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## LAOS CSW concerned by crackdown on religious freedom in Luang Namtha province

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Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received reports that in recent weeks four people, including two Thai citizens, have been arrested by police in Luang Namtha province in Northern Laos for explaining the Bible to a Lao man in the home of a local Christian.

All four had their personal belongings confiscated by the police before being transported to Luang Namtha provincial prison. Although it is normal practice for those arrested to be detained in a village or district prison while an investigation is conducted, in this case the four people arrested were taken to a provincial prison within 36 hours of their arrest despite no investigation taking place.

There have been no formal charges and Thai officials have not made any comment on the incident. It remains unclear whether the Thai Embassy in Laos has intervened. No contact has been allowed with the prisoners, but family members are trying to find ways to provide for them because Lao prisons do not provide adequate food and resources for inmates.

These arrests follow that of a 53-year-old Lao pastor known as Asa. He remains behind bars after being arrested on June 6 for sharing his faith. This incident also took place in Luang Namtha province, in Pastor Asa's home village of Peeyeur. Two years ago the Lao police forced him to sign documents agreeing that he would not proclaim Christ or lead people to Christianity.

A third set of arrests in Luang Namtha province occurred on March 24, when six Christians, all Thai citizens, were arrested for their involvement in spreading the Christian faith. They were released several weeks later after paying a large fine.

These cases are part of a pattern of religious oppression in Luang Namtha province. Christians in at least 15 villages in the province have reported similar cases of harassment by the Lao authorities.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The harassment and detention of Christians in Luang Namtha province is unacceptable. CSW calls for the immediate release of the Thai and Lao citizens and urges the Lao authorities to adhere to international standards on religious freedom."