

Joint statement

Laos: States should ask “Where is Sombath?” at upcoming review of human rights record

15 December 2024: On the 12-year anniversary of the unresolved enforced disappearance of Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone, we, the undersigned civil society organizations and individuals worldwide, urge United Nations (UN) member states to express their concern over this continuing crime and to call for the prompt resolution of Sombath’s case at the upcoming review of the human rights record of Laos.

As UN member states prepare for the fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Laos, scheduled for April/May 2025 in Geneva, Switzerland, we call on them to reinforce civil society’s long-standing calls for truth and accountability regarding Sombath’s enforced disappearance.

During the second UPR of Laos in January 2015, Sombath Somphone was the subject of recommendations, expressions of concern, and advance questions by 16 UN member states.¹ During the third UPR of Laos in January 2020, seven UN member states formulated recommendations or advance questions on Sombath’s case.²

During both reviews, the Lao government claimed its investigation into Sombath’s enforced disappearance was ongoing. Such statements have been contradicted by the undisputable fact that, for 12 years, the Lao authorities have consistently failed to provide any concrete information on the steps they claim to have taken to effectively investigate Sombath’s disappearance. Instead, the government has engaged in a protracted campaign of misinformation, denials, slander, and cover-ups.³

At the upcoming UPR, UN member states should call on the Lao government to take thorough and effective measures to establish the fate or whereabouts of Sombath and all other victims of enforced disappearances in the country, identify the suspected perpetrators of such serious

¹ Recommendations: Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and United Kingdom; Expression of concern: Belgium, Netherlands, and Singapore. Advance questions: Slovenia, Spain, and United States.

² Recommendations: Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, and United Kingdom. Advance questions: Belgium and United States.

³ For example, see: BBC, *Laos accused of lying over Sombath Somphone abduction*, 28 August 2013; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23862691>; Radio Free Asia, *EU Parliament Dissatisfied with Lao Efforts to Locate Missing Activist*, 28 October 2013, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/eu-10282013191323.html>; Human Rights Watch, *Laos: End Cover-Up in Activist’s ‘Disappearance’*, 14 June 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/14/laos-end-cover-activists-disappearance>; AHR, *Lao government’s deceptive game on Sombath investigation must end*, 12 September, 2014, <https://aseanmp.org/publications/post/laos-governments-deceptive-game-on-sombath-investigation-must-end/>; FIDH, *Government slanders Sombath Somphone, issues “blanket denials” on enforced disappearances during rights review*, 18 July 2018, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/laos/government-slanders-sombath-somphone-issues-blanket-denials-on>; Human Rights Committee, *Information received from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic on follow-up to the concluding observations on its initial report*, 18 December 2023, <https://shorturl.at/6ZOYe>; Sombath.org, *The investigation [last accessed on 29 November 2024]*, <https://www.sombath.org/en/who-is-sombath/video/the-investigation/>

crimes, and provide victims with an effective remedy and full reparations. To date, no case of enforced disappearance in Laos has been resolved and no perpetrators have been identified or brought to justice.

UN member states should also recommend the Lao government promptly ratify, without reservations, the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), which it signed in 2008, and fully implement it into national law, policies, and practices.

The Lao government's failure to uphold its obligations under international human rights law and standards with respect to Sombath is reflective of the human rights violations constituting crimes under international law and related impunity that have plagued Laos for several decades. His enforced disappearance has also had a chilling effect on Lao civil society organizations and human rights defenders, and marked a significant escalation in the government's silencing of independent voices.

Amid the serious constraints and repression faced by independent civil society organizations and human rights defenders in Laos, and the continued silence of donors, development agencies, and diplomats in the country, concerned international attention remains the primary hope for finding Sombath and delivering justice to him and his family.

We continue to stand in solidarity with Sombath and his family and urge UN member states to join us in asking the Lao government the same question we have been asking for the past 12 years: "Where is Sombath?"

Background

Sombath Somphone, a pioneer in community-based development and youth empowerment, was last seen at a police checkpoint on a busy street of Vientiane on the evening of 15 December 2012. Footage from a traffic CCTV camera showed that police stopped Sombath's vehicle at the checkpoint and that, within minutes, unknown individuals forced him into another vehicle and drove him away in the presence of police officers. CCTV footage also showed an unknown individual arriving and driving Sombath's vehicle away from the city center. In December 2015, Sombath's family obtained new CCTV footage from the same area and made it public. The video shows Sombath's car being driven back towards the city by an unknown individual.

For further information, please visit: <https://www.sombath.org/>

Organizations:

1. Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)
2. Amnesty International
3. Armanshahr|OPEN ASIA
4. ARTICLE 19

5. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)
6. Asia Democracy Network (ADN)
7. Asia Human Rights and Labour Advocates (AHRLA)
8. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
9. BALAOD Mindanaw
10. Bangladesh Krishok Federation
11. Bir Duino
12. Bytes For All
13. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
14. Cambodian League for the Promotion & Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
15. Center for Prisoners' Rights
16. Centre for Civil and Political Rights
17. Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)
18. China Labour Bulletin (CLB)
19. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
20. Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)
21. Community Resource Centre (CRC)
22. Covenants Watch
23. Cross Cultural Foundation (CrCF)
24. Defence of Human Rights (DHR)
25. Equality Myanmar
26. FIAN International
27. FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights
28. Focus on the Global South
29. Fortify Rights
30. Fresh Eyes
31. Front Line Defenders
32. Globe International
33. Human Rights Alert
34. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)
35. Human Rights in China (HRIC)
36. Human Rights Watch
37. Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation
38. Indonesian Legal Aid and Human Rights Association
39. International Campaign for Tibet (ICT)
40. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
41. International Rivers
42. Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw)
43. Justice for Peace Foundation
44. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law
45. Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR)
46. League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI)
47. London Mining Network
48. Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA)

49. MADPET (Malaysians Against Death Penalty and Torture)
50. Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)
51. Manushya Foundation
52. National Commission for Justice & Peace (NCJP)
53. National Fisheries Solidarity Movement
54. Odhikar
55. Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum
56. Peace Rights Foundation
57. People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)
58. People's Watch
59. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA)
60. Psychological Responsiveness NGO
61. Public Association "Dignity"
62. Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU)
63. Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO)
64. Stiftung Asienhaus
65. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)
66. Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR)
67. Task Force Detainees of the Philippines
68. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR)
69. The Corner House
70. Think Centre
71. Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG)
72. Transnational Institute
73. Union for Civil Liberty (UCL)
74. Urgewald
75. Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR)
76. WH4C (Workers Hub For Change)
77. Women's Peace Network (WPN)
78. World Organization against Torture (OMCT)

Individuals:

1. Shui Meng and Sombath's family, Vientiane
2. Nico Bakker, Portugal
3. Philip Hirsch, University of Sydney
4. Rosanna Barbero
5. Anne Sophie Gindroz
6. Saeed Baloch
7. Ame Trandem, The Hague, The Netherlands
8. Dr. Nora Sausmikat, Germany
9. Randall Arnst
10. Larry Lohmann
11. Sarah Sexton

12. Nicholas Hildyard
13. David JH Blake
14. Angkhana Neelaphaijit