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## LAOS | Police arrest Christian leader for “converting 300”

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Christian leader Bountheung of Borikhamxai Province in Central Laos has been arrested on the charge of converting 300 Lao citizens to the Christian faith. The arrest took place in the third week of August. In the month prior to his arrest, Bountheung had been summoned and questioned by the provincial authorities on two separate occasions.

According to Fides News Agency, the 300 residents from the village of Nongpong freely decided to follow the Christian faith in May this year after meeting Bountheung.

The local authorities have ordered the 300 Christians to renounce their faith in exchange for the right to remain in the village, despite the fact that the converts and Bountheung himself are registered as permanent residents. The NGO Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) has stated that this violates the villagers' right to citizenship as well as the right to adopt a religion of their choice.

Although the 1991 Lao Constitution guarantees the basic right to freedom of religion, repression of religious believers continues at the local level. In the village of Nahoukou in the same province, local authorities have interrogated community leader Tongkoun Keohavong about the growth of Christianity in his village. According to Tongkoun, since February 2012, more than 30 residents have converted to Christianity. The authorities have ordered the villagers to renounce their faith and give up meeting together for worship, or risk being forcefully evicted from their village.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: “CSW is deeply concerned about the arrest of religious leaders in Laos and the pressure placed on new converts to renounce their faith. CSW calls for the immediate release of Christian leader Bountheung. We urge the Lao authorities to uphold the right to religious freedom guaranteed in the Lao constitution and in international law.”