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## **LAOS | Christians Found Not Guilty Of Murder, Remain Detained**

Five Christians accused of the murder of a Christian convert in Savannakhet province, Laos, were found “not guilty,” according to the non-profit advocacy organization Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF).

Savannakhet Office of Prosecutors ruled Pastor Kaithong and three church leaders named Puphet, Muk and Hasadee, and another Christian known as Tiang, who had been detained since June 23, did not commit any criminal offense. They remain in detention as the authority to release the five lies with the Atsaphangthong District Chief. No date has been set for their release.

The five Christians were accused of murdering Mrs. Chan, a convert to Protestant Christianity, who was suffering from an unidentified two-year illness when she died en route from the hospital back to her home in Atsaphangthong district. The village chief granted permission for a Christian funeral, but later ordered Pastor Kaithong, who was conducting the funeral, to stop the proceedings. Kaithong appealed to the chief of Atsaphangthong district, and was instructed to wait for one day for the outcome of the appeal. According to HRWLRF, on June 23, the village chief and the police authorities arrested Kaithong and the four other Christians, accusing Kaithong of giving Chan medication on the journey back from the hospital which they claim caused her death.

Research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide found Savannakhet to be one of the worst provinces for religious freedom violations in Laos, which include forced eviction, arrest and detention, disruption of religious meetings and services, forced participation in animist ceremonies, and threats.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We welcome the news that the five Christians detained on 23 June have been found not guilty of the murder of Mrs. Chan. We urge the Atsaphangthong District to release the five Christians immediately and without conditions. We also call on the relevant authorities to investigate allegations that police forced a relative of the deceased to sign a statement accusing Pastor Kaithong of murder, and pressured other Christians in the area to recant in violation of their right to freedom of religion or belief.”