



## Laos

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies restricted this right in practice. The Prime Minister's Decree on Religious Practice (Decree 92) is the principal legal instrument defining rules for religious practice; it institutionalizes the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Although this decree has contributed to greater religious tolerance since it was promulgated in 2002, authorities, particularly at the provincial and district levels, have used its many conditions to restrict some aspects of religious practice.

During the reporting period, the overall status of respect for religious freedom did not significantly change. As during previous reporting periods, officials in urban areas tended to show more acceptance of religious practice, with more difficulties encountered in rural areas. The law does not recognize a state religion; however, the Government's financial support and promotion of Buddhism, along with its willingness to exempt Buddhism from a number of restrictions, gave the religion an elevated status. In most areas, officials generally respected the constitutionally guaranteed rights of members of most religious groups to worship, albeit within strict constraints imposed by the Government. Authorities in some of the country's 17 provinces continued to be suspicious of non-Buddhist religious communities and displayed intolerance for minority religious practice, particularly Protestant groups, whether or not they were officially recognized.

Local officials reportedly interfered with the right of Protestants to worship in a number of places, particularly in Luang Namtha and Bolikhamsai Provinces. Arrests and detentions of Protestants reportedly occurred during the reporting period in Luang Namtha, Phongsali, and Savannakhet Provinces. Local officials reportedly pressured Protestants to renounce their faith on threat of arrest or forceful eviction from their villages in Bolikhamsai, Houaphan, Salavan, Luang Prabang, Attapeu, Oudomsai, and Luang Namtha Provinces.

At the end of the reporting period, there were two known religious prisoners, both Protestants. A number of other Protestants were being detained for reasons other than their religion, although religion was alleged to have been a contributing factor in their arrests.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, conflicts between ethnic groups and movement among villages sometimes exacerbated religious tensions. Proselytizing and rights to village resources were particular points of contention. Frictions also arose over the refusal of some members of minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in local Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies. The efforts of some Protestant congregations to establish churches independent of the government-sanctioned Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) continued to cause strains within the Protestant community.

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy also maintained frequent contact with religious leaders. Official visitors from the U.S. Government, including a specialist from the Office of International Religious Freedom, reinforced embassy efforts by raising religious freedom issues during their meetings with Lao officials.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 85,000 square miles and a population of 6.7 million. Theravada Buddhism is the faith of nearly all of the ethnic or "lowland" Lao population, who constitute only 40-50 percent of the overall population of the country. The remainder of the population belongs to at least 48 distinct ethnic minority groups. Most of these ethnic minorities are practitioners of animism and ancestor worship, with beliefs that vary greatly among groups. Animism is predominant among most Sino-Thai groups, such as the Thai Dam and Thai Daeng, as well as among Mon-Khmer and Burmo-Tibetan groups. Even among lowland Lao, many pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs have been incorporated into Theravada Buddhist practice. Roman Catholics and Protestants constitute approximately 2 percent of the population. Other minority religious groups include those practicing the Baha'i Faith, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, and Confucianism. A very small number of citizens follow no religion.

Theravada Buddhism is by far the most prominent organized religion in the country, with more than 4,000 temples serving as the focus of religious practice and the center of community life in rural areas. In most lowland Lao villages, religious tradition remains strong. Most Buddhist men spend some part of their lives as monks in temples, even if only for a few days. There are approximately 20,000 monks in the country, more than 8,000 of whom have attained the rank of "senior monk," indicating years of study in temples. In addition, more than 400 nuns, many of whom are older widows, reside in temples throughout the country. The Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO) is under the direction of a supreme patriarch who resides in Vientiane and supervises the activities of the LBFO's central office, the Ho Thammasapha.

Although officially incorporated into the dominant Mahanikai School of Buddhist Practice after 1975, the Thammayudh sect of Buddhism still maintains a following in the country. Abbots and monks of several temples, particularly in Vientiane, reportedly follow the Thammayudh School, which places greater emphasis on meditation and discipline.

