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Christians exiled from village after refusing to renounce their faith

ICAN (15.11.2014) - <http://persecutedchurch.info/2014/11/15/lao-christians-exiled-from-village-after-refusing-to-renounce-their-faith/>

Six Hmong Christian families have been forced to leave their village in central Laos after refusing to renounce their faith, according to a fellow member of their ethnic group and friend to the families.

The six families, consisting of 25 people, were made to leave their homes in Borikhamxay province's Khamkeut district because they would not revert to animism as practiced by the majority of residents in their Ko Hai village, the source told RFA's Lao Service.

"After they converted to Christianity, the local authorities became unhappy and ordered them to revert back to animism, but they refused," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

According to the source, authorities detained two men from among the families in July and held them for nearly a month after they refused to renounce Christianity.

"Once they were released the authorities again tried to force them to believe in animism, but they still refused, so they were forced to leave their homes," he said.

Two of the Christian families were evicted from Ko Hai on August 27, while the other four were sent away on September 18, he said.

All six families resettled in Khamkeut's Hoi Keo village, located near the town of Lak Sao, the source said.

He said that the 62-year-old patriarch of one of the families died shortly after arriving in Hoi Keo, suggesting that the stress of being forced from his ancestral home was responsible for his death.

"[The Christian families] want to return to their homes because they are poor and don't have enough money to resettle in the new location," the source said. "They already had a home, land and a farm in their old village."

The governor of Khamkeut district claimed to have no knowledge of the forced eviction, but vowed to investigate.

"We have not received any reports about this, but we will look into it and ask the local authorities," the governor, who gave his name as Thongsam, told RFA.

Arrests in Luang Namtha

According to the friend of the evicted families, seven other ethnic Hmong — including a 14-year-old boy — were arrested in northwestern Laos' Luang Namtha province on November 2 after they converted from animism to Christianity.

He said five of the Christians were released after signing a pledge to renounce their faith, but that two others had refused and were to be transferred to the provincial prison.

A security officer from Luang Namtha's Long district, which administers Kang Daeng village where the seven Hmong live, denied that authorities had arrested the Christians.

But he told RFA that the seven had been taken in for questioning and a "consultation" on their behavior, which he said included fighting with other village residents.

"[They] have disturbed the social peace, argued, and gone on rampages, so we brought them in for a consultation — we didn't arrest them.

Religious affairs

The Lao constitution provides for freedom of religion but stipulates that the state should play an active role in managing the country's religious affairs.

Christians are a small minority in the Buddhist-majority country, where Roman Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Bahai's, and followers of Confucianism constitute less than three percent of the population, according to the US State Department's annual report on global religious freedom.

In some provinces in Laos, local authorities are suspicious of non-Buddhist religious groups, and sometimes minority groups' refusal to participate in Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies produces tension in local communities, according to the report.

In March, six Christian families left their Buddhist-majority village in Savannakhet province following what rights groups said were threats of eviction if they did not renounce their faith, though local authorities said the families had left of their own accord to avoid conflict with other residents.

Lao authorities have also long been wary of opposition among the Hmong, many of whom say they face persecution from the government because of their Vietnam War-era ties with the US.

Thousands of Hmong fought under CIA advisers during a so-called "secret war" against communists in Laos.

Seven Christians arrested for religious meeting, Savannakhet

CSW (30.09.2014) - Local authorities in Savannakhet province, Laos, arrested seven Protestant Christians after they held a religious meeting on 29 September.

According to the non-profit advocacy organisation Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF), Pastor Sompong Supatto of Bouham village, Atsaphathong district and six Christians from villages in Palansai district met together for worship at Pastor Sompong's home on the morning of 29 September. Afterwards, as they gathered together for lunch, the village chief, village security officers and village police arrested the seven Christians. A week before, on 21 September, village officials told the Christians they were not allowed to gather for worship in Boukham village, despite the fact that Christians have been meeting for worship in Boukham village for three to four years.

The seven Christians, aged 18 to 60 years old, are currently being detained at the Boukham village government headquarters. Pastor Sompong is reportedly handcuffed and held in leg stocks.

Also in Savannakhet, five Christians [accused](#) of the murder of a Christian convert in June this year remain in detention despite having been found "[not guilty](#)". Savannakhet Office of Prosecutors ruled that Pastor Kaithong and four Christians detained since 23 June did not commit any criminal offence. However, they remain in detention as the authority to release the five detainees lies with the Atsaphangthong District Chief. No date has been set for their release. Recent reports claim that the five Christians' health has deteriorated since their imprisonment.

Research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2012-2014 found Savannakhet to be one of the [worst provinces](#) for violations against Protestant Christians in Laos, which include forced eviction, arrest and detention, disruption of religious meetings and services, forced participation in animist ceremonies, and threats.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We deplore the local authorities' decision to ban Christian worship in Boukham village, and the arrest of the seven Christians on 29 September. Sadly, this kind of incident is still common in Savannakhet province and other parts of Laos, despite the government's recognition of Protestant Christianity. We call on the central government to protect and promote the rights of people of all religions or belief, in all parts of the country. We further call on the local authorities in Savannaakhet province to release the seven Christians arrested in Boukham village, and the five Christians cleared of murder in August 2014."

Christians found not guilty of murder, but still detained

CSW (05.08.2014) - Five Christians [accused](#) of the murder of a Christian convert in Savannakhet province, Laos, have today been found "not guilty", according to the non-profit advocacy organisation Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

Savannakhet Office of Prosecutors ruled that Pastor Kaithong and three church leaders named Puphet, Muk and Hasadee, and another Christian known as Tiang, who had been detained since 23 June, did not commit any criminal offence. However, they remain in detention as the authority to release the five lies with the Atsaphangthong District Chief. No date has been set for their release.

