

# **Laos: Rights groups urge ASEAN to break silence on enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone**

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On the second anniversary of the enforced disappearance of prominent Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone, we, the undersigned regional and international organizations, firmly condemn the Lao government's ongoing refusal to provide any information regarding Sombath's fate or whereabouts.

The Lao government's deliberate silence on Sombath is part of a strategy that aims at consigning to oblivion the heinous crime of enforced disappearance. Regrettably, all other ASEAN member states have remained conspicuously silent on the issue of Sombath's disappearance. Our organizations believe that ASEAN member states, as well as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), must break the silence on this matter.

Instead of invoking the principle of non-interference into one another's internal affairs, ASEAN member states must act as responsible members of the international community and uphold the 10-nation bloc's key tenets enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, which recognizes the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms among the bloc's purposes and principles.

As a result, we, the undersigned organizations, call on ASEAN member states to raise the issue of Sombath's disappearance with the Lao government in all bilateral and multilateral fora. We also urge AICHR to exercise its power to "obtain information from ASEAN member states on the promotion and protection of human rights" in order to shed light on the disappearance of Sombath.

Sombath was last seen on the evening of 15 December 2012 in Vientiane. Lao public surveillance CCTV footage revealed that police stopped Sombath's car at a police post. Within minutes after being stopped, unknown individuals forced him into another vehicle and drove away. Analysis of the CCTV footage shows that Sombath was taken away in the presence of police officers who witnessed the abduction and failed to intervene - a fact that strongly suggests government complicity.

Sombath's enforced disappearance is not an isolated incident. To this day, the whereabouts of nine people arbitrarily detained by Lao security forces in November 2009 in various locations across the country remain unknown. The nine had planned peaceful demonstrations calling for democracy and respect of human rights. The whereabouts of Somphone Khantisouk are also unknown. Somphone, the owner of an ecotourism guesthouse, was an outspoken critic of Chinese-sponsored agricultural projects that were damaging the environment in the northern province of Luang Namtha. He disappeared after uniformed men abducted him in January 2007.

Our organizations urge ASEAN member states and the AICHR to call on the Lao government to immediately conduct competent, impartial, effective, and thorough investigations into all cases of enforced disappearances, hold the perpetrators accountable, and provide reparations to the victims and their families.

*Signed by:*

1. Adventist Development and Relief Agency Lao PDR
2. Ain O Salish Kendra
3. Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)
4. Amnesty International
5. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights
6. ASEAN SOGIE Caucus
7. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact
8. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances
9. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
10. Asia-Pacific Solidarity Coalition
11. Association of Human Rights Defenders and Promoters
12. Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM)
13. Boat People SOS
14. Burma Partnership
15. Cambodian Civil Society Working Group on ASEAN
16. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
17. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
18. Cambodian Volunteers for Society
19. Center for Human Rights and Development
20. China Labour Bulletin
21. Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia
22. Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)
23. Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
24. East Timor and Indonesia Action Network
25. Equality Myanmar
26. Equitable Cambodia
27. FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights
28. Finnish Asiatic Society
29. Focus on the Global South
30. Forum for Democracy in Burma
31. Fresh Eyes - People to People Travel
32. Gender and Development Initiative-Myanmar
33. Globe International
34. Hawaii Center for Human Rights Research & Action
35. Human Rights and Development Foundation
36. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
37. Human Rights Watch
38. Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation
39. Indonesian Human Rights Monitor (IMPARSIAL)
40. INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre
41. Initiatives for International Dialogue
42. Interfaith Youth Coalition on Aid in Myanmar
43. International Rivers
44. Judicial System Monitoring Programme
45. Justice and Peace Network of Myanmar
46. Justice for Peace Foundation
47. Justice for Women
48. Kachin Peace Network
49. Kachin Women Peace Network
50. Khmer Kampuchea Krom for Human Rights and Development Association
51. Korean House for International Solidarity

52. Lao Movement for Human Rights
53. Law and Society Trust
54. League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran
55. LICADHO Canada
56. LILAK (Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights)
57. Madaripur Legal Aid Association
58. MARUAH
59. National Commission for Justice and Peace
60. Network for Democracy and Development
61. Odhikar
62. Olive Branch Human Rights Initiative
63. People's Empowerment Foundation
64. People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy
65. People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights
66. People's Watch
67. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates
68. Potahar Organization for Development Advocacy
69. RTCC Research and Translation Consultancy Cluster
70. Sehjira Foundation for Persons with Disabilities
71. SILAKA
72. Social Action for Change
73. STAR Kampuchea
74. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)
75. Taiwan Association for Human Rights
76. Task Force Detainees of the Philippines
77. Think Centre
78. Transnational Institute
79. United Sisterhood Alliance - Cambodia
80. Vietnam Committee on Human Rights
81. Women Peace Network Arakan
82. World Rainforest Movement

Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF), France

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