There are four Mahayana Buddhist temples in Vientiane, two serving the ethnic Vietnamese community and two serving the ethnic Chinese community. Buddhist monks from Vietnam, China, and India have visited these temples freely to conduct services and minister to worshippers. There are at least four large Mahayana Buddhist pagodas in other urban centers and smaller Mahayana temples in villages near the borders of Vietnam and China.

Church officials estimate there are approximately 45,000 Catholics; many are ethnic Vietnamese, concentrated in major urban centers and surrounding areas along the Mekong River in the central and southern regions. The Catholic Church has an established presence in five of the most populous central and southern provinces, and Catholics are generally able to worship openly. No ordained Catholic priests operated in the north, and the Church's activities there remain restricted. There are four bishops, two located in Vientiane Municipality and the others in Thakhek city in Khammouan Province and Pakse city in Champasak Province. One of the bishops oversees the Vientiane Diocese and is responsible for the central part of the country. The second bishop resident in Vientiane is the Bishop of Luang Prabang. He is assigned to the northern part of the country. While the Government did not permit him to take up his post, it permitted him to travel intermittently to visit church congregations in the north including in Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, and Bokeo Provinces. The Catholic Church's property in Luang Prabang was seized after the current Government took power in 1975, and there is no longer a parsonage in that city. An informal Catholic training center in Thakhek prepared a small number of priests to serve the Catholic community. Catholic personnel have also been able to go to Australia and the Philippines for training. Several foreign nuns temporarily serve in the Vientiane Diocese and work with families, the elderly, and younger members.

The Protestant community has grown rapidly over the past decade, and LEC officials estimate that Protestants number as many as 100,000. More than 400 LEC congregations conduct services throughout the country. The LEC maintains properties in the cities of Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse, and LEC officials confirm LEC ownership is

recognized in all three locations by the authorities. Many Protestants are members of ethnic Mon-Khmer groups, especially the Khmu in the north and the Brou in Savannakhet and nearby provinces. Protestantism also has expanded rapidly in the Hmong and Yao communities. In urban areas, Protestantism has attracted many lowland Lao followers. Most Protestants are concentrated in Vientiane Municipality, in the provinces of Vientiane, Sayaboury, Luang Prabang, Xiang Khouang, Bolikhamsai, Savannakhet, Champasak, and Attapeu, as well as in the former Saisomboun Special Zone, but smaller congregations are located throughout the country. Seventh-day Adventists number slightly more than 1,200 countrywide, the majority of whom reside in Vientiane Municipality. The group also has congregations in Bokeo, Bolikhamsai, Champasak, Luang Prabang, and Xiang Khouang Provinces.

Christian groups that have some following, but which are not recognized by the Government, include Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutherans, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Baptists. Official membership numbers are not available.

All three approved Christian groups own properties in Vientiane Municipality. In addition, three informal churches, one each for English-speakers, Korean-speakers, and Chinese-speakers, serve Vientiane's foreign Protestant community.

There are approximately 500 adherents of Islam, the vast majority of whom are foreign permanent residents of South Asian or Cambodian (ethnic Cham) origin. There are two active mosques in Vientiane, where the majority of Muslims reside. The Vientiane mosques follow the Sunni branch of Islam, but both are open to visits by Shi'ites as well. There are also very small numbers of Muslims living in provincial cities, including an estimated 3-4 in Pakse in Champasak Province and 2-3 in Luang Prabang, although there are no mosques in these locations.

Baha'i leaders estimated the Baha'i Faith has 8,500 adherents. A 9-member Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly oversees Baha'i activities including its five centers: two in Vientiane Municipality, one in Vientiane Province, one in Savannakhet Province, and a new center established in Paksane District of Bolikhamsai Province. A small number of Baha'is also live in Khammouane Province and in Pakse City in Champasak Province, and outreach is underway in Oudomsai, Xiang Khouang, Luang Prabang, and Salavan Provinces.

