



Joint statement

Laos: 1,000 days on, Sombath's enforced disappearance remains a clear dereliction of the government's international obligations

11 September 2015

Today marks 1,000 days since prominent Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone “disappeared” at a police checkpoint on a busy street in Vientiane. We, the undersigned organisations, reiterate our call for the Lao government to intensify its efforts to conduct a prompt, impartial, and effective investigation into Sombath's apparent enforced disappearance, to determine his fate or whereabouts, and to take the necessary measures to bring those responsible to justice.

At the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Laos, held in Geneva on the 20th of January 2015, 10 states made recommendations to Laos to investigate Sombath's disappearance. In addition, five states raised questions about the issue.

We are dismayed by the Lao authorities' failure to provide any specific information on the status and progress of the investigation since the 7th of June 2013. This failure has occurred despite the government's claim in June 2015, during the UPR process, that it was “still thoroughly conducting” an investigation into Sombath's “whereabouts.” It is not enough for Laos to simply assert it is still investigating the case. Laos' international legal obligations require it to carry out a prompt investigation and to keep Sombath's family informed on the progress and status of the investigation.

We are troubled by the Lao government's continued refusal to accept external assistance regarding the investigation of Sombath's enforced disappearance. The government has ignored important recommendations made by several human rights organisations despite an official statement that it is “ready to receive suggestions from any interested parties” regarding the investigation.

We also decry the Lao government's refusal to disclose any information concerning all other victims of enforced disappearances in the country. To this day, the fate or whereabouts of at least 13 individuals, including three student leaders who were arrested on the 26th of October 1999 for organising a peaceful pro-democracy protest in Vientiane remain unknown.

On the 29th of September 2008, Laos signed the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). However, almost seven years on, the government has made no demonstrable progress towards the ratification of the treaty. We urge the Lao government to immediately ratify the ICPPED, incorporate its provisions into the country's legislation, and effectively comply with its treaty obligations.

In January 2016, Laos will assume the Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The government's protracted failure to resolve the case of Sombath's enforced disappearance is a clear dereliction of its international obligations, which seriously undermines Vientiane's attempts to gain credibility as a rights-respecting member of the regional bloc.

We call on Laos to undertake prompt, impartial, and effective investigations into Sombath's case and all other outstanding cases of enforced disappearances and provide effective remedies and reparation to all victims pursuant to its international legal obligations, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention against Torture (CAT), and ratify the ICPPED.

Signed:

1. ALTSEAN-Burma
2. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)
3. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)
4. Civil Rights Defenders
5. FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)
6. Focus on the Global South
7. Forum-Asia
8. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
9. Justice for Peace Foundation
10. Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR)
11. Sombath Initiative