

Message of the SAPA Working Group on ASEAN at the Solidarity Event for Sombath Somphone

Forced or enforced disappearance is not a new phenomenon in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines hundreds of people involuntarily disappeared during the brutal martial law regime. In Indonesia, a number of political activists were abducted during the turbulent years leading up to the fall of Suharto. In Thailand, it has been nine long years since human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit went missing. Two days from now it will be the fourth month since Sombath Somphone, or Uncle Bath to the young activists in the region, was abducted. The list goes on and on without end in sight.

Enforced disappearance violates our basic right to life. It is an assault to our basic sense of humanity and decency as friends and families of the disappeared continue to suffer without knowing if they will be able to see their loved one again.

The Solidarity for Asian Peoples Advocacy or SAPA Working Group on ASEAN, a network of NGOs and human rights organizations in the region, reiterates the call of its partners and friends in the region for Sombath's immediate and safe return. We challenge the Lao government to break its silence on the Sombath Somphone's case and remind them that Lao is a signatory to the International Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Their continuing silence and seeming inaction only amplifies the horror, pain and suffering felt by the family of Sombath Somphone. It worries us that someone like Sombath, who have never openly challenged the Lao government, and who is recognized by the international community for his work among rural communities would be subjected to something like this.

We call on the leaders of ASEAN, who will meet for the 22nd ASEAN Summit in Brunei, to put on their agenda the alarming situation of enforced disappearances in the region. The ASEAN governments must act now and show that they are committed to end the impunity on enforced disappearances by taking a decisive action on Sombath Somphone's case. ASEAN can start that by instructing their representatives in the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights or AICHR to investigate the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone. The time to act is now.

On April 24 and 25, these ASEAN leaders will gather in Brunei under the theme of *"Our People, Our Future Together."* But how can we invest our future in an ASEAN where peoples' basic rights are continuously ignored and violated, a community where people are abducted and forced to disappear? We cannot be part of this. If ASEAN wants us to be part of this community then they should put the interests of the people above everything else. They should respect and uphold basic human rights.

To all our beloved desaparecidos we will continue to wait for you, look for you, and shout for your names. We will never forget you.