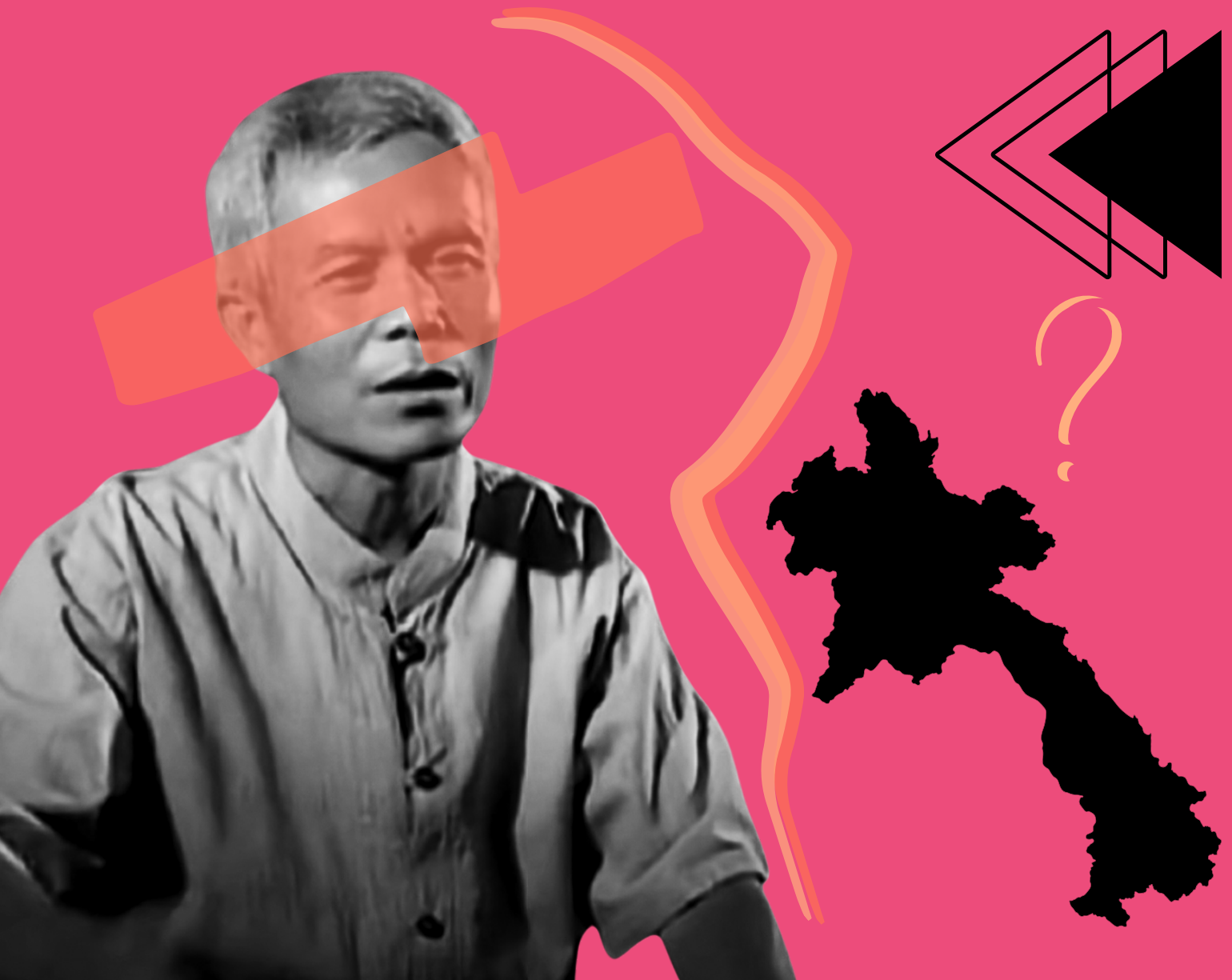


JOINT STATEMENT

15 December 2023

Laos: 11 years of government inaction on Sombath Somphone's enforced disappearance

#WhereIsSombath



Laos: 11 years of government inaction on Sombath Somphone's enforced disappearance

15 December 2023: On the 11-year anniversary of the enforced disappearance of Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone, we, the undersigned civil society organizations and individuals, strongly condemn the Lao government's continued failure to provide necessary information as to his fate and whereabouts and reiterate our calls to the authorities to deliver truth, justice and reparations to his family.

International concerns over Sombath's case, expressed by international civil society, United Nations (UN) human rights experts, and UN member states on last year's anniversary of Sombath's enforced disappearance, have been ignored by the Lao government.

