

PRISONERS OF faith

Pastor Sompong Country: Laos

At 10am on Sunday July 20, district police stormed into the church in Boukham village, Laos and ordered the believers to stop worshipping God. When they refused to comply the police arrested Pastor Sompong (32), along with two other leaders charging them with 'believing and worshipping God'. The remaining 60 believers continued to worship. On hearing the praise and worship, the police again entered the house and proceeded to arrest another of the leaders. Even after this second arrest, the congregation, mostly women, continued to boldly praise God. The police then entered the house church for a third time and arrested a seventeen-year-old girl who was leading the worship. They were then taken to prison in Dong Haen. On their arrival, all five were placed in foot stocks and accused of spreading the gospel and conducting a religious meeting without permission. In prison, the group bore witness to their faith and three prisoners trusted Christ.

Although the Lao constitution 'guarantees' freedom of religion and worship, church fellowships must be registered with government-approved institutions. Such registration comes with strict limitations meaning many churches prefer not to register. The authorities frequently harass and persecute Christians at a local level.

On July 22, following a delegation of three local church leaders, all five were released. It has been reported that the arrest and subsequent release of the five has not adversely affected the church, rather it has served as an encouragement to others to continue in their faith. On Sunday August 3, the Lao authorities again entered a worship service at Pastor Sompong's home. They arrested him and two others, Boot and Khamvan Chanthaleuxay, both 18. All three remain in detention. Since their arrest they

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EMAIL ALERT
for prayer & action
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Photo: Compass Direct

have been held in wooden foot stocks causing numbness and infection in their legs and feet due to restricted circulation. The authorities have said they will release the three only if they renounce their faith.

When family members visited the detainees on August 24, police officers deliberately tightened their restraints and told the families that this was the consequence of not renouncing their faith. The next day the village chief encouraged family members to apply for bail for the two teenagers but allegedly said that Pastor Sompong did not qualify for bail. His punishment for leading the Boukham church would be 'life in prison.' Three days later, the chief again pressured family members to sign documents renouncing their faith, but they refused.

PLEASE PRAY

- ▶ For Christians throughout Laos and especially for house church leaders who face persecution
- ▶ For Pastor Sompong's wife and two children
- ▶ That the government of Laos will uphold the rights of Christians to worship God freely

'But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him'
Acts 12:5

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Hebrews 13:3 'Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow-prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering'

Over recent months there has been an increase in the number of recorded incidents of persecution directed at Christians in Laos. Provincial authorities appear to be adopting a different approach from that of the government. In this situation we believe that international advocacy can be helpful.

When writing please do not mention Release International, or advance your political opinion or include anything which could be insulting to the authorities. Do not send money

Please write a letter on behalf of Pastor Sompong

(Date)

His Excellency Mr Soutsakhhone Pathammavong
Embassy of the Lao People's Democratic Republic
74 Avenue Ramond-Poincare
75 166 Paris
France

Sample letter

Dear Sir,

We are thankful that the laws and constitution in Lao People's Democratic Republic allow freedom of religion. However, we have heard that a Christian pastor named Sompong Supatto from Boukham village was put in prison at Ad-Sapangthong district police detention centre for practising his religion.

We are concerned for his welfare and would respectfully request his release. We are grateful for your attention to this matter. Thank you very much.

Yours faithfully,

If you would like to encourage Pastor Sompong, Boot Chanthaleuxay, Khamyan Chanthaleuxay or their families you may also send a card or letter to

(Name)
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