Small groups of followers of Confucianism and Taoism practice their beliefs in the larger cities.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies, particularly at the local level, sometimes violate this right. Article 30 of the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, a fact frequently cited by officials in reference to religious tolerance. Article 9 of the Constitution, however, discourages all acts that create divisions among religious groups and persons. The Government has interpreted this clause to justify restrictions on religious practice by all religious groups, including the Buddhist majority and animists. Both local and central government officials widely refer to Article 9 as a reason for placing constraints on religious practice, especially proselytizing and the expansion of Protestantism among minority groups. The Constitution also notes that the state "mobilizes and encourages" Buddhist monks and novices as well as priests of other religions to participate in activities "beneficial to the nation and the people." Although official pronouncements acknowledge the positive benefits of religion and the existence of different religious groups, they emphasize religion's potential to divide, distract, and destabilize.

Decree 92 is the principal legal instrument defining rules for religious practice. Decree 92 defines the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Although this decree has contributed to greater religious

tolerance since it was promulgated in 2002, authorities have used its many conditions to restrict some aspects of religious practice, particularly at the provincial and district levels.

In its 20 articles, Decree 92 establishes guidelines for religious activities in a broad range of areas. While the decree provides that the Government "respects and protects legitimate activities of believers," it also seeks to ensure that religious practice "conforms to the laws and regulations." Decree 92 legitimizes proselytizing by Lao citizens, printing religious materials, owning and building houses of worship, and maintaining contact with overseas religious groups; however, all of these rights are contingent upon a strict approval process. Decree 92 reserves for the LFNC the "right and duty to manage and promote" religious practice, requiring that nearly all aspects of religious practice receive the approval of an LFNC branch office. Some cases require approval from the central-level LFNC. In practice, the Government used the approval process to restrict the religious activities of certain groups and effectively limited or prevented some religious denominations from importing Bibles and religious materials as well as constructing houses of worship. Many minority religious leaders complained that the requirement to obtain permission, sometimes from several different offices, for a broad range of activities greatly limited their freedom.

The Government officially recognized four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith. Recognized Christian groups include the Catholic Church, the LEC, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Although Decree 92 establishes procedures for new denominations to register, the Government's desire to consolidate religious practice for purposes of control has effectively blocked new registrations. The LFNC's Order Number 1 of March 2004 required all Protestant groups to become a part of the LEC or the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The order stated that no other Christian denominations would be permitted to register, a measure to prevent "disharmony" in the religious community. Although denominations not registered with the LFNC are not legally allowed to practice their faith, several do so quietly without interference.

The Government required several religious groups, apparently with the exception of Buddhists and Catholics, to report membership information periodically to the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC. The Government also maintained restrictions on the publication of religious materials that applied to most religious groups, except for Buddhists.

Although the Government does not recognize an official state religion, the Government's exemption of Buddhism from many of the Decree 92 restrictions, sponsorship of Buddhist facilities, increased incorporation of Buddhist ritual and ceremony in state functions, and promotion of Buddhism as an element of the country's cultural and spiritual identity gave Theravada Buddhism an elevated status.

Both the Constitution and Decree 92 assert that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and instructing believers to be good citizens. The Government presumed both a right and a duty to oversee religious practice at all levels to ensure religious practice fills these roles in society. In effect this has led the authorities, particularly at the provincial, district, and local levels, to intervene in the activities of minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, on the grounds that their practices did not promote national interests or demonstrated disloyalty to the Government.

Since 2001 the Government has more closely scrutinized the activities of the small Muslim community in Vientiane but has not interfered with its religious activities. Muslims were able to practice their faith openly and attend the two active mosques. Daily prayers and the weekly Jumaat prayer on Fridays proceeded unobstructed, and all Islamic celebrations were allowed. Adherents from the two mosques belong to one Muslim Association. Government officials, including LFNC members from Vientiane Municipality and the local level, were invited to and attended Islamic festivals held by the Association. Muslims were permitted to go on the Hajj, but apparently none have done so since 2000 because of the expense. Groups have come from Thailand to conduct Tabligh teachings for

adherents. Local Muslims joined with members of other religious groups to represent the Government at Interfaith Conferences on Religion in Indonesia in 2006 and in Cambodia in early 2008.

While animists generally experienced little interference from the Government in their religious practices, the Government actively discouraged animist practices that it deemed outdated, unhealthful, or illegal, such as the practice in some tribes of killing children born with defects or burying the bodies of deceased relatives underneath homes. In some areas where animism predominated among ethnic minority groups, local authorities have actively encouraged those groups to adopt Buddhism and abandon their beliefs in magic and spirits which the authorities considered "backward."

