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## LAOS | Five Christians File Appeal Against Conviction

Five Laotian Christians convicted of “performance of the medical profession without a license” after praying for a Christian convert confirmed they will appeal the decision.

According to the non-profit advocacy organization Human Rights Watcher for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRWF), a false document was submitted to the Appeals Court without the knowledge or consent of the five which stated they had decided to withdraw their appeal. The five Christians, Pastor Kaithong, Puphet, Muk, Hasadee and Tiang, met with the Prosecutors' Office at the Appeals Court in Pakse, Savannakhet Province on April 24 to confirm they intended to move ahead with the appeal. They also asserted that the signatures on the document were not theirs and the Prosecutors' Office accepted that the document was false.

Pastor Kaithong, Puphet, Muk, Hasadee, and Tiang, were originally accused of murdering Mrs. Chan, a convert to Protestant Christianity. She was suffering from an unidentified two-year illness when she died en route from the hospital back to her home in Atsaphangthong district on June 21, 2014. The village chief granted permission for a Christian funeral, but later ordered the proceedings to be stopped. Pastor Kaithong appealed to the chief of Atsaphangthong district, but on June 23, 2014, the village chief and the police authorities arrested Kaithong and the four other Christians. They were accused of giving Chan medication which caused her death.

In August 2014, Savannakhet Office of Prosecutors ruled the five did not commit any criminal offense. However, on Feb. 12, 2015, the People's Court of Savannakhet Province found them guilty of “performance of the medical profession without a license,” under Article 82 of the Lao Penal Code. The accused maintain they did not use any drug or material remedy, but only prayed for Mrs. Chan in accordance with her request for prayer for healing.

The five Christians have been released temporarily while they appeal the court's decision. No date has been set for the final verdict.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “The submission of a false document with forged signatures is a worrying sign that there are certain individuals who are determined that these five Christians should be returned to prison. In the past ten months, these five people have been arrested, accused of murder, cleared, and accused under new charges. For much of this period they have been kept in detention, away from their families, and their health has deteriorated. We welcome the decision of the Prosecutors' Office to allow the five Christians to appeal the decision of the court on Feb. 12 and call on the authorities to consider the entire history of the case, including the pressure put on other Christians in the area to recant. We also urge the Lao authorities to allow people of all faiths and none, in all areas of the country, to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.”