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LAOS | Deceased Christian's Friend Pressured to Recant

On June 29, days after the authorities accused five Christians in Savannakhet province, Laos, of murdering Christian convert Mrs. Chan, the friend who introduced Chan to the Christian faith was pressured to recant.

According to the non-profit advocacy organization, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom, Mrs. 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. Although the village chief originally granted permission for a Christian funeral, on June 22 the chief and local police ordered Pastor Kaithong and the other Christians present to stop the funeral proceedings and later arrested five Christians, accusing one Christian leader of having given Chan medication which caused her death. All five detainees have now been implicated in the alleged murder.

On June 29, three days after the arrest of the five Christians, the village chief Bounlert and another government employee went to the home of the friend who introduced Chan to the Christian faith, Mrs. Varn. The authorities stated Christianity is "the American religion," and informed her that if she refused to recant, she would be evicted from her village after 2-3 months and her land would be confiscated.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The right to freedom of religion or belief includes the right to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice: the pressure on Mrs. Varn to abandon her religion is a violation of this right, which is protected by the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, which Laos ratified in 2009. We call on the district and provincial authorities to investigate immediately the actions of the village chief and police, both at the funeral of Mrs. Chan and subsequently with Mrs. Varn, and the accusations made against the five detainees."