

United Nations Human Rights Council
Universal Periodic Review of Member-State: Lao People's Democratic Republic

Jubilee Campaign USA, Inc., in special consultative status with ECOSOC, submits this analysis of religious freedom or belief and human rights in Laos as a contribution to the Universal Periodic Review of UNHRC member-state Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos).

Freedom of Religion: Dangers for Christian Minority

1. Christians comprise a small 1% of the population in Laos, but the government has taken action with impunity against churches, church leaders, and Christian citizens regarding the practice of their faith. The Lao Constitution guarantees religious freedom to all individuals and Article 5 of the Law on Criminal Procedure prohibits arrest, detention or building search without an order from a public prosecutor or from a people's court.
2. In violation of the Lao Constitutional right to religious freedom, the Lao government has repeatedly harassed Christians. In January 2013, an elderly couple was evicted from their home and village after they professed Christianity. The husband is extremely ill and in need of treatment. Their village will not let them return, stating that no Christians are allowed in the village. The couple is temporarily living under an unfinished roof in another village.
3. On August 30, 2013, a Nongdaeng village chief ordered 11 Christian families (50 people) to recant their faith or be evicted. The village officials stated that villagers are not allowed to practice the religion of a Western power. The Christians reminded the chief of their Constitutional rights and continued to worship. Though the HRWLF requested that the federal government overturn the eviction order, the government has taken no action.
4. In September 2013, Nonsung village officials demanded that 53 Christian villagers partake in animist rituals to demonstrate their submission to local authorities. The Christians were threatened with banishment if they refused.
5. In spite of a Constitutional right to corporate worship, police raided a Christian gathering in May 2014. The police terrorized attendees, confiscated Bibles, and accused the pastor of illegal actions. After the non-Christian village chief testified to their legal behavior, the police left, only taking the Bibles. Another nearby village simultaneously reported that 3 Christian schoolgirls are being denied their right to an education based on their faith.
6. Abuses of authority such as these are punishable by law in Laos. The law states the offender can be punished and imprisoned three to five years and fined from 2 million kip to 7 million kip (US\$240 to US\$840) for these types of abuses, yet no justice has been done for these Christians in Laos.

A Vital Voice for Those Suffering in Silence

9689-C Main Street · Fairfax, VA 22031-3746 TEL: (703) 503-0791 FAX: (703) 503-0792 EMAIL:

jubilee@jubileecampaign.org

P.O. Box 700 · Addlestone · Surrey, KT15 9BW · United Kingdom

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7. Churches are required to register with the government and apply for approval for building, construction, printing religious texts, and contacting foreign religious affiliates. Any type of gathering, including gatherings in private homes, must be approved in advance by local officials. Authorities view all unregistered churches and religious gatherings as illegal and foreign missionaries are prohibited from sharing their faith, or “proselytizing.”
8. Only three churches in Laos are recognized: The Lao Evangelical Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and the Roman Catholic Church. Church leaders experience arbitrary arrests, threats and kidnappings. The greatest persecution in Laos is suffered by Protestants, who are considered a “threat” to the government. In some areas, local LEC churches are refused registration, even though it is a legal church. In spite of these churches technical legalization, many village leaders nevertheless banish Christians on the basis of practicing a corrupting Western religion.
9. As recently as March 2014, Jubilee Campaign received a report that Christian converts involving eight families in the Natahall village, in Savannakat Province’s Phin District still faced expulsion from their village and loss of their homes if they refused to recant their Christian faith, as per an eviction order issued to them in December 2013. Jubilee Campaign encourages any efforts of Laos government authorities to find a compromise, and we urge the Laos authorities to recognize the religious freedom rights of these converts.
10. Jubilee Campaign agrees with these quotes from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an agency funded by the U.S. government, which reports that “the Lao government has been either unwilling or unable to stop provincial authorities and security officials from committing serious abuses against ethnic minority Protestants . . . authorities are either unaware of laws protecting religious practice or fail to implement them.” These past few years have marked “detentions, forced evictions, denials of government services, and forced renunciations of faith.” (USCIRF 2013 Annual Report)
11. Laos must enforce its own Constitution to bring justice to victims of religious violence. Laos must not allow Christians to become a targeted minority and must ensure the free expression of all religions for all people.

Human Trafficking

1. Lack of resources, poor training and corruption block the Lao government from being effective in complying with the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking. Women are being trafficked to China and Thailand, but Laos is primarily a transit country for Vietnamese, Chinese and Burmese women trafficked to Thailand.

2. Forced labor is one major form of human trafficking and the government has taken no discernible measures to prevent this. Furthermore, men comprise about one-third of the total victims trafficked. Most men are ineligible to receive victim services since the majority of services are only available to women.
3. Prosecutions and convictions of traffickers significantly declined during 2013. Authorities investigated 75 cases of suspected human trafficking and only 18 convictions were obtained—a decrease from the 37 obtained in 2012.
4. Although the Lao government provides some victim support in the form of one shelter, the government primarily depends on NGO's and international organizations to provide victim services. Because there is no long-term victim support, many victims are vulnerable to re-trafficking after they exit a shelter.
5. Through NGO and international encouragement, the Lao government did improve trafficking awareness and official training. In March 2012, the government helped train 400 officers on combating child sex tourism and in December 2012, the government held an awareness event.
6. Laos must find resources to better train its officials and prosecutors, take action to eliminate forced labor, improve long-term victim services for both men and women victims, implement systems to better identify trafficking victims in transit, and successfully prosecute more traffickers as they are identified.
7. Jubilee Campaign is also concerned that in May of 2013 Laos used trafficking as a justification for repatriating nine North Korean refugee children. By this action, Laos authorities placed the lives of these nine North Korean orphans at risk by forcing them back to North Korea, reportedly as the request of Kim Jong Un. We encourage the Laos government to protect refugee seekers and allow them to resettle to the Republic of Korea, where they have automatic citizenship under the Republic of Korea's constitution. Vulnerable refugee children should be protected and not forcibly repatriated to a country which will imprison, torture, and starve them.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Laos must not grant impunity to its officials who persecute the Christian minority in Laos. Provincial leaders must be required to stop evicting, detaining, threatening, coercing, or harassing Christian villagers who lawfully practice their religion.
2. Laos must adhere to its Constitutional mandates for religious freedom and freedom of expression for all people.

3. Laos must adhere to its Constitutional mandates for the punishment of officials who abuse authority by the use of force, weapons, torture, indecent words or acts affecting the honor and reputation of the victim.
4. Laos must improve its capacity to prosecute traffickers, implement long-term victim services for both men and women, and train officials in identifying and combating all types of trafficking victims so as to provide justice for trafficked individuals.