

My dearest Sombath

Today, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2015 marks the third anniversary of your disappearance. Each year, I dread the dawning of this day, as I am once more reminded of that fateful evening when you were so abruptly taken away from my life. I remember that evening 3 years ago so well. You and I were supposed to meet back at home for dinner – except you never came home. And now dinner for me can never be the same! In fact life can never be the same!

The past three years have been one long struggle for the search for truth as to what happened to you; where have you been taken; are you well, or... I don't know anymore. But I still hold on to the hope that you are still alive and will come back to me one day.

My dearest Sombath, I want you to know that you have not been forgotten, even though some of your close friends and colleagues within government and non-government circles are still so intimidated by your sudden disappearance that they do not even dare to speak your name, or acknowledge in public that they know you or have worked with you. I used to feel very angry and betrayed by their actions; but now I don't even want to waste any energy by getting angry with them anymore. It is not for me to judge them; they are their own best judge.

Nowadays, I mostly continue to take comfort that you still have many loyal and courageous friends, and many supporters old and new who continue to show concern and support for you. Take for example, a recent event organized by PADETC on 11 December this year to commemorate the third anniversary of your disappearance. Organized around the theme of "Sombath Somphone: the man, his work and his dreams for Laos", the event was attended by more than 100 people, including your colleagues, your friends, and representatives of various embassies and development agencies.

Five monks from the Wat Nakoune Noi led a blessing ceremony for you and prayed for your good health and safe return to us. After the blessing ceremony, a number of people spoke about our legacy and your dreams for Laos. We were reminded of your kindness, your humility, and your genuine commitment to build a better society for the Lao people. Some people talked about what they had learned from you – your pioneering of participatory rural planning and community development in Laos; your effective consultative leadership skills; your initiative in involving the Buddhist clergy in education and development; and your innovative use of the media and ICT to bridge the digital divide between the urban and rural communities.

The best depiction of your work actually came from one of your former youth volunteers. She likened herself as a "fruit" that you have grown and nurtured on the PADETC tree. Once she has gained some experience and maturity, you encouraged her to leave PADETC and establish her own organization. She said, "Sombath tossed me out, but it is not like tossing me into the dustbin. He just wanted me to go out and start my own organization and lead other young

people, just as he had helped me learn and develop. He told me it was my turn to go and work with other young people just as PADETC had trained me”.

Indeed Sombath, you have been like a farmer who has patiently and diligently nurtured the “PADETC tree” which has grown and thrive and borne so many good fruit. These “fruit of your labor” are now out there spreading the seeds of your vision and your values and practices on balanced and sustainable education and development in different parts of the country. Sombath, you should rightly be proud that your 30-years’ lifework has not been in vain.

It is also heartening to note that apart from the PADETC event in Vientiane, other support networks in Thailand and the Philippines have also planned events to talk about your disappearance and your work as a way to remind the world and the Lao Government that the unresolved case of your disappearance has not forgotten.

My dearest Sombath, three years without you by my side has been too painful and too long. But I promise you, I will not give up my struggle to find you and have you come back to us.

My love, take care and stay strong. I too will stay strong for you.

Shui Meng