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Laos: Peaceful protesters must be released immediately

Amnesty International calls on the Lao authorities to release, immediately and unconditionally nine peaceful protesters who have gone missing since their arrest on 2 November 2009. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience, arrested solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

As international attention falls on Laos while it hosts the regional Southeast Asia Games beginning on 9 December, the government must ensure that the rights of all people in Laos are respected and protected.

The nine should never have been arrested in the first place, let alone subjected to enforced disappearance. They are at high risk of torture or other ill-treatment. The Lao authorities must make their whereabouts known immediately and guarantee their safety.

The Lao government has denied that any arrests or attempted protests have taken place.

However, according to credible sources, on 2 November 2009, Lao security forces rounded up over 300 farmers and others who were planning to submit petitions to the authorities in the capital, Vientiane. The petitions related to grievances over loss of land, and lack of economic and social support. All but nine of those detained were released after questioning.

The nine people, reportedly identified by the authorities as “leaders”, were first taken to Samkhe Prison in Vientiane, but according to information provided to Amnesty International, a special unit of the armed forces has since moved them to unknown locations.

Sources in Laos have reported that family members have not been able to contact them since they were moved from Samkhe prison. They include two women, Kingkeo and Somchit, and seven men, Soubinh, Souane, Sinpasong, Khamson, Nou, Somkhit and Sourigna.

Information on the arrests is limited, but sources indicate that one group of petitioners were travelling from Saravan and Savannakhet in southern Laos to the capital. Security forces stopped them in the area of Pakkading, Borikhamsay province some 190 km northeast of Vientiane. Another group had traveled from the vicinity of the Nam Ngum dam, 60 km north of Vientiane. Some members of this group were stopped in Phon Hong, in Vientiane province. Another group of people were arrested in Vientiane itself.

The Lao authorities should order a prompt, independent, impartial and thorough investigation into this case. Any persons suspected of responsibility for their enforced disappearance, including those who ordered these acts, should be prosecuted, in proceedings which meet international standards of fairness. The victims should be provided with reparations. Steps should be taken on all levels to ensure that no further enforced disappearances take place.

These recent arrests and disappearances have taken place within days of the 10-year anniversary of the last known attempt to stage a public peaceful protest in Vientiane in October 1999. At least three former students arrested at that time remain imprisoned today, while one died in detention following torture by prison guards. Since then, the Lao authorities have continued to deny its citizens the rights to peaceful protest and assembly guaranteed under international human rights law.

Background

This year Laos is host for the Southeast Asian Games, a regional bi-annual sports event. The authorities have carried out meticulous preparations, but the recent arrests and enforced disappearances of peaceful petitioners risks tarnishing the occasion.

Laos ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on 25 September 2009. This core international human rights treaty places obligations on state parties to guarantee, amongst others, the rights to freedom of expression and assembly, as well as to provide safeguards for the treatment, including detention and trial of arrested persons, in accordance with human rights standards.

Enforced disappearance is a human rights violation and a crime under international law. In addition, it violate a wide range of other human rights: the right to liberty and security of person; the right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the right to be recognized as a person before the law; as well as the rights to fair trial and to family life. Ultimately, it can violate the right to life, as victims of enforced disappearance are often killed.

Since the first arrests in early November, Amnesty International has received unconfirmed reports about more petitioners taken into custody in Vientiane and other provinces.

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