

## **ASEAN lawmakers seek rights body's help in Lao activist disappearance**

Friday 18 January 2013, by [AMURAO George](#) (Date first published: 17 January 2013).

BANGKOK - A delegation of lawmakers from ASEAN countries on Wednesday said they will file a petition before the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) soon to pressure the Lao People's Democratic Republic to investigate decisively and quickly the disappearance of Lao social activist Sombath Somphone.

Somphone, who founded the Participatory Development Training Center in 1996 and received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 2005, has not been heard from since December 15, 2012 when CCTV video footage showed he was stopped by the police and was driven in a pick-up truck with unidentified men in Vientiane.

The delegation, composed of Rep. Walden Bello of the Philippines, Member of Parliament Lily Wahid of Indonesia, and MP Charles Santiago of Malaysia, undertook a fact-finding mission of Sombath's disappearance in Vientiane, Lao PDR, on January 13-15, based on a request by the Asia-Europe People's Forum, and met with high-ranking government officials, including Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sakayane Sisouvong, National Assembly members, the diplomatic community, and civil society.

Rep. Bello said the Lao government should act on and resolve the case immediately because Sombath is not just a Lao citizen or a civil society leader in Lao PDR but also a member of the ASEAN community as well.

"We told the officials we met that the disappearance of Sombath is an ASEAN concern because Sombath is an ASEAN figure whose work has touched the lives of many people in Lao and other countries in ASEAN. His disappearance reflects badly not only on Laos but on the whole ASEAN community as well," Bello said.

Speaking at a news conference held at the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand in Bangkok on Wednesday, the three lawmakers outlined the initial steps that they will take in pressuring the Lao government to act decisively on the Sombath case.

Wahid said they will ask their respective colleagues in parliament for a signature campaign and use these in a petition to be filed before the AICHR.

Santiago said they also recommended to Lao government officials that the family of Sombath be regularly updated of the investigation, and that the National Assembly show its independence by further pressuring the executive branch and the military and police to fast-track the investigation.

Bello said that despite the apparently sincere efforts of Vientiane to be open to the delegation, their trip brought up more questions than answers. "The answers we received were far from satisfying," Bello said.

He added that they posed questions to the authorities covering all possible angles on the disappearance of Sombath, including motives for the abduction.

## **AEPF link**

MP Santiago said that based on information they had gathered, Sombath's case might be possibly linked to the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), which was held in Vientiane in October last year. It might also be connected to the expulsion of Anne-Sophie Grindroz, the country director of the Swiss agency Helvetas, a few months earlier.

He said Sombath, like Grindroz, were members of the national organizing committee of the AEPF. As part of his tasks, Sombath reportedly consulted 16 civil society groups in Lao covering a diverse range of social issues like land-grabbing, poverty, ethnic minorities, and others.

Santiago said Sombath might have stepped on the toes of powerful figures. He also quoted Permanent Secretary on Foreign Affairs Sisouvong as saying, "Sombath might be crossing a line."

The delegates also noted inconsistencies in the investigation. Just as most of the government officials they have met denied that Sombath was transferred to a pick-up truck as seen on the CCTV footage, Santiago quoted Sisouvong as saying that Sombath voluntarily boarded the said vehicle.

Santiago also recounted how the police treated Sombath's wife, Ng Shui Meng, saying that she was only summoned by the police early this week to question her about the disappearance. However, only the lowest ranking police officer met her, and he asked questions that were not directly related to the case (like when and where did they first meet each other, how many children do they have, etc.).

One month after, has the police already identified the men who abducted Sombath? Santiago quoted authorities as saying they have not yet done so because "[our] level of technology is poor," even if Santiago said the images in the CCTV footage were clear.

Bello said that members of the Lao National Assembly promised they would do their best to pressure the government to resolve the case, noting that this is crucial considering that Lao laws allow its investigators to solve a case up to two months, and are allowed up to three extensions. "Translated, that is equivalent of two more years," Bello said.

## **AICHR and ASEAN Charter**

Bello said that the move to file the petition before AICHR would be a crucial test for the ASEAN human rights body. "We expect this [Sombath case] to be a tough one. We expect AICHR to take this seriously because this is a test case. If AICHR responds positively, this body might have a bright future, if not, AICHR along with the ASEAN Charter will be in jeopardy."

Sombath's disappearance also comes at a time that Lao PDR is joining the World Trade Organization and playing host to the Asia-Europe Leaders Meeting (ASEM), along with Vientiane's recent signing of the Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances.

Bello said in a statement that Lao officials he had met acknowledged that Sombath's case "could not have come at a worse time."

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\* InterAksyon.com. The online news portal of TV5. January 17, 2013 7:12 AM:

<http://www.interaksyon.com/article/52897/asean-lawmakers-seek-rights-bodys-help-in-lao-activist-disappearance>