

Laos: Three Years On, Still No Answers for Sombath Somphone Disappearance

*Failing Government Investigation Uninterested in
New CCTV Footage*



(Bangkok, December 14, 2015) – On the eve of the third anniversary of the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone in Vientiane, the Sombath Initiative is releasing previously unseen CCTV footage from the day of the disappearance. Taken by cameras further south on the street with the police checkpoint where Sombath was last seen, the videos had previously been offered to Lao government investigators but they declined to examine or otherwise consider it.

“Our message today to the Lao authorities is that we are determined to find out what happened to Sombath no matter what, and we will never rest until we have all the answers,” said Shui-Meng Ng, wife of Sombath and Advisory Board member of the Sombath Initiative. “The enforced disappearance of Sombath has caused incredible suffering to our family, but we are comforted by the solidarity of Angkhana Neelapaijit and all the families of persons disappeared in the Asian region who continue to stand with us as we pursue answers and the truth.”

The new CCTV videos show the distinctive jeep of Sombath Somphone initially being driven away from the checkpoint by an unknown person in a direction heading out of Vientiane city – as previously shown in the police CCTV footage that was revealed within days after the disappearance. However, under a minute later, the CCTV footage reveals that the jeep was driven back towards the city center. To date, the jeep has not been found. The newly revealed CCTV video was offered to Lao police investigators but they declined to even accept it, much less view or investigate it further.

“This CCTV footage was gathered by Sombath’s family and sheds new light on what happened the night he disappeared. Even three years later, information is still likely available and the Lao government is obliged under international law to investigate this evidence fully,” said Sam Zarifi, Regional Director for Asia-Pacific for the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). “As the ICJ has said before, this case still could be solved, but the Lao government has not clarified whether it has looked for other information from the other CCTV cameras on that road, or effectively pursued other leads, strongly suggesting lack of political will in establishing the fate and whereabouts of Sombath Somphone.”

Sombath was last seen on the evening of 15 December 2012 in Vientiane. CCTV footage from a traffic surveillance camera revealed that police stopped Sombath’s jeep at a police post. Within minutes, unknown individuals forced him into another vehicle and drove away. Analysis of the CCTV footage shows that Sombath was taken away in the presence of police officers who witnessed the abduction and failed to intervene - a fact that strongly suggests government complicity.

Laos has consistently denied all offers of technical assistance for the investigation and analysis of CCTV footage, failed to examine evidence like the newly released CCTV video, and failed to keep Sombath’s family apprised of developments in the investigation. Lao citizens and civil society groups face harassment and intimidation if they raise the case of Sombath publicly.

Sombath Somphone is an internationally acclaimed civil society leader and 2005 Magsaysay Award winner who concentrated his life's efforts on agricultural, community and educational development in Laos. Hailing from a modest rural background, he possessed an acute understanding of the value of indigenous knowledge and culture, and the need for inclusive and sustainable development approaches that would positively impact the lives of Laos' farmers and their communities.

“As Laos takes over the chairmanship of ASEAN for 2016, Vientiane’s leaders have become aggressively regressive when it comes to human rights, and systematically expanded their repression of basic civil and political liberties,” said Phil Robertson, Deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch. “While the Lao government has gagged its own people to stop them asking ‘where is Sombath’, the man who is arguably the most prominent and accomplished development visionary and practitioner of his generation, he is far from forgotten and we will continue to pursue justice for him and his family.”

For more information:

In Bangkok, Sam Zarifi, Asia Regional Director, International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), mobile phone +66 80-781-9002, or sam.zarifi@icj.org

In Bangkok, Phil Robertson, Deputy Asia Director, Human Rights Watch, mobile phone: +66-85-060-8406, or RobertP@hrw.org

The Sombath Initiative: See www.sombath.org or contact Thesombathinitiative@gmail.com