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LAOS | Christians Released, Pastor Still Detained

Six Protestant Christians, who were arrested Sept. 28 by local authorities in Savannakhet province, Laos, after a religious meeting, were released from detention Oct. 3. Pastor Sompong Supatto is still being held at Boukham village government headquarters.

According to the non-profit advocacy organization, Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF), the group, aged between 18 and 60 years old and accompanied by a three year-old girl, were arrested by local authorities after they met together for worship at Pastor Sompong Supatto's home in Boukham village, Atsaphathong district. 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 Christians have been meeting there for worship for three to four years.

The Christians were then detained at Boukham village government headquarters. Although the rest of the group was released, Pastor Sompong remains detained and held in a position of restriction and torture, handcuffed with his legs in wooden stocks.

Research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has 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 remains concerned for five Christians accused of the murder of a Christian convert in Savannakhet province in June this year, whose health is deteriorating in detention. Pastor Kaithong and four other Christians have been detained since June 23 despite being found "not guilty" of any criminal offense by Savannakhet Office of Prosecutors. The authority to release the five detainees lies with the Atsaphangthong District Chief and no date has been set for their release.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is deeply concerned for the health of Pastor Sompong Supatto, whose treatment amounts to torture. We call on the local authorities in Boukham village to release Pastor Supatto immediately and unconditionally, and to allow Christians to meet for worship in the village. We also call for the release of Pastor Kaithong and the four Christians detained with her, who have been cleared of all charges and whose health is deteriorating. We urge the central government to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is respected in all parts of the country and that local authorities comply with the law in accordance with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Laos ratified in 2009."