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Authorities in Laos jail threaten to kill Christians

Local official tells pastor to renounce faith; church member expelled, children denied schooling

By Edward Ross

Compass Direct (11.09.2009) / HRWF (14.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Authorities in Laos last week jailed a church leader in Savannakhet Province for embracing Christianity and threatened to expel him unless he renounces his faith – and kill him if his arrest is made public, according to a human rights organization.

Officials from Liansai village, from Saybouthong sub-district and from Ad-Sapangthong district on Sept. 3 arrested Thao Oun, an elder at Boukham Church, at his home and forced him at gunpoint to the Saybounthong sub-district office, according to Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF). The organization said the officials turned him over to the chief of police of Saybouthong sub-district, Thao Somphet, who detained, interrogated, and terrorized the Christian for nearly six hours.

Oun was charged with bringing destruction to the Lao nation and government by embracing Christianity, which the officials consider a “foreign religion to be abhorred,” according to HRWLRF.

The chief of police demanded that Oun immediately renounce Christianity or face expulsion from the village. He “further threatened Thao Oun that if word of his arrest and interrogation get out to the international community, he will be put to death,” according to HRWLRF. The organization decided to publicize the mistreatment, a spokesman told Compass, citing international exposure as the most effective way of preventing Lao officials from carrying out threats.

The sub-district chief of police also told Oun that his harsh treatment would end “only after the death of all believers in Boukham Church,” according to HRWLRF.

To further pressure Boukham Church, Liansai village officials and security forces along with Saybouthong sub-district police on Saturday (Sept. 5) arrested Thao Aom, who became a Christian 10 months ago. He also was interrogated and intimidated at Saybouthong sub-district police headquarters, with authorities telling him, “You have believed in a foreign religion, so you must sign an affidavit to renounce Christianity – if you do not recant, you must vacate the village.”

HRWLRF reported that after three hours of police interrogation, Aom still refused to sign the affidavit renouncing his faith. He was expelled from the village.

He has sought refuge in a village about six kilometers (nearly four miles) away, where he had previously lived, according to HRWLRF.

On Sunday (Sept. 6) at 6 a.m., Palan district police authorities joined the officers from Saybouthong sub-district, in Ad-Sapangthong district, to surround the Boukham Church worship site in Saisomboon village – blocking church members from entering for Sunday morning worship.

Members of Boukham Church rotate worship sites among three locations, according to HRWLRF: in Liansai village in Saybounthong sub-district of Ad-Sapangthong district; in Boukham village in Ad-Sapangthong district; and in Saisomboon village in Ad-Sapangthong district. Elder Oun lives in Liansai village, where he leads the worship service when Boukham Church meets there.

To punish Boukham Church members for following Christ, Lao officials have denied schooling to 10 of their children and cut off access to water at village wells, according to HRWLRF. They have also deprived all area Christians of protection and rights and threatened to deny public medical care for Christians who get sick or injured.

Laos is a Communist country that is 1.5 percent Christian and 67 percent Buddhist, with the remainder unspecified.

The actions against Boukham church violate the Lao Constitution as well as the 2004 Law on Criminal Procedure, the 2006 Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children and the 2005 Penal Law, according to the organization. The officials who arrested Oun and Aom have violated Article 5 of the Law on Criminal Procedure, which prohibits the arrest, detention or building search without an order from a public prosecutor or from a people's court, according to HRWLRF.

"Any individual who arrests, detains or conducts any search of buildings or persons in contravention of the laws shall be subject to criminal proceedings and shall be criminally liable," the law states, according to HRWLRF.

"In addition to violating the Lao Constitution that guarantees religious rights of an individual Lao person, the arrest of Thao Oun by gunpoint was clearly an abuse of authority, and the officials should be punished for this criminal act," HRWLRF said in a statement. "Article 154 of Penal Law stipulates, 'Any civil servant engaging in the intentional excessive use of the authority provided by law, thereby [adversely] affecting the interests of the state or society or the rights and interests of citizens, shall be punished by three months to three years of imprisonment and shall be fined from 500,000 kip to 5 million kip [US\$60 to US\$600].'"

