

Book Launch at FCCT
Silencing of a Laotian Son: The Life, Work and Enforced
Disappearance of Sombath Somphone

Bangkok, 14 December 2021

Good morning everyone. Thank you for coming to this event. Special thanks go to the other panelists: Ms Cynthia Veliko of the UN OCHR, Ms Angkhana Neelapaijit, wife of Dr Somchai Neelapaijit and fellow victim of Enforced Disappearance, Ajan Sulak Sivaraksa, a friend and mentor for many years.

Thank you all for your sincere support and generous and kind words. I am truly grateful and touched by you all.

Tomorrow, 15 December, is the 9th anniversary of Sombath's disappearance. So some of you probably wonder, why I write the book now, why not soon after his disappearance, or why write the book at all?

When I first sat down to write the book – I too asked myself, why do this? Why go through the trauma of remembering every detail again? Yet, the trauma of what happened has never left me, it is there whether I like it or not. I can brush it aside momentarily, and try not to dwell upon it – but it's always there. It is like a wound that is only covered by the scab of time – scrape below the surface and wound is there; a wound that can never heal because there is no closure. That is the pain of enforced disappearance – Angkhana here knows it all too well!

So, why re-tell something so painful. I write the book because I have to assert the fact that my husband, Sombath Somphone, is a human being that has a life – he too has parents who gave birth to him, raised him, loved him, and nurtured him. He too has dreams and aspirations, like you and I, and he too has spent many years living among his relatives, friends, colleagues, building a life and family with me, until he was so unjustly whisked away, abducted and disappeared. And with what happened to him clearly captured by the police CCTV. Today, 9 years later, the truth of what happened to Sombath is still kept hidden from me.

Enforced disappearance is the mother of crimes against humanity – it not only deprives a person of his liberty, but by concealing the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, it places the person outside the protection of the law.

So far the Lao police has not carried out any transparent investigation of the crime and has never given me any account of what happened. It is clear that those who perpetrated the crime want the facts of what happened and why Sombath is disappeared to be forever hidden. They hope that with the passing of time, people will forget what had happened and the memory of Sombath would forever be wiped off the surface of the earth.

I can't allow that to happen. A person's life is precious and the memories of every individual are precious and sacred. It is ultimately the memories and records of every human being that constitutes the history of the family, the community and the society. Without these memories and the collective stories of ordinary men and women, we don't have any history. History is not only about the powerful and the rich or about great men and women who make extraordinary discoveries. History is collectively made by ordinary individuals like Sombath, a man who only wants to do his little bit to make his family and community better.

That is why I must keep alive the story of Sombath, and put in writing about who he is, how he grew up and who and what shaped him to become the man he is and what motivated him to do what he did, and also record how he was so unjustly taken away from me and from his family. I don't want Sombath's life and his work to just fade away without letting people know who he is and what he did and stands for.

Writing the book is also my way to honor my husband and show my love for him – my memories of our life together and what we have shared. I don't want those to disappear

I am also reminded of the words of Elie Wiesel, the famous Nobel Peace Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, who had written in his memoir "Night"

“For in the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and, of course, its consequences ...

For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead *and* for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive...”

I must say that writing this book has not been easy – it has been an emotional roller-coaster. I must have written the book in my mind a hundred times before I finally put my thoughts into words. And believe it or not, if not for the outbreak of the Covid pandemic and the periods of lockdown when I had no where to go, and no more excuses of telling myself, I needed to do this or that, that I finally sat down at the computer and started to write.

And so today, I am here to launch the book. I hope many of you will take the time to read it and share it with your friends and colleagues. I have dedicated this book to all victims of enforced disappearance. In telling Sombath’s story and his disappearance I hope the book will also give voice to the thousands of voiceless victims of enforced disappearance, who for many reasons are unable to tell their stories of their loved ones who have been taken away from them.

For all of us the victims – our loved ones are not just a name, a news story that will get buried by another news flash the next day. They are still very present, just as it is described in this anonymous poem that I used to open and close the book:

Those we love don’t go away
They walk beside us everyday
Unseen unheard but always near
Still loved, still missed and very dear.