

Statement of Rep. Walden Bello on the Preliminary findings of ASEAN Parliamentary Delegation to the Lao PDR on the disappearance of Sombath Somphone



We are members of a delegation of ASEAN parliamentarians that visited the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic to investigate the disappearance of Sombath Somphone, the prominent Lao leader of civil society from January 13 to 15. We went at the request of the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF)

The delegation was assembled in 10 days' time owing to the urgency of the matter. Despite the short notice, high officials of the Lao PDR met with us, and we are very grateful for this. We had a very frank exchange of views in a cordial atmosphere.

We told the officials we met with that the disappearance of Sombath is an ASEAN concern because Sombath is an ASEAN figure whose work has touched the lives of many people in Lao and other countries in ASEAN. His work on rural development was a model emulated throughout the region. Moreover, at a time when ASEAN is coming together as a real community in the eyes of the world, his disappearance reflects badly not only on Laos but on the whole ASEAN community.

The officials we met acknowledged that the disappearance of Sombath is a blow to the reputation of the Lao PDR and that it could not have come at a worse time, coming on the heels of the country's joining the World Trade Organization and hosting the Asia-Europe Leaders Meeting (ASEM). They also all acknowledged that Sombat was an important civil society leader who has contributed much to Laos' development working alongside government, with many of them saying they knew him personally. They also noted the special responsibility of the government to solve Mr. Sombath's disappearance since the Lao PDR has just signed the Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, being the fourth country in Asia to do so.

One of the Lao leaders we met, Mr. Phoungsavath Boupha, President of the National Committee for Human Rights in the Office of the President, acknowledged that Sombath's disappearance is not the first case of disappearance in Laos. He cited the case of the sister of the wife of the former ambassador of the Lao PDR to Indonesia who vanished five years ago and has not yet been found. We stressed to the officials we met that this case shows the importance of acting swiftly to find the disappeared, for the longer he or she is not located, the greater the chances that he will no longer surface.

We are very grateful for the meetings and the frank exchange of views, but we are from satisfied with the answers we got, and we told this to our hosts.

We were told that after a month of investigation, the only thing that has been established is that the police had nothing to do with the disappearance. We told them that this was not credible and that if we accepted this as fact as to the progress of the case, we would ourselves lose credibility.

We were told that Sombath was kidnapped, but we said if this was done by criminal elements, the family would by now have received a demand for ransom. No such note specifying an amount has been received. We received no satisfactory answer to this.

We noted discrepancies in our hosts' accounts of the circumstances of the abduction. Most of the officials we met said that there was no evidence that Sombath got into the pickup truck that appeared in the CCTV footage after his jeep was stopped. Yet Mr. Sakayane Sisouvong, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Sombath voluntarily boarded that vehicle.

Considering the experience of other countries in ASEAN where abductions have taken place, like the Philippines and Indonesia, we asked about the possibility that some section of the government or rogue elements in the government might have carried out an abduction that the rest of the government did not know about. This query did not elicit an answer from the officials we spoke to, except from Permanent Secretary Sisouvong, who said it was good suggestion. We expressed our hope to him that the authorities would indeed look into this angle.

We asked if Sombath's disappearance might have something to do with the Asia Europe People's Forum and the expulsion of Anne-Sophie Grindroz, the country director of the Swiss agency Helvetas. All we got in answer to this question was that Anne-Sophie was acting against Laos' interests. There was a denial that Sombath's disappearance was connected to her expulsion or the holding of the AEPF.

In short, our visit raised more questions than answers. It is indeed possible that the officials we met, high though they are in the government and National Assembly, do not know what happened to Sombath. Thus, it is all the more important that the highest state authorities direct the police, security, and intelligence agencies to focus their investigation on all possibilities, including the possibility that Mr. Sombath may have been abducted by elements, possibly rogue elements, within the government itself, a line of investigation that we strongly suggested and which was accepted as a good suggestion by the Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the government and the National Assembly of the Lao PDR for meeting and having a frank exchange of views with us. We especially appreciate the fact that our visit was not taken as an intrusion into the sovereignty of the Lao PDR but as a legitimate expression of fraternal ASEAN concern, and that our suggestion that the objects of investigation include possible sections or rogue elements in the government was accepted as a viable course of action. Let me reiterate what both sides repeated throughout the talks: that the immediate surfacing of Mr. Sombath is in the interest of all parties, of Mr. Sombath and his family, of the Lao PDR, and of ASEAN.