

Summary of Jon Ungphakorn's message of solidarity at the "Return Sombath Safely" Forum in Commemoration of the International Day of the Disappeared, organized by AFAD at the University of the Philippines on August 27, 2015:

Shui Meng, Mrs. Edita Burgos, Mary Ann Burgos, Relatives of the Disappeared, and Distinguished Guests,

I met Sombath Somphone for the first time ten years ago almost to the day, when we both arrived in Manila to receive the 2005 Ramon Magsaysay Awards.

During the days we were together that time and on a visit to his organisation PADETC two years later, I learned that he is a very gentle and mild mannered man who loves his country very very much, and has dedicated his life to the development of the lives of rural famers and the leadership skills of Laotian youth. He chose to live and work in the Lao PDR despite obvious opportunities to live a much more comfortable life outside the country.

Whatever he did, Sombath always worked in close cooperation and consultation with the relevant government agencies. He was never confrontational and could not be considered an "activist" in the conventional sense. That is why he has so many friends in high positions in his country.

It was therefore with great shock that I learned of his disappearance on December 15, 2012. It was unbelievable. Everyone who knew him in Thailand thought that there must be some sort of mistake and that he would soon resurface, but that was not to be.

Enforced disappearance is the most violent and cruel and inhuman act that can be committed against a human being. It is directed not only at the victim but also at the victim's family, his/her community, and the whole of society. If the victim is a development worker, it crushes the morale of all development workers. If the victim is a journalist, it affects the whole profession.

Many countries in Asia and in the ASEAN states have records of crimes of enforced disappearance committed by state officials. In my country Thailand, there are three well-known cases:

- 1) The case of Mr. Tanong Po-Arn, a labour leader who

disappeared after being ordered to report to the military junta that took power during a coup d'etat in 1991

2) The case of the Muslim human rights lawyer, Somchai Neelapaijit, who was abducted and disappeared on March 12, 2004 after exposing torture of Muslim detainees in the far south.

3) The recent case of "Billy", Porlagee Rakjongcharoen, a Karen community leader living with his community in the Kaeng Krachan National Park, who disappeared on April 17, 2014 after discovering evidence of logging by park officials.

Enforced disappearance is not an internal affair of a particular country. It is a crime against humanity, a vile human rights violation, which is of concern to all, transcending geographical boundaries and national borders. In particular, as a crime committed by state organisations (who have the necessary resources to disappear a person), whenever this crime occurs in an ASEAN state it affects the reputation and moral integrity of the whole ASEAN community.

It is therefore the collective responsibility of all ASEAN states to pool their efforts and resources to safely return Sombath Somphone, Jonas Burgos and all other disappeared persons to their families and communities, or when not possible, at least to provide a full account of what happened to them as well as ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice. The walls of silence within the ASEAN community must be pulled down.

I wish to express my solidarity with Shui Meng, Edita and Mary Ann Burgos and all families of the disappeared in their unrelenting efforts to surface their loved ones.

WE MUST NEVER FORGET THEM! THEY MUST NEVER BE FORGOTTEN!