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## ALLIANCE FOR DEMOCRACY IN LAOS

### Alliance pour la Démocratie au Laos

Letmather Str.71, 58119 Hagen, Germany. Tel & Fax: 0049( 2334) 44 44 668, [E-Mail: alliance-lao@alice.de](mailto:alliance-lao@alice.de)  
[www.laoalliance.org](http://www.laoalliance.org)

## **Speech of the ADL president Dr. Bounthone Chanthavong-Wiese at the ASEAN People's Forum in Manila**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since 2009 the Alliance for Democracy in Laos (ADL) works for Human rights and democratization in Laos and supports the democracy movements in the neighbor countries. The ADL is a worldwide network of Lao political organizations and active advocates committed to a peaceful change for genuine democracy in Laos. It is a non-government organization that is based and registered with their headquarter in Germany. The members are people in Laos and Laotians living in exile in different countries all over the world, including USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Germany, France, Spain, Switzerland and others where native citizens of the respective host counties join as active members and supporters. Many allied activists are in Thailand and Laos. The Alliance for Democracy in Laos draws attention the problems in Laos and to situations as they occur. To redress those problems it takes action in cooperation with the authorities of the host countries in the free world as well as other Lao democracy organizations.

Since 1975 Laos has been ruled by an authoritarian single-party regime under the Lao communist party. The poor human rights record of the Lao PDR has perennially been documented, voiced and decried not only by Lao people across the world and their fellow Laotians in Laos but also by the world community including OHCHR itself, the European Parliament, civil society, and by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other international human rights organizations.

In contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, and many other human rights Conventions and Treaties to which it is a signatory, the Lao PDR has persistently and routinely suppressed and violated the basic freedoms and human rights of its people.

The people are deprived of their political rights, civil rights, legal rights, religious rights, land rights, property rights, and the rights to habitat, livelihood and food security.

The people have no right to choose their own government or to change the government. There is no free election. The people have no say in governance. There is no popular participation in decision making.

The press, media and internet is muzzled and controlled by the government. Political opposition and dissenting opinions are strictly forbidden, swiftly dealt with and brutally

repressed. Dissidents are systematically subjected to intimidation, abduction, arrest, incognito detention, trial and imprisonment without due process, and death from starvation, sickness, torture or execution in the prisons.

The law provides for freedoms of speech, of the press, of assembly, and of association. But in practice these rights are severely curtailed by government infringements and by arbitrary application of the laws by corrupt judges and abusive police and security forces.

Public demonstrations and protest marches are absolutely forbidden. Anyone who is even perceived to violate this ban will suffer the fate of a political prisoner and is subject to enforced disappearance, false accusation, arbitrary arrest, unlawful trials without legitimate qualified legal defense and recourse.

Religion is also under tight state control, discriminating against the beliefs of ethnic minorities who continue to suffer harsh persecutions like banishment, church confiscation, forced renouncement, arrest, incarceration, and torture. For the purported purpose of development projects which benefit only foreign interests and personal wealth of the rulers, thousands of farmers and other already impoverished segments of society are being evicted from their lands where they, like their ancestors for hundreds of years before them, have lived and worked to feed their families. Without institutional and legal help or recourse and torn forever from their ancestral places of worship, and their time honored social fabric, they are helpless. Being relocated to unfamiliar areas that are unsuitable for their traditional ways of making a living, they are desperate for food security.

Some examples from the last years:

> 2016, The Lao PDR has imprisoned many Human Rights defender and pro-democracy advocates. So in March 2016 three migrant workers has been imprisoned and sentenced up to 20 years for criticize the government.

October/ 2016, Bounthanh Thammavong, Polish citizen with Lao descendant was convicted for same reasons and now serving 4 years 9 month term.

> December/ 2012, Mr. Sombath Somphone, a beloved people-oriented Lao development specialist and an internationally respected civil society leader, was stopped by the police at an outpost in Vientiane and whisked away in the dark of night.

He has not been seen or heard from since. The circumstances surrounding the incident which were caught on camera by the government's CCTV at the checkpoint are self-explanatory and point to a case of enforced disappearance. The OHCHR spokesperson characterized it as such, calling Sombath a human rights defender.

Expressions of concern by the OHCHR, European Parliament, ASEAN and European parliamentarians, and civil society, continue calling for a speedy and transparent investigation as we speak. But 3 years has passed, there is no answer from the Lao

authorities, not even a progress report on the investigating process. All we hear from the Lao PDR government is that it knows nothing, finds nothing and is not involved.

Despite being embraced by ASEAN, ASEM, WTO and the rest of the international community, the human rights situation in the Lao PDR has taken a turn for the worse. Laos is small country and being swallowed by its neighbors to the East Vietnam and to the North China.

Since 1975, Laos is under the rule of a Communist one-party system, since that the government of Laos has practiced a very close co-operation with Vietnam. The Treaty of Friendship of 18 July 1977, on cooperation in all areas has led to an increasing dependence of Vietnam. The envisaged as a friendship treaty between the countries agreement has led in practice to the fact that Vietnam has taken over the political and military control of Laos. More recently, Vietnam has now also begun to take on the cultural and economic control.

