

7 April 1998

Further information on UA 38/98 (ASA 26/01/98, 6 February 1998) and follow-ups (ASA 26/02/98, 16 February 1998) - Fear for safety / Possible prisoners of conscience

LAOS Khun Sy (full name: Sy Yilatchay)
 Bounlerth, health coordinator for *Partners in Progress*,
 and son of Khun Sy
 Chan, son of Khun Sy
 Duangmanee (f), aged 20, daughter of Khun Sy
 Khonmanee
 Khet
 Khamsawang
 Phengsy, health trainer
 Khammieng, farmer
 Kaljaruengsuk, farmer
 Phakhamphim (f), (released)
 Vienkham (f), (released)
 Phakhamporn (f), (released)

According to unofficial sources the 13 above-named prisoners were brought to trial on 25 March 1998. They have been held in incommunicado detention since their arrest at a Bible study meeting on 31 January.

Khun Sy, owner of the property where the Bible study meeting was taking place and leader of the congregation, and his two sons Bounlerth and Chan, together with other employees of *Partners in Progress*: Khonmanee, Khet and Phengsy were sentenced to three years imprisonment. Khamsawang and Kaljaruengsuk were also sentenced to three years. Khun Sy's daughter Duangmanee and Khammieng were sentenced to two years' imprisonment, reduced to one year.

Phakhamphim, Vienkham and Phakhamporn, who led mid-week Bible study classes, were each sentenced to one years' imprisonment, reduced to two months; they were subsequently released on 30 March.

Amnesty International has not been able to obtain a copy of the legal charges against those sentenced, but it is reported that they are accused of having carried out activities in violation of Article 66 of the Lao Criminal Code. Article 66 allows imprisonment up to five years for anyone who organizes meetings "*to create a disturbance which poses danger to society...*". The 10 prisoners still detained are appealing against their sentences.

The detainees are part of a group of 44 people arrested at the Bible study meeting held by the evangelical Churches of Christ. The others were released in February. The authorities apparently alleged that the real purpose of the meeting was not religious and that those attending had "*wrongly slandered the Lao Government, attempting to interfere in internal affairs of Laos*" and that the meeting "*disparaged other religions*", contrary to the constitution.

Since the trial families are now reportedly being allowed access to the prisoners.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/express/airmail letters in English or French or in your own language:

- welcoming the release of Phakhamphim, Vienkham and Phakhamporn on 30 March 1998;
- expressing concern that 10 of the prisoners have been sentenced to prison terms solely for exercising their rights to freedom of belief and worship and calling for their immediate and unconditional release;
- urging that, pending their release, all 10 prisoners are treated in accordance with international minimum standards, with access to families, lawyers and doctors

APPEALS TO:

Khamtai Siphandone
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
Vientiane
Laos

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Vientiane, Laos
Salutation: Your Excellency

Major General Asang Laoli
Minister of Interior
Ministry of Interior
Vientiane
Laos

Telegrams: Interior Minister, Vientiane, Laos
Salutation: Dear Major General

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Laos accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 19 May 1998.