

Embargoed for : 30/05/2000 17:00 GMT

## **Laos: Where are the missing protestors?**

*At least five people who were arrested in the capital Vientiane during an unprecedented protest last October, remain unaccounted for and the government continues to deny the protest ever occurred, Amnesty International said today in a new report.*

*Members of the Lao Students Movement for Democracy gathered on 26 October 1999 to raise banners calling for peaceful political change but were quickly surrounded and arrested by police.*

*“Simply denying that the arrests took place does not absolve the Lao authorities of responsibility for these people,” Amnesty International said.*

*Among those arrested was Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, the founder of the group and a father of seven. It is likely that he and his colleagues - Kamphouvieng Sisaath, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh, Bouavanh Chanmanivong and Keochay - are detained without charge or trial in Vientiane’s Samkhe prison, without regular access to their families, adequate medical care or legal assistance.*

*Prison conditions in Laos are very poor, and often constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Prisoners are often beaten in police custody to force them to confess to alleged crimes.*

*In February 1998, Thongsouk Saysangkhi, a prisoner of conscience held for his peaceful political beliefs, died in a prison camp in the north of the country, having been denied medical treatment for a chronic*

illness. The Lao authorities refused to confirm his death, even to his family, for several weeks.

Amnesty International's new report calls upon the Lao authorities to account for the fate and whereabouts of Thongpaseuth Keuakoun and his supporters, whose welfare is a matter of grave concern to the organization.

"Hiding behind a wall of secrecy does not change the facts. Where are these men, and why are they detained?" Amnesty International asked. "These questions cannot be ignored for ever -- it's time for some straight answers."

### **Background**

The attempted public demonstration by the Lao Students Movement for Democracy on 26 October 1999 was the first such reported protest since the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. The Lao government greatly restricts the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and expression of dissent is not permitted.

The only legal political party in Laos is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the communist party which controls the government. Opposition to the government is banned, even in the form of peaceful public meetings. The state retains control of institutions such as the media, religious organizations and trade unions. There are no independent domestic non-governmental organizations in Laos and international human rights monitors are not allowed access to the country.

ENDS.../

\*\*\*\*\*

For more information or a copy of *The October Protestors: Where Are They?*, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566.

