

Lao Officials Arrest Eight Christian Leaders

Police early this morning traveled to Boukham village in Laos' Savannakhet Province to meet with officials about the arrest on Dec. 16 of eight Christian leaders who had gathered some 200 church members for a Christmas celebration, an advocacy group reported today.

Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported that the leaders had secured permission for Friday's event from Boukham's village chief and invited him to attend. He stayed for the Christmas meal but left before the sermon began. After the sermon, at about 9 p.m., village security forces entered the building, isolated the eight leaders and marched them to the Boukham government headquarters, where they were detained without charge.

Four of the detainees were placed in handcuffs and wooden stocks, while the other four were left unrestrained. Family members were allowed to bring blankets and other provisions to the detainees but were given no explanation for their arrest, according to HRWLRF.

"While they were held without formal charges, it is quite clear that they were arrested for gathering people for worship," an HRWLRF spokesman told Compass.

Bouthong sub-district police arrived on Dec. 17 to investigate the incident and record the names of the detainees. Later that afternoon, the deputy chairman of the Savannakhet branch of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), the only Protestant group recognized by the government, came to plead for the detainees' release, but his efforts proved fruitless.

The following day, LEC representatives managed to negotiate the release of one of the detainees held in stocks, who goes

by the single name of Kingnamosorn, after paying a fine of 1 million kip (US\$123) to the village chief. By comparison, the average monthly wage for an unskilled laborer in the province is close to US\$40.

The content of this morning's discussion between village leaders and the sub-district police remains unknown. When the police left the village, however, the chief ordered the other four unrestrained detainees to be placed in stocks as well, HRWLRF reported.

Wooden stocks are commonly used in Lao prisons and detention centers and are sometimes combined with exposure to red fire ants as a form of torture.

The arrests of the church leaders were confirmed by another source who preferred to go unnamed.

HRWLRF identified the eight by their single names, as is customary in Laos: Sompong, Ma and Kaithong – the only female detainee – all from Boukham village church; Oun from Dansai village church; Puphet from Donpalai village church; Wanta from Liansai village church; Kai from Nonsomboon village church and Kingmanosorn from Tongsamakee church in Savannakhet city.

It is customary for Lao Christians to hold Christmas celebrations before or after Dec. 25 in order to avoid drawing the attention of authorities.

Offending the Spirits

On Dec. 18 the village chief told the detainees that they had violated "*hiit*," or the traditional spirit cult of the village, by gathering for a Christian worship service. He then ordered them not to practice Christianity in Boukham for fear that the spirits would be offended, HRWLRF reported.

Under *hiit*, residents must worship and placate the spirits of the village to ensure the fertility of their fields and to

ensure ongoing safety and prosperity for their families.

Many believe that the departure of a few people from this practice will bring distress for the entire village.

Boukham's chief asked the detainees to admit their guilt and agree not to worship Christ in the village, but all seven refused, according to HRWLRP.

Since the district authorities have not publicly chastised village officials, "the case could get complicated, and the Christians will suffer in the process," the HRWLRP's spokesman said, adding that public advocacy was the best way to direct attention to their plight and perhaps secure their release.