On 25 September 2023, in a submission to the UN Human Rights Committee as part of its follow-up review of Laos under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Lao government repeated previous misleading statements and miserably failed to provide any additional information on the steps it said it had taken to find Sombath. The government claimed it "never stopped trying to find the truth" about Sombath's fate "in order to bring the offender(s) to justice." In reality, the Lao authorities have continued to disregard Sombath's wife, Shui Meng Ng, and have not provided her with any updates on her husband's case since 2017. The government then made the extraordinary assertion that its Task Force's investigation had been "carried out on the basis of transparency, impartiality and accountability, including the use of modern investigative techniques consistent with international standards by the capable inquiry officials." It concluded that the case of Sombath needed "more time for investigation" and added that the Task Force was "still active in the investigation" and had "not yet closed the case."

These government statements are unequivocally false in suggesting any degree of transparency. Existing evidence is clear that the Lao government has been engaged in a continuous cover-up of the facts of Sombath's case since he was forcibly disappeared in 2012, including providing misleading information about its actions to his family, the Lao public, and the international community, as stated above.

We deplore the unmistakable pattern of inaction, negligence, and obfuscation that various Lao authorities have repeatedly engaged in for more than a decade and we continue to resolutely stand in solidarity with Sombath's family and all other victims of enforced disappearances in Laos.

We reiterate our calls on the Lao authorities to take real and effective measures to establish the fate or whereabouts of Sombath and all other victims of enforced disappearances in the country, identify the perpetrators of such serious crimes, and provide victims with an effective remedy and full reparations. We also urge the government to immediately ratify without reservations the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which it signed in 2008, and to fully implement it into national law, policies, and practices.

As upcoming chair for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Laos will be placed in a strategic position to lead the regional efforts to strengthen, promote, and protect human rights. However, its continued failure to act on Sombath's enforced disappearance sends a message of inadequacy to head the regional bloc and to fulfill ASEAN's purpose under Article 1(7) of the ASEAN Charter, which is to strengthen democracy, enhance good governance, and the rule of law and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We will continue to seek justice and accountability for Sombath. Until the truth is found and justice is delivered to his family, we will not stop demanding answers from the Lao government to the same question we have been asking for the past 11 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/en/>

Organizations:

1. Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)
2. Amnesty International
3. Armanshahr Foundation | OPEN ASIA
4. ARTICLE 19
5. Asia Democracy Network (ADN)
6. Asia Europe People's Forum
7. Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD)
8. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
9. AWAM Pakistan
10. Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM)
11. Boat People SOS
12. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
13. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
14. Campaign Committee for Human Rights (CCHR)
15. Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD)
16. Center for Prisoners' Rights (CPR)

17. Centre for Civil and Political Rights
18. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
19. Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)
20. Committee of the Relatives of the May 1992 Heroes
21. Community Resource Centre (CRC)
22. Cross Cultural Foundation (CrCF)
23. Dignity-Kadyr-kassiyet
24. FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights
25. Focus on the Global South
26. Fortify Rights
27. Fresh Eyes
28. Front Line Defenders
29. Hawai'i Institute for Human Rights
30. Human Rights Alert
31. Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF)
32. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP)
33. Human Rights in China
34. Human Rights Lawyers Association (HRLA)
35. Human Rights Watch
36. Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI)
37. INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre Sri Lanka
38. Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC)
39. International Campaign for Tibet (ICT)
40. International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED)
41. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
42. International Rivers
43. Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw)
44. Judicial System Monitoring Program (JSMP)
45. Karapatan Alliance Philippines
46. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR)
47. Korean House for International Solidarity (KHIS)
48. Lao Movement for Human Rights
49. Law and Society Trust Sri Lanka
50. League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI)
51. Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA)
52. Malaysians Against Death Penalty and Torture (MADPET)
53. Maldivian Democracy Network
54. Manushya Foundation
55. MARUAH
56. National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP)
57. Odhikar
58. Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee
59. People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)
60. People's Watch

61. Perhimpunan Bantuan Hukum Indonesia (PBHI)
62. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA).
63. Progressive Voice
64. Pusat Komnas
65. Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RRMRU)
66. Solidarity for People's Education and Lifelong Learning (SPELL)
67. Stiftung Asienhaus
68. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)
69. Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP)
70. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR)
71. Think Centre
72. Transnational Institute
73. Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR)
74. WOREC Nepal
75. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)

Individuals:

1. Anne-Sophie Gindroz
2. David JH Blake
3. Nico Bakker
4. Randall Arnst
5. Shui Meng and Sombath's family, Vientiane