

Three Lao, Two Thai Christians Arrested in Laos

Lao officials arrested two Lao and two Thai Christians in Luang Namtha Province earlier this month, seizing them from a private residence in Long district, according to Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

Officials also arrested a pastor in Luang Namtha and dismissed two civil servants in Savannakhet for converting to Christianity, HRWLRF reported.

An HRWLRF source told Compass today that officials have charged the two Lao and two Thai Christians arrested on June 16 in Luang Namtha with “spreading the **Christian faith** without official approval.”

“That is ironic, since Lao officials are highly unlikely to approve of anyone spreading the Christian faith,” said another source who requested anonymity.

A resident of Phone Sampan village in Long district who witnessed Thai brothers Jonasa and Phanthakorn Wiwatdamrong explaining Bible passages to enquirers in a private home reported their presence to police. Police then raided the home, confiscating the brothers’ passports along with biblical literature and Christian CDs, according to HRWLRF.

The brothers, along with two local residents, one identified by the single name Chalar and the other as yet unidentified, were then arrested and taken directly to Luang Namtha provincial prison. Under normal procedure, detainees would be held in a village or district prison for 36 hours during a preliminary investigation before transferring to provincial facilities, according to HRWLRF.

Officials seem determined to eliminate Christianity from the

province, local sources told HRWLRF. In one case, police on June 6 arrested a pastor identified by the single name Asa following reports that he had encouraged many people in Sing district to accept Christ.

Two years ago, police arrested Asa and forced him to sign documents agreeing not to share his faith with others—but so many have turned to Christ this year as a result of Asa's influence that officials ordered a second arrest.

Elsewhere, the military commander of Phin district, Savannakhet Province, on June 14 discharged two members of the Alowmai village security force, identified by the single names Khamsorn and Tonglai, for converting to Christianity, according to HRWLRF.

The two men became Christians in late May, as did other family members shortly thereafter. Alowmai's chief immediately reported the conversions to the chief of police in Chudsume sub-district, who replied that under Lao law, the men had every right to believe in the religion of their choice.

The village chief then reported the conversions to Phin district's military commander, who subsequently discharged Khamsorn and Tonglai and confiscated their military-issue firearms.

HRWLRF has called on the Lao government to respect the right of these and other Lao citizens to religious freedom as guaranteed by the constitution and other national laws, and by international covenants ratified by the Republic.