The five Christians were accused of murdering Mrs Chan, a convert to Protestant Christianity, who was suffering from an unidentified two-year illness when she died en route from hospital back to her home in Atsaphangthong district. The village chief granted permission for a Christian funeral, but later ordered Pastor Kaithong, who was conducting the funeral, to stop the proceedings. Kaithong appealed to the chief of Atsaphangthong district, and was instructed to wait for one day for the outcome of the

appeal. However, according to HRWLRF, on 23 June, the village chief and the police authorities arrested Kaithong and the four other Christians, accusing Kaithong of giving Chan medication on the journey back from the hospital which they claim caused her death.

Research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2012-2014 found Savannakhet to be one of the [worst provinces](#) for religious freedom violations in Laos, which include forced eviction, arrest and detention, disruption of religious meetings and services, forced participation in animist ceremonies, and threats.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We welcome the news that the five Christians detained on 23 June have been found not guilty of the murder of Mrs Chan. We urge the Atsaphangthong District to release the five Christians immediately and without conditions. We also call on the relevant authorities to investigate allegations that police forced a relative of the deceased to sign a statement accusing Pastor Kaithong of murder, and [pressured](#) other Christians in the area to recant in violation of their right to freedom of religion or belief."

Laos Christians charged with murder – death of convert

Persecuted Church (14.07.2014)

<http://persecutedchurch.info/2014/07/14/lao-christians-charged-with-murder-after-death-of-convert/> - Laos, July 01, 2014: Five Christians have been charged with murder in Laos after a sick woman sought prayer at her local church, converted to Christianity and later died.

Mrs Chan from Saisomboon village in Savannakhet province passed away on 21 June, having been unwell with an unknown condition for two years. In April, she approached the local church for prayer, and her health improved for a short time. She, along with her eight grown-up children, came to faith in Christ.

The sons and daughters wanted a Christian burial ceremony for their mother and gained permission for this from the Saisomboon village chief; they were going to bury her on their own property, as Christians are denied burial rights in the local cemetery.

The evening after Mrs Chan's death, Christians came from nearby villages for her funeral, but it was prevented from going ahead. The village authorities backtracked on their original decision, saying the funeral could take place only if Mrs Chan's sons and daughters signed an affidavit recanting their Christian faith, which they refused to do.

On 23 June, the Saisomboon church leader, Mrs Kaithong, appealed to the district chief, and the following day she was arrested along with three other area church leaders, Mr Puphet, Mr Muk and Mr Hasadee, and local believer Mr Tiang.

Their detention was initially over the burial dispute, but they were subsequently charged with Mrs Chan's murder. The five were placed in handcuffs and wooden stocks.

Shortly after the arrests, the village chief led Buddhist monks and relatives of Mrs Chan into her house and conducted a Buddhist ceremony before her body was taken to the village cemetery.

A spokesman for Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) told Morning Star News:

I believe that authorities are trying to find every way they possibly can in order to stop the spread of Christian religious freedom in the area.

The Chans were the fifth family in Saisomboon to convert to Christianity. Other Christians in the village have encountered opposition because of their faith. On 20 May, three teenage girls, Noi (15), Net (15) and Nut (14) were disqualified from taking their final school exams because of their faith. The village chief said that in following Christianity, the students had forfeited their right to education.

- barnabas team

Laos: Christians still detained in Savannakhet as EU-Laos human rights talks begin

CSW (21.05.2014) <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=news&id=2062&search> - Multiple sources have informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that 11 Christians detained in Savannakhet Province on 11 May 2014 remain in prison after being arrested for meeting in an unauthorised location. Twelve others, including women and teenagers, have been released after signing documents agreeing to not meet at that location again.

The news comes as the EU's regular [dialogue](#) with Laos on human rights and good governance begins in Brussels this week. A [new briefing](#) by CSW urges the EU delegation to ensure that the EU's key concerns in relation to freedom of religion or belief are raised consistently through exchanges on human rights and good governance.

The 23 Christians in Savannakhet Province belong to a church in Paksong Village in Songkhone District, which was [barred](#) from holding church services in 2012. The pastor of the church was arrested and coerced into signing a document saying the church would stop meeting. According to Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom, the authorities, including the new village chief, claimed that Christians in that area did not receive permission to hold worship services; however, the Christians claimed they received permission from the former village chief approximately a year before.

The recent arrest of the 23 Christians, including the pastor, appears to involve two locations. The authorities are trying to prevent Christians meeting at a "new" location, which they claim is unauthorised. However, the group has reportedly been meeting there for over six years.

CSW's [briefing](#) includes an overview of the most common violations of freedom of religion or belief in Laos, including forced eviction and being "forced to sign documents recanting their beliefs". Although Laos has seen some improvements in the protection of freedom of religion or belief, including "a reduction in the number of long-term Christian prisoners of conscience and in the average length of sentence" over the past decade, cases like the one mentioned above in Savannakhet Province are not uncommon.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We welcome this dialogue on human rights and good governance between the EU and Laos. However, such efforts towards constructive dialogue are overshadowed by incidents like the one described above. Freedom of religion or belief is a touchstone for human rights standards. We therefore strongly urge the authorities involved in this case to release the

remaining detainees in Savannakhet Province, and to allow them to meet for communal worship according to their rights under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Laos ratified in 2009”.