In recent years, the government of Laos has allowed hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese to settle in Laos, this means that the Lao people lose their own settlement in their own country. Furthermore Laotian businessmen are replaced by Vietnamese. In more and more places the Lao Language is replaced by the Vietnamese. Lao officials has to finish their work, Vietnamese officials got their place. More worse: Massive illegal logging for Vietnamese companies result in the loss of livelihood of the remaining population.

On September 1st, 2015 Radio Free Asia reported a further invasion of Vietnam. In the province Savanakheth in the village near the town of Xeboun Feuang, the border was simply pushed around 15 Km towards Laos. The border was in the town of Nong 8 Km from the border also shifted to the detriment of Laos. This is a clear breach of international law. The population is all of these measures to minority in their own country.

A similar development takes place by Chinese investors in the country's north. Laos is taken from its two neighboring countries in the pliers and the population of Laos gradually loses their own country. Land grabs and mass settlement of Chinese lead to expulsion of the indigenous people and their Laotian culture. More than 30% of the land is owned by foreign investors, most of them Vietnamese or Chinese. The Lao people lost their land slowly but truly and put them into poverty.

Many dictator ships in Asia have plundered the resources in Asia and so they threat the live hood of the people. The lack of democracy, the rampant corruption and the egoism of these dictators has lead that the future of these countries in Asia is dark and sad.

A big number of human rights defenders sees that and they never give up to advocate for the people's right in Asia. But some people in Asia have surrender, because they thought that there is no success. One of the quotes by the people is: "The authorities do what they want anyway." So we have a question: "Why?" The answer is: "Because you let them do what they want!" We don't let them do what they want! It is a matter of our future and the future of our children! No success? The fact is our fact has success.

Here are some highlights of the ADL's work and the following success:

- 1) Corrupt officials in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia as well as companies from these countries have operated illegal logging in Laos and Cambodia. After ADL has made some detailed report to the UN, the governments' staff of some western countries like Germany, Australia, Canada and the USA, the pressure on the Lao government grows up. So in 2015 the Lao government starts a campaign against the illegal logging in that area.
- 2) In 2015 and 2016 the Lao PDR wants to join into the Human Rights Council (UNHCR) of the UN. ADL has started a campaign with many side events and lobbying against this. ADL knows that a country with such a bad balance of human rights cannot be a member of this council. We successfully prevented it and so the Lao government has surrender to join into the UNHCR.
- 3) All over the decades no one has taken care about what's going on in Laos. And so the Lao authorities believe that they can continue their business as well. But ADL has participated at CERD (*Committee on the Elimination against all kind of Racial Discrimination*) and UPR (*Universal Periodic Report*) of the UNHCR in Geneva. Now we have made it impossible to seek human rights violations for the public. The UN has sent many special rapporteurs to Laos and the UNHCR has given 195 recommendations in human rights matters to the Lao PDR, all ADL recommendations are included.

These are only a small number of examples about our work and we will give a model to people who want to fight for human rights in their own country. Never surrender, never give up, together we are strong! In this spirit, we wish all human rights activists a lot of success. Yes we will create it together and peaceful for a community of free states in Asia.

Thank you for your attention



Mrs. Dr. Bounthone Chanthavong- Wiese  
President of the ADL

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**Office in Germany:** **Dr. Bounthone Chanthavong- Wiese**, President, Letmather Str.71, 58119 Hagen, Germany  
Tel.& Fax: +49-2334-44 44 668, Email: [chanthalavong@aol.com](mailto:chanthalavong@aol.com)

**USA:** **Mr. Vanlang Khamsouk**, Vice-President 16443 SE Garrett Court Damascus, OR 97089 USA  
Tel.: +1-503-307 0835 Email: [khamphitham@yahoo.com](mailto:khamphitham@yahoo.com)

**Australia:** **Mr. Khamphao Lathamany**, Vice-President, 53 McIntyre Drive, Altona Vic., Australia  
Tel.: +61-3-9398 45 42, cell: 61-4-04169927, Email: [ksithandone@hotmail.com](mailto:ksithandone@hotmail.com)

**Canada:** **Mr. Kambane Anonthisen**, Vice-President, 84 Highgatz Rord Kichener, ONT, Tel. cell: 519-58 80 502,  
email: [khambane@hotmail.com](mailto:khambane@hotmail.com), **Secretary Mr. Kongsay Bounnapha**, 7  
Birchfield, Avenue Canada, Ontario, K2M 2 N4, Tel. +1-613-271-8027, email: [kxbounnapha@gmail.com](mailto:kxbounnapha@gmail.com)

**France:** **Mr. Sovath Thongsavat** Vice-President, ADL Fr., 1 chemin du bief 01230 Tenay, France, Tel. +33-4-74 36  
56 44, or +33- 6-63 99 42 09, Email: [thinan.t@laposte.net](mailto:thinan.t@laposte.net)

**New Zealand:** **Mr. Touy Manikham** Vice-President, 1 The Anchorage Whitby, Wellington 5024, NZ, Tel.: +64-4-234  
1535, Email: [touy.manikham@gmail.com](mailto:touy.manikham@gmail.com)