The law further states that if such abuses of authority are committed with the use of force, weapons, torture, indecent words or acts affecting the honor and reputation of the victim, the offender is to be punished by three to five years of imprisonment and fined from 2 million kip to 7 million kip (US\$240 to US\$840).

The denial of education for school-age children on the basis of religious affiliation violates Article 3 (5) of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children, the organization asserted. Article 6 further states, "All children are equal in all aspects without discrimination of any kind in respect of gender, race, ethnicity, language, beliefs, religion, physical state and socio-economic status of their family."

Last year officials in Boukham village detained three Christians from the church – Pastor Sombong Supatto, Boot Chanthaleuxay and Khamvan Chanthaleuxay – for several weeks before releasing them on Oct. 16. Authorities initially arrested Pastor Supatto and four others on July 20, storming their house church and ordering the 63 Christians present to cease worshipping or face prison for "believing in and worshipping God."

Police targeted the church because it was not officially registered. Such registration comes with strict limitations on church activities, so many Christians avoid doing so.

Police destroy church building in Lao village

Destruction carried out while Christians attend compulsory village meeting

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct News (30.03.2009) / HRWF (31.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> -Police in Borikhamxay province, Laos, on March 19 destroyed a church building in Nonsomboon village while Christian residents attended a meeting called by district officials.

A member of the provincial religious affairs department, identified only as Bounlerm, has since claimed that police destroyed the worship facility because it was built without official approval.

Tension between the Christians and local authorities escalated last year when officials ordered at least 40 Christian families living in Ban Mai village to relocate some 20 kilometers (12 miles) to the newly-created Nonsomboon for “administrative reasons,” according to advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF). Local sources said the forced relocation to Nonsomboon village was an effort to control the activities of Christians in Ban Mai who were sharing their faith with other people in the district.

Previously authorities had evicted Christians from several other villages in the district and relocated them to Ban Mai village, HRWLRF reported. Families were expected to cover their own relocation expenses, including the cost of rebuilding their homes and re-establishing their livelihoods.

Initially residents refused to relocate a second time, largely because officials would not grant permission to move their existing church building or to erect a new structure in Nonsomboon. Eventually they were forced to move to Nonsomboon under duress.

Lacking worship facilities, the villagers on Dec. 10, 2008 erected a simple church building. On Dec. 26, village police removed the cross from the building, summoned four key church leaders to a meeting at the Burikan district office and subsequently detained them for building a church without government approval.

HRWLRF identified the four only as pastor Bounlard, assistant pastor Khampeuy, church elder Khampon and men’s ministry leader Jer. When the wives of the four men brought food to them during their detention, officials refused to allow them to see their husbands.

In a meeting on Dec. 27 between provincial religious affairs officials and church leaders, officials said police had arrested the Christians because they refused to tear down the church building. A senior religious affairs official identified only as Booppa, however, agreed to release the Christians on Dec. 29.

The Christians of Nonsomboon then applied for permission to hold a Christmas service in their church facility on Jan. 7 and invited religious affairs official Bounlerm to attend. When permission failed to arrive in time, they conducted the service regardless, with Bounlerm and other district officials attending as honorary guests.

During the service, district and village level police officers charged into the building and ordered church members to cease worshipping. Bounlorm encouraged the congregation to follow orders from the local officials.

Police officers then drafted a document ordering church members to abandon the Christmas celebration and demanded that the congregation sign it. When they refused, the police insisted that they disband the meeting immediately. After leaving the building, the congregation traveled to nearby Burikan town and set up a tent in an open field next to a government office in order to complete the Christmas service, as there were no church facilities in Burikan.

A campaign of intimidation followed, according to HRWLRF, culminating in the destruction of the church building by village police on March 19. At press time, no information was available on the content of the meeting called by district officials on that day.
