reported to be too frightened of official Lao government retribution to put down their arms and are literally fighting for survival. The group includes the elderly, women and children. They reportedly have no access to desperately needed medical attention and sufficient food and other basic services. (See UA 168/03, ASA 26/005/2003, 11 June 2003). Amnesty International has recently called on the Lao authorities to give all groups of Hmong fighters access to UN specialist agencies and others to provide these services in line with Laos's obligations under international humanitarian law. It is widely believed that Vietnamese forces are assisting in military operations against Hmong opposition at the invitation of the Lao authorities.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, French or your own language:

- expressing grave concern for the safety of four Lao nationals, whose identities are unknown, who were arrested on 4 June 2003;
- expressing grave concern for the safety of Pa Fue Khang, an ethnic Hmong Lao national, arrested around 4 June 2003;
- welcoming that Pastor Naw Karl Mua (an ethnic Hmong and a US national), Belgian national Thierry Falise, and French national Vincent Reynaud were allowed consular access on 15 and 16 June;
- urging the authorities to make public the identity of the Lao nationals, the place of detention of all those arrested and any charges against them;
- urging the authorities to ensure that none of those detained will be tortured or ill-treated in detention;
- calling on the authorities to give the eight detainees immediate access to lawyers, relatives, and any necessary medical treatment;
- calling on the authorities to release those detained immediately and unconditionally if they are held solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association.

APPEALS TO:

Bounyang Vorachit
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
Rue Sisavat
Vientiane

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Telegram: Prime Minister, Vientiane, Laos
Fax: + 856 21 212408 (c/o Ministry of Information)
Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Somsavat Lengsavat
Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
That Luang
Vientiane

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Telegram: Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane, Laos
Fax: + 856 21 414009
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of Lao People's Democratic Republic accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 6 August 2003.