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LAOS | Christians Arrested for Religious Meeting

Local authorities in Savannakhet province, Laos, arrested seven Protestant Christians after they held a religious meeting Sept. 29.

According to the non-profit advocacy organization, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF), Pastor Sompong Supatto of Bouham village, Atsaphathong district and six Christians from villages in Palansai district met together for worship at Pastor Sompong's home on the morning of Sept. 29. Afterwards, as they gathered together for lunch, the village chief, village security officers and village police arrested the seven Christians. A week before, on Sept. 21, village officials told the Christians they were not allowed to gather for worship in Boukham village, despite the fact that Christians have been meeting for worship in Boukham village for three to four years.

The seven Christians, aged 18 to 60 years old, are currently being detained at the Boukham village government headquarters. Pastor Sompong is reportedly handcuffed and held in leg stocks.

Also in Savannakhet, five Christians accused of the murder of a Christian convert in June this year remain in detention despite having been found not guilty. Savannakhet Office of Prosecutors ruled that Pastor Kaithong and four Christians detained since June 23 did not commit any criminal offense. However, they remain in detention as the authority to release the five detainees lies with the Atsaphangthong District Chief. No date has been set for their release. Recent reports claim the five Christians' health has deteriorated since their imprisonment.

Research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2012-2014 found Savannakhet to be one of the worst provinces for violations against Protestant Christians 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 deplore the local authorities' decision to ban Christian worship in Boukham village, and the arrest of the seven Christians on Sept. 29. Sadly, this kind of incident is still common in Savannakhet province and other parts of Laos, despite the government's recognition of Protestant Christianity. We call on the central government to protect and promote the rights of people of all religions or belief, in all parts of the country. We further call on the local authorities in Savannaakhet province to release the seven Christians arrested in Boukham village, and the five Christians cleared of murder in August 2014."