

UA 443/90

Legal Concern

2 November 1990

LAOS: Thongsouk Saisangkhi
 Latsami Khamphoui
 Fang
 + possibly several others

According to foreign press and other reports, on 8 October 1990 Thongsouk Saisangkhi, a recently resigned assistant to the Minister of Science and Technology; Latsami Khamphoui, a former official of vice ministerial rank in the State Planning Commission; Fang, the director of a department in the Ministry of Justice and possibly several others were detained for advocating the institution in Laos of a multi-party political system. Those arrested were reportedly involved with an unofficial "Social Democrat Club", comprising some 40 Laotian officials and intellectuals, who since April 1990 had been criticising the country's one-party system in a series of meetings and letters and were making plans to campaign for a change to a multi-party system.

On 26 August 1990 Thongsouk reportedly submitted a letter of resignation to Chairman of Laos' Council of Ministers Kaysone Phomvihane, in which he described Laos' political system as a "communist monarchy" and a "dynasty of the Politburo" and declared "Laos should change to a multiparty system in order to bring democracy, freedom and prosperity to the people". He reportedly wrote that he had faithfully served the one-party regime since its establishment in 1975 with the hope of bringing progress to the country and giving freedom to its people, but had now concluded it had been "cheating the people".

On 12 January 1990 Latsami reportedly wrote a letter criticising the implementation of government policy, and this letter is believed to have been circulated privately in Vientiane starting in June. He had previously been arrested in early 1984, apparently in part because while an official in charge of planning government agricultural projects he had criticised government decisions both among Laotians and foreign diplomats and United Nations officials. He was later released and reportedly returned to government service for a period.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Laos has been governed exclusively by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) since December 1975, since the overthrow of a coalition government that had been formed in 1973 after a peace agreement that ended almost 15 years of civil and international war in the country. The LPRP was formed in 1955 by Laotian members of the Indochinese Communist Party, and at its last National Congress in 1986 proclaimed its fidelity to Marxism-Leninism and close alliance with Viet Nam. It has ruled the country without a constitution since taking power, and elections for a national legislature, the Supreme People's Assembly, were not conducted until March 1989. No parties other than the LPRP were allowed to contest the elections, and all non-LPRP candidates were vetted by it. Sixty-five of the 79 members elected were LPRP members.

In August 1989 the LPRP Politburo appointed a Constitution Drafting Committee, and in April 1990 the Politburo and the LPRP Secretariat approved a draft which reiterated the party's exclusive role in its Introduction and first article and described Laos as "a popular democratic state under the leadership of the LPRP". The draft was then disseminated so that it could be discussed first

among party and government officials and then among the public. The LPRP Secretariat later issued an instruction complaining that "people in many major towns" had dwelled too much on discussing what the constitution had to say about "the organisational structure of the state apparatus". In June LPRP Central Committee member and Constitution Drafting Committee standing member Chaleun Yiapaoheu warned against "the staging of any demonstrations to demand a multi-party system" and that anyone doing so would be arrested, if necessary without a court warrant. He reportedly explained that no other political parties would be allowed "because our multi-ethnic Lao people have remained faithfully under the leadership of the LPRP", and is quoted as saying in July that: "The Party has proved to the people in the past 35 years that it has been the only party that can take care of them" adding that "too many parties invite division". In July Somphavan Inthavong, a prominent member of the Supreme People's Assembly, declared in response to an interview question about the possibility of introducing a multi-party system in Laos that the country was in no position to "think about building rockets to go to the moon" and warned that such systems were characterised by "bloody turmoil".

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Telexes/airmail letters:

- expressing concern at reports that Thongsouk Saisangkhi, Latsami Khamphoui and other alleged members of the "Social Democrat Club" may have been detained for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly by advocating multiparty democracy at meetings and in letters;
- urging that unless they are going to be charged with recognizably criminal offences and promptly and fairly tried, they be immediately and unconditionally released.

APPEALS TO:

HE Kaysone Phomvihane
 Chairman of the Council of Ministers
 Office of the Council of Ministers
 Vientiane, Laos

HE Gen Khamtai Siphandone
 Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers
 and Minister of Defence
 Ministry of National Defence
 Vientiane, Laos

HE Asang Laoly
 Minister of the Interior
 Ministry of the Interior
 Vientiane, Laos

Telexes to all of the above: 4317 MINAE LS; 4320 MINAE LS

COPIES TO:

HE Sali Vongkhamsoo
 Vice Chairman of the Council of Ministers and
 Minister of Economy, Planning and Finance
 Ministry of Economy, Planning and Finance
 Vientiane, Laos

HE Souli Nanthavong
Minister of Science and Technology
Ministry of Science and Technology
Vientiane, Laos

and to diplomatic representatives of Laos in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 14 December 1990.