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**The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR)**

Joint press release

Laos: Pro-democracy student leaders must be released after 16 years of arbitrary detention

Paris-Geneva, 8 December 2015: The Lao government must immediately and unconditionally release two former pro-democracy student leaders who have been arbitrarily detained for more than 16 years and disclose the fate or whereabouts of two others, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (a joint FIDH and OMCT programme) 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), remain detained in Samkhe prison, located on the eastern outskirts of Vientiane. Thongpaseuth and Sengaloun were arrested in Vientiane on October 26, 1999, along with fellow LSMD members Mr. **Bouavanh Chanhmanivong**, Mr. **Khamphouvieng Sisa-at**, and **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.” The government, however, denied that it had detained Bouavanh, Khamphouvieng, and Keochay.

Thongpaseuth and Phengphanh are imprisoned in solitary confinement with their legs locked in wooden stocks at all times. Prison authorities allow them to go out of their cells once a week or once every two weeks to wash and empty their accumulated excrements. They are accompanied by police officers and not by prison guards. Witnesses described them as looking like “human skeletons.” Prison authorities do not allow them to receive visitors and have consistently prohibited them from receiving food and medication sent from family members. For many years, the Lao government refused to acknowledge the detention of Thongpaseuth and Phengphanh.

“The lengthy arbitrary detention of the two former student leaders as well as the prolonged torture inflicted upon them are gross and unacceptable human rights violations. The authorities must immediately and unconditionally release them, investigate allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and provide compensation for their wrongful detention,” said FIDH President Karim Lahidji.

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 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 has never been informed about his alleged release and his fate or whereabouts remain unknown. The government’s claim of Keochay’s release and Sisa-at’s death in custody contradict Vientiane’s earlier statement that only two LSMD members - Thongpaseuth and

Phengphanh - had been arrested on October 26, 1999. To this day, the fate and whereabouts of the fifth former student leader, Bouavanh, also remains unknown.

“We urge the Lao authorities to investigate and ascertain the circumstances related to the death of Khamphouvieng Sisa-at in Samkhe prison, make the investigation’s findings public, and hold those responsible for his death accountable,” said OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock. ***“They must also disclose the fate or whereabouts of Bouavanh and Keochay.”***

In addition, the Observatory and LMHR 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**, **Khamsone**, **Nou**, **Somkhith**, and **Sourigna** - who were detained in November 2009 for planning to participate in pro-democracy demonstrations.

“More international efforts are needed to press the Lao government to be transparent about the fate or whereabouts of many missing student leaders, activists, and human rights defenders. Many of these cases amount to enforced disappearance – an issue that the Lao government has failed to address for far too long,” said LMHR President Vanida Thephsouvanh.

Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) defines enforced disappearance as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person.” Despite signing the ICPPED on September 29, 2008, Laos has not yet ratified the convention.

On June 23, 2014, during its second Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Laos rejected all eight recommendations that called for investigations into all allegations of enforced disappearance in the country and dismissed such allegations as “not true.”

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 two organizations 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.

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