

Lao Officials Arrest Five Christians for Religious Movement

Officials in a village in southern Laos on March 25 arrested and detained five Christians during **worship** and charged them with leading a **religious movement** without official approval, according to advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

The five Christians from Palansai district were attending a **worship service** in nearby Boukham village in Ad-Sapangthong district. HRWLRF identified the five by their single names, as is customary in Laos: Phosee (male), Viengsai (male) and Alee (female) from Phosai village; Poon (female) from Pone village and Narm (also female) from Natoo village.

Previously they had attended many services in Boukham, Savannakhet Province, without interference from authorities.

"This is typical of Laos now," a pastor from the capital, Vientiane, told Compass on condition of anonymity. "In Vientiane we see things opening up a little. But the law is fluid. Things can change from day to day, and the situation is still very difficult in the provinces."

Boukham church members meet in a private home, as do Christians in most other provincial villages. Officials strongly oppose **small groups** meeting outside the umbrella of the government-approved Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), but many Christians prefer meeting as **house churches**, citing strict controls over LEC activities.

Following the arrest at 2 p.m. on Sunday, officials detained the five at the Boukham village headquarters, also used in December 2011 to hold eight church leaders arrested for

gathering some 200 Christians together for a Christmas celebration.

The eight leaders arrested in December said they had sought and received permission for the event; they had even invited the village chief to attend. The chief joined them for the celebratory meal but left before the sermon. Village security forces arrived not long afterwards.

At that time, LEC representatives paid a fine for the release of one detainee but pleaded unsuccessfully for the release of the other seven.

One week later, on Dec. 21, officials warned 47 Christians from Natoo village church in nearby Palansai district that they must give up their faith or face eviction from the village.

"We urge the government to respect the freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by the Lao constitution," HRWLRF officials said in a statement issued March 25.

The Vientiane pastor said that while conditions have slightly improved in the capital, churches are starting to face problems typical of **Western churches**.

"Now we have many groups coming into Laos offering money," he said. "Until now, all the pastors shared one broken-down car. Now they all have their own car, their own computer, and nobody shares their resources anymore. They all want a good house and money to send their children to school—and who can blame them?"

Previously, he said, churches experienced greater unity.

"Before this, they looked to God as their only source," he added. "Now they look to others. Our greatest need is to get back to our **first love**, and to live in unity."