

REPORT BY EUROPEAN DELEGATION TO LAOS PDR - THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SOMBATH SOMPHONE 6-9TH March 2013

On December 15th 2012 Sombath Somphone disappeared, taken away in a truck by unknown persons after being stopped by police in the Lao capital, Vientiane. 83 days since then, nobody has seen or heard from him.

A European Delegation was in Vientiane between the 6th and 9th of March 2013 to express their grave concern that Sombath Somphone has still not returned safely to his family.

The Delegation was led by Tuur Elzinga a Senator of the Dutch Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and national and international Trade Unionist. Tuur Elzinga was accompanied by Andy Rutherford, a representative of the International Organising Committee of the Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF). The AEPF IOC had worked closely with Sombath in the preparations for and co-organising of the AEPF9 that took place in Vientiane between 16th and 19th October 2012, weeks before ASEM9.

The Delegation met with

- Representative of the Government of the Lao PDR, the Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Alounkeo Kittikhoun
- The Vice President of The National Assembly of the Lao PDR, Mr.Somphanh Phengkhammy and members of the National Assembly including Mr. Onsy Saensouk, Vice Chair of National Assembly Committee for Security and National Defence , Mr. Kisinth Sinphanngam Vice Chair of National Assembly Law Committee and Mr. Khongsy Sisengdeuane, Deputy Permanent Secretary.
- The Chargé d'Affaires, Head, of the European Delegation in Laos and Ambassadors from European Union member states in Laos
- Representatives from Lao development organisations
- Representatives from International NGOs based in Laos.

All meetings were frank, cordial and open and the Delegation would like to thank all the people that we met for their time and clear commitment to the safe return of Sombath to his family.

The Delegation also met with the wife of Sombath, Ng Shui-Meng and learned of her continued anguish and concerns for her husband's health and his whereabouts.

The Delegation was able to express directly their solidarity and deep commitment to work in all possible ways for as long as necessary until Sombath is returned safe and well to her. The Delegation also affirmed its commitment to support Shui-Meng along with that of many people, in many organisations, in many countries across the world.

In all meetings the Delegation shared their deep and tragically continuing concern that Sombath has not yet returned safely to his family.

The Delegation noted that the Government of the Lao PDR has given two public statements on progress of its investigations into the disappearance of Sombath. The second was on 2nd March 2013. Notwithstanding what has been undertaken so far Sombath is still yet to be safely returned to his family.

It noted the investigations to date but stressed that it is essential that investigations and related actions must be prioritised to ensuring Sombath's safe return to his family.

The Delegation also took every opportunity to stress that they strongly felt that it was within the capacities of the Government of the Lao PDR to ensure Sombath's safe return to his family.

The Delegation formally presented the unanimously agreed Resolution of the 6th February 2013 of the European Parliament on 'Laos: the case of Sombath Somphone' to the Lao National Assembly and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lao PDR. It was stressed that the resolution was supported by all six major political groups in the European Parliament and that the resolution formally calls on the EU to include Laos and the case of Sombath Somphone in its priorities for forthcoming sessions of the UN Human Rights Council.

The Representatives of the Government of the Lao PDR and of the Lao National Assembly all shared their strong concern for Sombath and their commitment to working for his safe return to his family. The representatives of the National Assembly shared their commitment to continue to closely follow the investigation from the National Assembly.

The 8th of March 2012 is the 83rd Day since Sombath's disappearance. The Delegation shared with all people that they met that for many organisations and institutions and especially political parties and bodies outside Laos, 100 days is a time for reflection and taking stock on progress. If no positive result has been achieved the Delegation shared the inevitability of the beginning of a new phase of international activity and that there was a deep commitment that the continuing disappearance of Sombath would preface or even dominate bi-lateral, multi-lateral and international discussions with and about Laos. This could happen with discussion at the WTO, with the Asia Development Bank, at the UN Human Rights Council to name but a few instances. Even, if it is still necessary, it could influence discussions about Lao PDR's graduation from LDC status.

The Delegation is concerned that whilst Sombath has not returned safely to his family, there will be a growing negative effect on foreign engagement and foreign investment in Laos at a time where Laos is deeply committed to developing stronger ties and links. 2012 was seen as a positive and important year for Laos both nationally and internationally with the hosting of the ASEM9 summit and the Asia Europe Business Forum and the holding of the Asia Europe People's Forum. It was also the year that Laos joined the WTO. In 2013 there is now great and widespread concern that the credibility of Laos will be deeply

tarnished with significant negative effects whilst Sombath is not returned safely to his family.

In addition to Sombath's disappearance the Delegation would also like to report on concerns that there is an increasing perception that the 'spaces' for dialogue, discussion and debate on how to achieve more sustainable economic and social development in Laos are becoming constricted. The climate of positive and constructive dialogue that was a part of AEPF9 is felt to have dissipated. This is of great concern to us and we sincerely urge that positive measures and actions are taken to ensure that the agreed and stated commitment of AEPF9, as widely shown on posters all around the AEPF9 venues, -"that we should enable a secure environment that encourages learning and reflection and provides space for open, respectful, diverse and constructive debate. We support harmony, compassion and understanding, whilst recognizing the strength of diversity and solidarity for peaceful and sustainable development" becomes a lived reality for people committed to **People's Solidarity against Poverty and for Sustainable Development** in Laos.

Report of European Delegation to Lao PDR by

Tuur Elzinga

Senator of the Dutch Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

and

Andy Rutherford

Representative of the International Organising Committee of the Asia Europe People's Forum

8th March 2013

Sombath Somphone

Sombath is a highly respected member of Lao civil society— well known for his work promoting education and sustainable development. Sombath Somphone was the co-chair of the AEPF9 Lao National Organising Committee, a key note speaker during the Opening Day, one of the co-ordinators of the Lao People's Vision and the Provincial Consultations. He also enabled the highly acclaimed 'Happy Laos' film which was shown at the closing of the AEPF9. He was taken away in a truck by unknown persons after being stopped by police in the Lao capital, Vientiane on 15 December 2012. Nobody has seen or heard from him since.