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Laos: Two prisoners of conscience freed after 14 years

Amnesty International is delighted by the safe arrival in France today of two Lao former prisoners of conscience, Feng Sakchittaphong and Latsami Khamphoui. The pair were released from prison in October this year having served a 14-year sentence for charges including "making preparations for rebellion" and "propaganda against the Lao People's Democratic Republic".

Both men had advocated peaceful economic and political reform in Laos -- a country which has a zero-tolerance policy towards dissent in any form.

"Amnesty International shares in the delight of Feng and Latsami's families and hopes that their release marks another step on the road towards the full respect of human rights for all in Laos," said Natalie Hill, Deputy Asia Director at Amnesty International.

There were widely-held concerns that the pair may not have been released at the end of their sentence -- an all too common occurrence in Laos. It was also feared that the pair would not be allowed to leave the country to seek medical help abroad. Feng and Latsami are both 62 years old and suffering from poor health, including heart and kidney problems. Both men have close family connections in France.

Sadly, fellow prisoner of conscience Thongsouk Saysangkhi died in prison before he could be released. The former colleague of Feng and Latsami died in 1998 aged 59. The three men were arrested at the same time and lived under extremely harsh conditions in a prison camp, with few family visits allowed. Thongsouk had been denied adequate medical care for serious health problems.

"Our hearts go out to the family of Thongsouk Saysangkhi who should also have been rejoicing today," said Natalie Hill.

Background

Feng Sakchittaphong, Latsami Khamphoui, and Thongsouk Saysangkhi were former high-ranking government officials arrested in October 1990 for writing letters advocating peaceful political and economic change in Laos. Feng had held a high-ranking position in the Ministry of Justice; Latsami was a Vice Minister of Economics and Planning; and Thongsouk a Vice Minister of Science and Technology.

The three were tried in a grossly unfair trial in November 1992 on various charges including "making preparations for rebellion", "propaganda against the Lao People's Democratic

Republic" and "libel and slander". All three were adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International in 1991.

Public Document

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