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The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT)

Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR)

Joint press release

Laos: Free former student leaders arbitrarily detained for 17 years

Paris-Geneva, October 26, 2016 - The Lao government must immediately and unconditionally release two former pro-democracy student leaders who have been arbitrarily detained for 17 years and disclose the fate or whereabouts of two others, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (a joint FIDH and OMCT partnership) and the Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR) said today.

Mr. **Thongpaseuth Keuakoun** and Mr. **Sengaloun Phengphanh**, two former student leaders with the Lao Students Movement for Democracy (LSMD), are believed to be detained in Samkhe prison, located on the eastern outskirts of Vientiane. Messrs. Thongpaseuth and Sengaloun were arrested in Vientiane on October 26, 1999, along with fellow LSMD members Mr. **Bouavanh Chanhmanivong**, Mr. **Khamphouvieng Sisa-at**, and Mr. **Keochay**, for planning peaceful demonstrations that called for democracy, social justice, and respect for human rights. All five were subsequently sentenced to 20 years in prison for “generating social turmoil and endangering national security.”

“Thongpaseuth and Sengaloun’s prolonged, arbitrary, and incommunicado detention in atrocious conditions is an alarming violation of international law. The fact that the two former student leaders are among Southeast Asia’s longest-serving political prisoners reflects Vientiane’s long-standing and severe repression of any dissent”, said FIDH President Dimitris Christopoulos.

Mr. Khamphouvieng Sisa-at died in Samkhe prison in September 2001 as a result of serious food deprivation, prolonged heat exposure, and lack of adequate medical care. In 2006, the government stated that Mr. Keochay had been released in 2002 upon completion of his prison term and “transferred to guardians to further educate him to become a good citizen”. However, Keochay’s family was never informed of his alleged release, and his fate or whereabouts remain unknown. The government’s claim about Mr. Keochay’s release as well as Mr. Khamphouvieng’s death in custody contradict Vientiane’s earlier statement that only two LSMD members – Messrs. Thongpaseuth and Sengaloun - had been arrested on October 26, 1999. The Lao government had initially refused to acknowledge even the detention of Messrs. Thongpaseuth and Sengaloun. To this day, the fate and whereabouts of the fifth former student leader, Mr. Bouavanh, also remain unknown.

“The authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Thongpaseuth and Sengaloun and provide compensation for their wrongful detention. The Lao government must conduct a thorough, impartial, and transparent investigation into the death of Khamphouvieng Sisa-at in Samkhe prison, and disclose the fate or whereabouts of Bouavanh and Keochay,” said OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock.

The Observatory and LMHR also call on the Lao authorities to determine the fate or whereabouts of nine other activists - two women, Ms. **Kingkeo** and Ms. **Somchit**, and seven men, Messrs. **Soubinh, Souane, Sinpasong, Khamson, Nou, Somkhit, and Sourigna** - who were detained in November 2009 for planning to participate in pro-democracy demonstrations. Their detention, followed by the Lao government's refusal to acknowledge their deprivation of liberty, amounts to enforced disappearance under Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). Despite signing the ICPPED on September 29, 2008, Laos is yet to ratify the convention.

The Observatory and LMHR reiterate their call for the Lao government to conduct swift, thorough, and impartial investigations into all cases of enforced disappearances in the country and hold those responsible accountable. The Observatory and LMHR also urge the Lao government to speed up the investigation into the enforced disappearance of prominent civil society leader Mr. **Sombath Somphone**, who was last seen at a police checkpoint on a busy street of Vientiane on the evening of December 15, 2012.

“The international community must unequivocally condemn the government’s ongoing repression of civil society, urge the authorities to immediately release all detained activists and human rights defenders, and demand that all cases of enforced disappearance in the country be thoroughly investigated and resolved”, said LMHR President Vanida Thephsouvanh.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (the Observatory) was created in 1997 by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and FIDH. The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders. FIDH and OMCT are both members of ProtectDefenders.eu, the European Union Human Rights Defenders Mechanism implemented by international civil society.

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