Persons arrested or convicted for religious offenses had little protection under the law. Detained persons may be held for lengthy periods without trial. Court judges, not juries, decided guilt or innocence in court cases, and the defense rights of the accused were limited. All religious groups, including Buddhists, practice their faith in an atmosphere in which application of the law is arbitrary. Certain actions interpreted by officials as threatening brought harsh punishment. Religious practice was "free" only if practitioners stayed within tacitly understood guidelines of activity acceptable to the Government.

The Government typically refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing on the part of its officials, even in egregious cases of religious persecution. Blame was often attributed to the victims rather than the persecuting officials. In some cases, officials continued to concoct patently unbelievable explanations for events in order to exonerate local officials. While the Government has sometimes admitted that local officials are part of the problem, it has been unwilling to take action against officials who have violated laws and regulations on religious freedom.

Although the Government did not maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See, representatives of the Papal Nuncio have visited from Thailand and coordinated with the Government on assistance programs, especially for lepers and persons with disabilities.

The Government requires and routinely granted permission for formal links with coreligionists in other countries. In practice the line between formal and informal links was blurred, and relations generally were established without much difficulty.

There was no religious instruction in public schools, nor were there any parochial or religiously affiliated schools. However, several private preschools and English- language schools received support from religious groups abroad. Many boys spent some time in Buddhist temples, where they received instruction in religion as well as academics. Temples traditionally have filled the role of schools and continued to play this role in smaller communities where formal education was limited or unavailable. Christian denominations, particularly the LEC and Seventh-day Adventists, operated Sunday schools for children and young persons. Baha'i Spiritual Assemblies conducted religious training for children as well as adult members. The Muslim community offered limited educational training for its children.

The Government generally did not interfere with citizens wishing to travel abroad for short-term religious training.

The Government observes the That Luang Festival and the Lao New Year, which have religious overtones, as national holidays. The Government generally allowed major religious festivals of all established congregations without hindrance, and government officials attended some Buddhist religious festivals in their official capacity.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

Throughout the country, religious practice was restrained by official rules and policies that allowed religious groups

to practice their faith only under circumscribed conditions. However, the government structure is relatively decentralized, and central government control over provincial and district governments remained limited. As a result, the Government's tolerance of religion varied by region and by religion. Local officials were often unaware of government policies on topics such as religious tolerance due to the incomplete dissemination and application of existing laws and regulations and, when aware of the laws, often failed to enforce them. The LFNC at times visited areas where religious persecution had taken place in order to instruct local officials on government policy and regulation. More often, however, the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department encouraged local or provincial governments to resolve conflicts on their own and in accordance with Decree 92.

Minority religious leaders saw an increasing need for training of provincial, district, and local officials to help them better understand Decree 92; some called for amending the Decree to make its language more clear and its enforcement more consistent.

Christian leaders in Luang Prabang Province reported as many as 10,000 adherents able to hold Sunday services in 48 locations: three homes converted for use as churches (although not formally registered), as well as 45 homes. In contrast, Luang Namtha provincial officials said their province had 480 Christians and were clear that provincial policy is to have Christians worship individually in their homes; Christians may request permission from village chiefs to worship as a group, but "none have done so" according to Luang Namtha officials. According to religious leaders, Luang Namtha does not allow outside Christian leaders to train in the province, nor can Christians officially travel outside the province for training.

Protestant groups that wanted to be recognized as separate from the LEC continued to be the targets of restrictions. However, in some areas unauthorized churches generally were allowed to conduct services without hindrance by local authorities. Within the LEC, some congregations sought greater independence and forged their own connections with Protestant groups abroad. Authorities in several provinces insisted that independent church congregations return to the LEC, but in other areas authorities allowed independent churches to conduct services without hindrance.

For a number of years Methodists have consistently sought to register with the LFNC as a separate denomination. In early 2006 some village and district officials appeared to be taking a stronger stance against unauthorized Methodist congregations; however, this reportedly tapered off in late 2006 and has appeared to occur less frequently since then.

