

Message of Solidarity given at Manila, today 27 August 2015

In Memory of Sombath Somphone: Forum Commemorating the International Day of the  
Disappeared

Seng Raw Lahpai

It is an honour and a privilege to be here today to lend my heartfelt support to the campaign to resolve the unexplained disappearance of my fellow Ramon Magsaysay Award recipient Sombath Somphone, almost 3 years ago on December 15, 2012, in Vientiane, Laos. As we all know, the last sighting of Sombath was CCTV footage showing his car being stopped by police at a checkpoint, and of him being taken away in another vehicle. Thus we hold the Laotian authorities accountable as he was last seen in the company of its law enforcement personnel. The Lao government needs to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the case, and give a satisfactory account of what happened to Sombath after his encounter with the police.

We are gathered here in solidarity with Ng Shui Meng to raise, once again, the issue of her husband Sombath Somphone's unresolved disappearance, while also reminding the world of other victims of enforced disappearances.

This brings me to the home front, where victims of enforced disappearance are not uncommon in embattled ethnic minority areas. To cite one well-documented case, on 28 October 2011, Sumlut Roi Ja, a 28-year-old Kachin ethnic woman, was arrested together with her husband and father-in-law while working in their cornfield near Hkai Ban village, in Kachin State by soldiers of Myanmar Government's Light Infantry 321. The two men managed to flee but Sumlut Roi Ja was unable to escape the grip of the soldiers.

Family members and community leaders filed numerous petitions asking authorities to disclose her fate or whereabouts. However both military and civilian authorities have consistently refused to investigate Sumlut Roi Ja's disappearance. In March 2012, Myanmar's Supreme Court rejected a writ of habeas corpus submitted by Sumlut Roi Ja's husband. The Supreme Court claimed there was no evidence that the Army had detained Sumlut Roi Ja before her disappearance. The fate of the young Kachin mother remains unknown, justice has been denied, and although presumed dead, her body has not been found.

In China, as of 13 July 2015, the China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group estimated that over 114 human rights lawyers, activists, staff and family members have been detained. Some have been questioned and released, while others remain in detention, and still others are believed to have been victims of enforced disappearance. Many of the lawyers in question are signatories to a letter condemning the forced disappearance of Lawyer Wang Yu, who defended the right to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.

I present these cases from my home and neighbouring China so that we can again raise our voices to draw attention to Sombath's disappearance as well as to similar cases in the region. I would also like to see us network and pool our resources to resolve these cases of enforced disappearance and bring the responsible person or persons to justice.

In States with a recent history of dictatorial and unjust rule, currently claiming to be on the path of reform, I believe that enforced disappearances are evidence of continued 'State repression', now gone underground, with its tentacles permeating the ruling system like a chronic illness, or a cancer, and its symptoms surfacing sporadically to create anxiety and lame legitimate opposition. Enforced disappearances then are one obvious form of State repression. State authorities who still exercise control over the judicial system tolerate criminal acts of the military or other well-placed persons and use the system to punish those who speak out and seek reform.

We therefore, call on the Aquino Administration, as well as other ASEAN member governments, to sign and ratify the International Convention for the protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It is to be noted that in 2016 Laos will assume the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the second time. This also means that the Lao PDR representative will assume chairmanship of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). In meetings with the European Union, Laos has also stated its desire to join the UN Human Rights Council for the term 2016-2017. Such developments provide the motivation and opportunity to call upon the Lao government to conduct a proper investigation into the enforced disappearance of such a well-known civil society figure as Sombath.

My conviction is that State repression can only be eliminated through the engaged efforts

of civil society across the globe. That is, we, the people must work in democratic structures in civil society itself, to realise democracy down to the last village in every country.

Let us not be intimidated by State repression. We must not let Sombath and other victims disappear from the face of the earth, forgotten as if they never existed. CSOs must not become paralysed by fear of the lurking misuse of State power. We must continue to strive together until a satisfactory explanation of each case of enforced disappearance is achieved and the perpetrators are brought to justice.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the organisers of this event, the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances. My heart goes out to you Ng Shui Meng for your courageous and determined efforts to find your husband Sombath. Please know that I am honoured to be able to declare my solidarity with you in support of every endeavour to bring your husband home. I pray that it will be soon!