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Laos: Summit leaders should urge student protesters' release

The international community must demand the immediate release of three Lao student activists who have been imprisoned since 1999 for peacefully protesting, Amnesty International said as European and Asian heads of state gather in Laos for the 9th Asia-Europe Meeting Summit (ASEM 9).

On 26 October 1999, police in Laos' capital Vientiane arrested Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, now aged 52, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh, now 40, and Bouavanh Chanhmanivong, now 52, along with several other students and teachers for trying to peacefully display posters calling for economic, political and social change in the south-east Asian country. The three men were subsequently tried on treason charges and have been imprisoned ever since.

"It is shameful that these men arrested as students have been behind bars for 13 years for simply exercising their right to freedom of expression. The international community must use the ASEM summit to pressure the Lao government to free them immediately, and to end all other restriction of dissenting views," said Rupert Abbott, Amnesty International's Researcher on Laos.

"Amnesty International considers the three men prisoners of conscience."

The rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly are protected in the Lao Constitution and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Laos is a state party.

Thongpaseuth Keuakoun founded the Lao Students Movement for Democracy (LSMD) in February 1998, and recruited others including Seng-Aloun Phengphanh and Bouavanh Chanhmanivong.

Amnesty International had in 2003 received information that the three men were sentenced to up to 10 years' imprisonment, but the Lao authorities in 2009 said that the men were given 20-year sentences. They are held in Vientiane's Samkhe prison, Laos' main detention facility, where conditions are harsh.

Khamphouvieng Sisaath, another student protester arrested along with the three men, died in prison in September 2001 as a result of punishment inflicted by prison guards. Another, Keochay, was released in 2002.

"There should be an independent investigation into the death in custody of Khamphouvieng Sisaath, and those found responsible must be held accountable," said Abbott.

From 5 to 6 November 2012, European and Asian leaders will be in Vientiane for ASEM 9, for dialogue on cooperation between the regions. Laos' hosting of ASEM 9 follows news that the country is about to join the World Trade Organization.

"Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh, and Bouavanh Chanhmanivong must not be forgotten. European and Asian leaders attending the Vientiane summit should request updated information about the three men, and demand that they be freed immediately and unconditionally," said

Abbott.

Despite repeated requests, the Lao authorities have provided sparse and conflicting information about the men. According to a statement made in September 2011 to the European Parliament by European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, the Lao authorities have said that Seng-Aloun Phengphanh and Bouavanh Chanhmanivong were due for release this year, while the date for release of Thongpaseuth Keuakoun is unknown.

Their continued imprisonment points to the worrying human rights situation in Laos, where state control over the media and political, judicial and social affairs continues to restrict people's basic freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.