

**H.E. Mr. Thongsing Thammavong**  
Prime Minister, Lao People's Democratic Republic  
Prime Minister's Office  
Ban Nahai Dious, Muang Chanthaburi  
Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic

Fax: +856 21213653

17 January 2013

Your Excellency,

**Re: "Disappearance" of Mr. Sombath Somphone**

We, 65 national, regional and international human rights organizations, express very grave concern over the lack of progress and information regarding investigations into the fate and whereabouts of Mr. Sombath Somphone. He has been missing for over three weeks and to date, the investigations on in this respect appear to be lacking or ineffective. Our organizations fear that he may have been subjected to enforced disappearance.

The Government has so far only released two statements which were mere denials and were not helpful to the efforts to find Sombath. The first statement was released by Laos' Ministry of Foreign Affairs last 19 December 2012. The second statement was a response by Laos' Ambassador to queries from the UN Human Rights Council's Special Procedures about Sombath's fate and whereabouts, and was released last 4 January 2013. In both statements the government maintained that it had no knowledge or involvement in the "disappearance" of Sombath.

We wish to reiterate that the CCTV footage obtained by his family shows that Sombath was last seen with local police at the Thadeau police post on 15 December 2012, shortly after he left his office at around 5pm. The claim of the Government that Sombath's "disappearance" is a private affair involving personal or business conflict is unacceptable. The Government must look closely into the circumstances of Sombath's disappearance, considering that he went missing within a short time after he was stopped by police authorities and within the vicinity of a police outpost. The Government should fully disclose all information relating to the interface and interaction that any government officials, security personnel, have had with Sombath. This includes all information regarding the events of 15 December 2012.

On 26 December 2012, Sombath's wife, Shui-Meng Ng, was questioned by police on basic information regarding his background and lifestyle during preliminary investigations. When she was called in again on 15 January 2013 to further assist in investigations, the police officers again queried her on similar procedural questions, such as when they got married and when they moved into their current home. This apparent stagnation in the status of investigation is clearly unacceptable after Sombath's "disappearance" for over a month. There are critical questions which remain unanswered, such as whether Sombath's jeep has been found, the identity of the motorcyclist who took Sombath's jeep and whether the police personnel in the CCTV have been identified and investigated.

Sombath's work has been profoundly integral to the lives of ordinary people in Laos. He has been deeply involved in educating and building the capacity of the youth, initiating alternative sustainable development models and tackling rural poverty. His work is clearly important in a country which posted the fastest growth in 2012 in Southeast Asia. In the relentless pursuit of growth and development, the work of groups and individuals like Sombath is especially critical in ensuring that growth is inclusive and equitable.

The “disappearance” of Sombath creates a climate of fear and sends a chilling message to the still-fledgling civil society of Laos. It is therefore important that an enabling environment for human rights defenders working on economic, social and cultural rights, including development workers, is created and cultivated.

The “disappearance” of Sombath is a test of the commitment of the government of Laos to promote and protect human rights in the country. We remind the Government of its commitment under the Article 13(1) of the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (Declaration), which provides that in instances where there is an allegation that a person has been subjected to an enforced disappearance, the State shall ensure that the complaint is promptly, thoroughly, and impartially investigated by a competent and independent State authority. The Declaration also obliges the State to promptly refer the matter to a competent and independent State authority whenever there are reasonable grounds to believe that an enforced disappearance has been committed, even if there has been no formal complaint. Furthermore, as a signatory to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPEd), it must refrain, in good faith, from acts that would defeat the object and purpose of the treaty. We also urge the Lao Government to ratify and implement the Convention to prevent future cases of enforced disappearances and to acknowledge the competence of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances.

We therefore demand justice and the immediate safe return of Sombath.

Signed by:

1. Advocacy Forum, Nepal
2. Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN), Malaysia
3. Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)
4. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)
5. Asian Center for the Progress of Peoples
6. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)
7. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
8. Asia-Pacific Solidarity Coalition (APSOC)
9. Banteay Srei, Cambodia
10. Boat People SOS
11. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), Cambodia
12. Cambodian Volunteers for Society (CVS), Cambodia
13. Cambodian Women Caucus (CWC), Cambodia
14. Center for Human Rights and Development (CHRD), Mongolia
15. Center for Migrant Advocacy, Philippines (CMA-Phils)
16. Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), Indonesia
17. Dignity International
18. Education and Research Association for Consumers (ERA Consumer), Malaysia
19. Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND)
20. Focus on the Global South
21. Front Line Defenders
22. Globe International, Mongolia
23. Housing Rights Task Force, Cambodia
24. Human Rights Defenders-Pilipinas (HRDP), the Philippines
25. Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB), Burma
26. iLaw, Thailand
27. IMPARSIAL, Indonesia
28. Indigenous Community Support Organization (ICSO), Cambodia

29. INDIGENOUS
30. Indonesia for Humans, Indonesia
31. International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED)
32. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
33. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
34. International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)
35. Institute for Essential Services Reform (IESR), Indonesia
36. Justice for Peace Foundation, Thailand
37. Koalisyon ng katutubo at Samaham ng Pilipinas (KASAPI, Inc), the Philippines
38. Lao Movement for Human Rights (MLDH)
39. Law and Society Trust (LST), Sri Lanka
40. LICADHO Canada
41. MARUAH, Singapore
42. Messenger Band, Cambodia
43. Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)
44. Odhikar, Bangladesh
45. Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, Pakistan
46. Pax Romana - ICMICA Asia
47. Peace Institute, Cambodia
48. People's Action for Change (PAC), Cambodia
49. People's Empowerment Foundation (PEF), Thailand
50. People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), South Korea
51. People's Watch, India
52. Pusat Komnas, Malaysia
53. Reality of Aid Network Asia Pacific
54. SILAKA, Cambodia
55. Social Action for Change (SAC), Cambodia
56. South East Asian Committee for Advocacy (SEACA)
57. Southeast Asia Monitor for Action
58. Southeast Asian Women Caucus
59. Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA)
60. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), Malaysia
61. Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR), Taiwan
62. Think Centre, Singapore
63. Women's Network for Unity (WNU), Cambodia
64. Workers' Information Centre (WIC), Cambodia
65. Youth for Peace, Cambodia

CC:

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR  
 23 Singha Road, Vientiane, Lao PDR  
 Fax: +856 21 414009  
 Email: [ict@mofa.gov.la](mailto:ict@mofa.gov.la)

Ministry of Public Security Lao PDR  
 P.O.Box 7040, Vientiane, Lao PDR  
 Tel: 021 262 396  
 Fax: +856 21 262 396

*For inquiries, please contact:*

- John Liu, East Asia Programme Officer, FORUM-ASIA at +66802828610 or [johnliu@forum-asia.org](mailto:johnliu@forum-asia.org)
- Joses Kuan, East Asia Programme Associate, FORUM-ASIA at +66835445166 or [joses@forum-asia.org](mailto:joses@forum-asia.org)