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## LAOS | Funeral Disrupted, Christians Charged With Murder

Five Christians in Savannakhet province, Laos, have been accused of the murder of a Christian convert, Mrs. Chan, who died on the morning of June 21. It's unclear whether or not they have been formally charged.

According to the non-profit advocacy organization Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom, Mrs. Chan and her family converted to Protestant Christianity in April 2014. Chan was suffering from an unidentified two-year illness when she died en route from the hospital back to her home in Saisomboon village, Atsaphangthong district. In accordance with Chan's beliefs, her family arranged for a Christian funeral to be conducted by the village church leader, Pastor Kaithong.

Although the village chief originally granted permission for the funeral, on June 22 the chief and local police ordered Pastor Kaithong and the other Christians present to stop the funeral proceedings. Pastor Kaithong appealed to the chief of Atsaphangthong district, and was instructed to wait for one day for the outcome of the appeal. On June 23, the village chief and the police authorities arrested Pastor Kaithong and four other Christians, including three church leaders named Puphet, Muk and Hasadee, and another Christian known as Tiang. The village chief then arranged for some monks to conduct a Buddhist ceremony and burial against the family's wishes.

According to a local source, the village chief and police forced Chan's daughter to sign a statement that stated Pastor Kaithong gave Chan medication on the journey back from Seno city to Saisomboon village which they claim caused her death. All five detainees implicated were in the alleged murder.

The information contained in the report is consistent with research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide in 2012-2014 which found Savannakhet to be one of the worst provinces for religious freedom violations. Common violations against Protestant Christians by state actors include forced eviction, arrest and detention, disruption of religious meetings and services, forced participation in animist ceremonies, and threats, including death threats. However, this is the first case reported to CSW in which Christians have been accused of murder.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The refusal of the local authorities to allow the family of the deceased to carry out a Christian funeral, in addition to being grossly insensitive, is a violation of their freedom of religion or belief. Furthermore, the accusations against the five Christians, including Pastor Kaithong, appear to be part of an attempt to discourage and even indirectly punish conversions to Protestant Christianity in the area. We call on the district and

provincial authorities to investigate immediately the actions of the village chief and police in this case and the accusations made against the five detainees.”