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EU urged to press Laos over human rights violations

Despite talks between the bloc and the communist government, little progress has been made in addressing rights abuses

UCA News (16.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/35upcaa> -Two leading human rights groups have called on the European Union to lean on the government of Laos about the pervasive rights abuses in the Southeast Asian nation, including severe violations of the freedoms of speech and religion.

"The European Union must raise its concerns with the Lao government over the ongoing serious human rights violations in Laos and press it to adhere to the country's human rights obligations," the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and its Laotian member organization the Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR) said in a jointly issued statement on June 14.

The two rights groups cited routine rights violations in Laos, including unfree elections, severe restrictions on free speech, unlawful imprisonment of government critics and frequent violations of the freedom of religion.

Lao authorities, they pointed out, severely curtail freedom of speech in a country where even innocuous criticisms of the government can land citizens in prison for decades.

"Individuals publicly criticizing government actions or exposing instances of corruption have continued to be subjected to arrest, detention and intimidation. At least four individuals remain imprisoned for the exercise of their right to freedom of opinion and expression," FIDH and LMHR said.

In addition, religious minorities, particularly Christians, continue to be harassed and persecuted, especially across the rural countryside.

"Lao Christians have particularly faced violence, prosecution and discrimination by authorities," the rights groups said.

Yet despite an ongoing dialogue between the EU and Laos' communist government, little progress has been made in addressing human rights violations in the country, according to Adilur Rahman Khan, secretary-general of FIDH.

"During the more than two years since the previous human rights dialogue with the EU, there has been no improvement in the human rights situation in Laos," Khan noted.

"It's time the EU demands concrete actions and results, not just words, from Vientiane."

In fact, noted Vanida Thephsouvanh, president of LMHR, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided the government with an excuse to step up its restrictive policies.

"During the Covid-19 pandemic, human rights violations have continued unabated and the Lao authorities have often blamed the pandemic for their failure to uphold their human rights obligations," Vanida said.

"The EU should not fall for these excuses and urge the government to address long-standing human rights issues that have nothing to do with Covid-19."

In its newly released Freedom in the World 2021 survey, Freedom House, a group based in Washington, D.C., list the one-party state as "not free" with only two points awarded out of 40 on political rights and 11 out of 60 on civil liberties.

There is no independent media in the country and local authorities monitor comments made by citizens online, which means that Lao citizens will rarely if ever speak their minds, according to Freedom House.

"In July 2019, the government required news outlets that disseminate material through social media networks to register themselves, threatening fines and prison sentences for those who did not comply; the Information Ministry claimed the move was meant to arrest the spread of fake news," the group said.

Christians in Laos, meanwhile, often face harassment, or worse, for trying to practice their faith in public in the predominantly Buddhist nation.

"There have been multiple cases in recent years of Christians being briefly detained or sentenced to jail for unauthorized religious activities or being pressured by authorities to renounce their faith. A ban on public proselytizing is generally enforced, and authorities make efforts to monitor the importation of religious materials," Freedom House said.

"In October 2020, reports revealed that four Lao Christians had been jailed for several months for planning Christian funeral rites. That same month, a group of Lao Christians were evicted from their homes and moved into a forest because they would not renounce Christianity."

Photo : Buddhist monks collect alms from villagers in Luang Namtha, northern Laos. (Photo: AFP)

Christian pastor in Laos will avoid jail if he promises not to preach for a year

Premier Christian News (14.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bEeaT3> - A Christian pastor, held in police detention in the Southeast Asian country of Laos for a year, has been spared jail after he was made to sign documents swearing not to preach until 2022.

A court convicted Sithon Thippavong, 35, in April of "disrupting unity" and "creating disorder" after he was found to have held church services in Savannakhet province without government permission.

The church leader, who started his ministry among villagers in southern Savannakhet in 2011, was arrested on 15th March, 2020.

Local sources told Open Doors that Sithon was made to sign a document before his release in which he promised not to preach or organise other Christian activities until March 2022.

Open Doors believes he also had to pay the equivalent of £360 for court fees and jail costs in order to be released.

Mr Thippavong was given a one-year prison sentence but released three days later, on account of the year he had spent in pre-trial detention.

Local Christians told Radio Free Asia they were glad of the pastor's release. "We're very excited that he's still alive and was finally saved by God," said one. "He may have been sick and frail in prison, but now he'll be very happy to be able to serve God again."

The US State Department has noted 'significant human rights issues' in Laos, including restrictions on the freedom of expression, association and religion.

Laos' communist government is currently monitoring Christian activity heavily.

Gatherings must be notified to the administration and house churches must operate clandestinely as they are considered 'illegal gatherings'.

Thomas Muller, persecution analyst for Open Doors' World Watch Research unit says that although a 2019 Law on the Evangelical Church gives Lao Christians the right to meet for worship and prayer, it is often not being implemented in practice.

"Village leaders, religious and animist leaders view Christians - converts in particular - as angering the spirits and bringing trouble to the community," he said.

One Christian in northern Laos, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, told Open Doors he and his wife had been targeted by those in their village because of their faith.

They had been forced to leave their village, had their pigs poisoned, had their rice farm set on fire, and their children faced discrimination at school.

In October 2020, seven Christians were evicted from their homes in southern Saravan province because of their faith, and upon return to the village were stopped from rebuilding their demolished houses.

Photo : A group of young Christians from northern Laos worshipping together in a forest. They had been threatened to be kicked out of their village because of their faith. They now have to find ways to convene together as discreetly as possible. Credit: Open Doors

A small victory for Christians in communist Laos

Pastor is released after a year in jail but convicted of 'disrupting unity' for holding religious services

UCA News (11.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ggaOZu> - **A Laotian pastor who was kept in police detention for more than a year for conducting religious activities related to his Christian faith is a free man again.**

Sithon Thippavong, 35, a Christian leader from the southern province of Savannakhet, was convicted on April 6 by a provincial court on charges of “disrupting unity” and “creating disorder.”

The court sentenced him to one year in prison but Sithon was released three days later on account of time served in jail awaiting trial. His release was hailed as a welcome development for the long-suffering Christian minority in the communist nation.

Sithon was also slapped with a fine of 4 million kip (US\$426) over the two charges.

In the communist nation, where most people are Buddhists and animists, Christians are allowed by law to practice their faith, within certain limits, yet many local authorities across the country continue to view Christianity as a subversive alien religion.

Sithon was arrested on March 15 last year after local authorities accused him of conducting religious services without permission.

On the day of his arrest, the pastor was preparing to hold a religious service when seven police officers showed up and told him to cancel it. The officers reportedly asked the Christian man to sign a document renouncing his faith and when Sithon refused, they detained him.

The pastor’s case became a cause célèbre among some rights advocates as it highlighted the routine discrimination that Christians in Laos, who number around 150,000 in a country of 7 million, continue to endure at the hands of communist officials and some hostile locals.

Late last month Phil Robertson, Human Rights Watch deputy director for the Asia-Pacific region, called Sithon’s arrest and year-long detention “a serious human rights violation.”

“Lao authorities should release Pastor Sithon and apologize for arresting and detaining him,” Robertson stressed. “The authorities should not violate the rights and freedom of those who believe in religion.”

Photo : Photo: Radio Free Asia