



Asian Federation Against Involuntary AFAD Disappearances (AFAD)

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Standing in Remembrance of Sombath; Standing for Truth and Justice for the Disappeared

A Forum Statement in Commemoration of the 2015 International Day of the Disappeared

27 August 2015, Quezon City, Philippines – All struggles against injustice represent the struggle of memory against forgetting. In commemoration of the International Day of the Disappeared, we, the families of the disappeared, human rights defenders, civil society organizations, members of the diplomatic community, students, acclaimed community leaders, who are gathered in this forum titled **“Return Sombath Safely! Surface All the Disappeared,”** renew our commitment to never forget the injustices brought upon the victims of enforced disappearances and their families, and intensify our call for truth and justice.

Organized by the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), the forum aims to raise awareness on the cruel and inhuman practice of enforced disappearances. Enforced disappearances remains to be a global phenomenon; the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) has received more than 53,000 cases of enforced disappearances from 84 states. Particularly, the forum highlights the case of Sombath Somphone, a Lao PDR citizen, who as of today has been disappeared for 986 days. Notable is that the global magnitude of enforced disappearances compelled the United Nations to adopt the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance with an independent monitoring body to ensure implementation.

Sombath Somphone is an extraordinary person of many roles: farmer, development worker, teacher and husband. Ordinarily, a person with his background would rather move to a foreign land in pursuit of greener pastures, but Sombath resolved to use the knowledge he got from studying agriculture and education in the University of Hawaii to promote sustainable agriculture and food security among the farming communities in Laos.

His compassion for the farmers in his homeland, Laos, inspired in him ingenuity and perseverance in finding innovative and practical ways to help them improve their production. Equally close to his heart are the youth, whom he looked upon with hope and believed to be the key to the development of Laos. He founded the Participatory Development Training Center (PADTEC), the first all-Lao organization to

help develop the potential of the youth and promote child-centered learning. His passion and hard work did not go unnoticed; in 2005, he was awarded with the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership.

Unfortunately, Sombath was disappeared in Vientiane on 15 December 2012. A CCTV footage obtained by his family shows that Sombath was stopped by the police at the Thadeau police post around 6 p.m. on 15 December 2012, and was driven away in a car by plainclothes men. He has never been seen again. His wife, Ng Shui Meng, is indefatigable in the search for Sombath and in appealing to the Lao PDR government to investigate Sombath's disappearance; but her efforts are met with denial and inaction. Sombath's family, friends and the people whose lives he has touched remain in the dark as to his fate or whereabouts.

For three years, people across the globe have continued to ask: **Where is Sombath?** Furthermore, the United Nations, leaders of various major countries, civil society organizations and members of the international community have continued to express their grave concern about Sombath's safety and whereabouts, and the persistent denial by the Lao authorities of its direct involvement on his enforced disappearance.

For instance, at the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Laos held in 20 January 2015, ten (10) states, e.g. Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK, recommended to the Lao PDR government to investigate into Sombath's disappearance. Five (5) other states raised questions on Sombath's disappearance.

The Lao PDR is a signatory to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons From Enforced Disappearance (ICPAPED); while it has yet to ratify the Convention, it is expected to act according to the spirit and letter of its provisions and has the obligation to refrain from any actions that may defeat the object and purpose of the Treaty prior to its entry into force.

Those who are responsible for the disappearance of Sombath want his memory to fade with each day. He remains disappeared, but we who know about his story refuse to forget. The same is true for the perpetrators of the disappearance of Jonas Burgos, who is Sombath's "brother" in that his work for the rights and welfare of farmers in the Philippines has led to his disappearance in 2009. We stand for Sombath, Jonas and the countless others who were snatched from their lives and from their families.

For the disappeared, for truth and justice, we commit ourselves to:

1. Spread awareness on enforced disappearance as a cruel human rights violation and as a continuing crime against human dignity that adversely affects the victims, their families and the society in general;
2. Be tireless in calling for justice for victims of enforced disappearances in Asia and all over the world;

3. Continue to call the attention of the Lao government to resolve the Sombath case by conducting a thorough and transparent investigation on the case and to heed the calls of many governments during the latest UPR and be true to its voluntary pledges to be true to the Charter of the UN and to the ASEAN mandate that it professes to uphold.
4. Urge the Lao PDR government to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

Finally, on the occasion of the International we, the participants of this forum, echo the call of the families to surface their disappeared loved ones without further delay; to bring justice to the perpetrators; to ensure reparation from the devastating consequences of their loved ones and to guarantee that enforced disappearance will never ever be repeated again.

The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) is one with many other organizations that celebrate the International Day of the Disappeared, a globally-observed annual remembrance of the victims of enforced disappearances. AFAD is a regional federation composed of 13 organizations of families of the disappeared and human rights organizations in Asia that are working directly on the issue of enforced disappearances.

The opening line in this forum statement paraphrases a line from Milan Kundera's "A Book of Laughter and Forgetting"