

LAOS

RELEASE PEACEFUL
PROTESTORS IMPRISONED
FOR 10 YEARS

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“We only wanted to ask the government to listen to the people. We didn’t want to make violence and cause problems to the authorities.”

Amnesty International interview with protestor, 1999

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners of conscience Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh and Bouavanh Chanhmanivong on the 10th anniversary of their arrest for trying to hold a peaceful protest.

On the morning of the annual water festival on 26 October 1999, a group of around 30 young people attempted to peacefully display posters in the Lao capital, Vientiane. The posters called for peaceful economic, political and social change in Laos and were an unprecedented expression of dissent. Police immediately surrounded and arrested five of them – students and former students – near the National Assembly building on the riverfront. They were subsequently sentenced to up to 10 years imprisonment on charges of treason.

Despite repeated interventions and requests from the international community, including Amnesty International, the Lao authorities have provided sparse information about the fate of the five men since their arrest. Nothing is known about their trial, and details of their prison sentences only became known four years later, in 2003. News of the death of one of them – Khamphouvieng Sisaath – in September 2001 as a result of harsh punishment inflicted by prison guards, only emerged in 2004. The release of another – Keochay – in 2002 was only learnt some four years later.

REASONS BEHIND THE PROTEST



Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, left, founded the Lao Students Movement for Democracy (LSMD) in February 1998. He had been a university student in Vientiane, but lack of money prevented him from completing his course.

Married with seven young children, he lived in poverty, supporting himself and his family as a street vendor. He decided to form a group of like-minded people who were concerned about social welfare, access to health care and free education. He recruited young people to the LSMD, many of whom were students and former students who also had been unable to finish their studies because of financial constraints. LSMD held

regular meetings at secret locations because of the strict restrictions on freedom of expression and association.

At first, all LSMD members were Lao citizens who had never travelled abroad. The group then attracted several people who had spent time outside of Laos and who had new ideas about how to articulate the discontent they felt about the social conditions in Laos. Some of the materials the group produced for their protest were posters in Lao and English that read "Freedom for Laos" and "21st Century for Democracy and Peace in the country". They also typed up small leaflets, setting out their aims and objectives. These included calling for multi-party democracy in Laos (a communist one-party state), free and fair elections and the release of political prisoners.



Thongpaseuth, Seng-Aloun (shown left) and Bouavanh (below) are detained in Samkhe prison, Vientiane, which is the main detention facility in Laos. Conditions of detention are extremely harsh, with poor medical care and food. Torture and ill-treatment in detention is reported. Prisoners are given tasks, such as making a quota of baskets, that are almost impossible to complete and are punished harshly if unable to do so.



These prisoners of conscience should never have been arrested. They committed no recognizable criminal offence, but only peacefully exercised their right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International calls on the Lao authorities to ensure that the three men still detained are released immediately and unconditionally and that information about their release and their well-being is made public.

Background

Freedom of expression, association and assembly in Laos is severely restricted. Opposition to the one-party government is not permitted, even in the form of peaceful public meetings. There are no independent domestic non-governmental organizations, and the state controls institutions such as the media, religious groups and trade unions. International independent human rights monitors are not permitted unfettered access to the country.

Trial proceedings fall far short of international standards for fair trial. Conditions of detention in both police and prison detention facilities are harsh, with reports of torture and ill-treatment, and lack of adequate food, medical care and family visiting rights.

Laos ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in September 2009 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 2001.

TAKE ACTION!

Write to the Lao authorities, asking them to:

- Ensure the immediate and unconditional release of Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh and Bouavanh Chanhmanivong;
- Make public information about them, their health and whereabouts;
- Release all other prisoners of conscience held for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, association and assembly;
- Honour its obligations and commitments as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

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Salutation: Dear Minister

Also write to diplomatic representatives of Laos in your country

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