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LAOS | Christians Still Detained In Savannakhet

Multiple sources informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that 11 Christians detained in Savannakhet Province on May 11 remain in prison after being arrested for meeting in an unauthorized location. Twelve others, including women and teenagers, were released after signing documents agreeing to not meet at that location again.

The news comes as the EU's regular dialogue with Laos on human rights and good governance begins in Brussels this week. A new briefing by CSW urges the EU delegation to ensure the EU's key concerns in relation to freedom of religion or belief are raised consistently through exchanges on human rights and good governance.

The 23 Christians in Savannakhet Province belong to a church in Paksong Village in Songkhone District, which was barred from holding church services in 2012. The pastor of the church was arrested and coerced into signing a document saying the church would stop meeting. According to Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom, the authorities, including the new village chief, claimed Christians in that area did not receive permission to hold worship services. The Christians claimed they received permission from the former village chief approximately a year before.

The recent arrest of the 23 Christians, including the pastor, appears to involve two locations. The authorities are trying to prevent Christians meeting at a "new" location, which they claim is unauthorized. The group reportedly has met there for over six years.

CSW's briefing includes an overview of the most common violations of freedom of religion or belief in Laos, including forced eviction and being "forced to sign documents recanting their beliefs". Although Laos has seen some improvements in the protection of freedom of religion or belief, including "a reduction in the number of long-term Christian prisoners of conscience and in the average length of sentence" over the past decade, cases like the one in Savannakhet Province are not uncommon.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW, said, "We welcome this dialogue on human rights and good governance between the EU and Laos. However, such efforts towards constructive dialogue are overshadowed by incidents like the one described above. Freedom of religion or belief is a touchstone for human rights standards. We therefore strongly urge the authorities involved in this case to release the remaining detainees in Savannakhet Province, and to allow them to meet for communal worship according to their rights under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Laos ratified in 2009."