Between 1999 and 2001 local authorities closed approximately 20 of Vientiane Province's 60 LEC churches. Beginning in 2002, most of these churches were allowed to reopen. However, officials in several districts of Savannakhet Province did not allow local congregations, despite requests, to reopen as many as 6 of the province's approximately 40 churches, and they remained closed at the end of the reporting period. Despite requests that a church building in Dong Nong Khun Village, which was confiscated by local officials in 2000, be returned to its congregation, provincial officials stated that the number of Protestants in the village was not sufficient to warrant having a church, even though local Protestants claimed more than 120 worshippers.

As many as 200 of the LEC's nearly 400 congregations did not have permanent church structures and conducted worship services in members' homes. Since the 2002 promulgation of Decree 92, officials from the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department have stated that home churches should be replaced with designated church structures whenever possible. However, most Christian communities have been unable to obtain permission to build new churches, even though group worship in homes is considered illegal by local authorities in many areas. Religious organization representatives pointed out that the building permit process begins at the local level and then requires provincial permission; they claimed the multiple layers of permission necessary were being used, beginning with local officials, to block the construction of new churches. No new LEC churches were permitted to officially register during the

reporting period. In a few cases, villages allowed construction of new church buildings without prior official permission from higher level authorities; however, problems occurred when district or provincial officials became aware of the "illegal" construction. Home churches thus remained the only viable place of worship for many LEC congregations.

Baha'i spiritual assemblies in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Champasak cities generally practiced without hindrance, and Baha'i groups faced fewer restrictions from local authorities than in the past. While cooperation from provincial-level authorities in Savannakhet Province was good, smaller Baha'i communities in Savannakhet Province continued to face restrictions by local police, including limitations on both the nature and extent of some religious activities.

During the reporting period, there were no reports of official interference with or denial of permission to hold religious celebrations in churches, but there were reports that Protestants in some villages were not allowed to hold Christian celebrations in their homes, thus restricting Protestant activities to church buildings only. This was particularly a problem for Protestants who had not been given approval to build church structures in their villages. For example, Protestants in Nakun Village, Bolikhamsai Province, and Xunya Village, Luang Namtha Province, were reportedly restricted in their ability to hold religious meetings and celebrations in their homes. Protestants in both villages also were not given approval to build church structures.

Longstanding restrictions on the Catholic Church's operations in the north resulted in the continued existence of only a handful of small congregations in Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Bokeo, and Luang Namtha Provinces as well as some village communities in Vientiane Province. Catholics in these areas sporadically held services in homes. There were no ordained Catholic priests in the north, and pastoral visits from Vientiane were intermittent. However, there were signs during the reporting period that the Government was slowly easing its control over the Catholic community in the north. Several church properties, including a school in Vientiane Municipality, were seized by the Government after 1975 and have not been returned, nor has the Government provided restitution.

The Government strictly prohibited foreigners from proselytizing, although it permitted foreign NGOs with religious affiliations to work in the country. Although Decree 92 permits proselytizing by religious practitioners provided they obtain permission from the LFNC, the LFNC did not grant such permission, and persons found evangelizing risked harassment or arrest. In previous reporting periods, authorities arrested and expelled foreigners attempting to proselytize, but there were no reports of this during the reporting period.

The Government permitted the printing, import, and distribution of Buddhist religious material.

Although Decree 92 authorized the printing and importation of non-Buddhist religious texts and allowed religious materials to be imported from abroad, it also required permission for such activities from the LFNC. While in practice some groups were able to print their own religious materials, Baha'i and Christian groups faced challenges. The Government did not allow the printing of Bibles, and special permission was required for their importation for distribution. No Bibles were known to have been imported during the reporting period. Authorities seized religious tracts and teaching materials from Protestants entering the country from abroad, including at the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge, and fined those carrying the materials. However, there were no reports of arrests associated with these confiscations, as had occurred in previous years. Several non-Christian groups indicated that they were not restricted in bringing religious materials into the country.

Identity cards did not specify religion, nor did family "household registers" or passports, two other important forms of identification. On occasion local officials withheld new government ID cards or household registration documents from Protestants and denied educational benefits to their children because of their religious beliefs or threatened to withhold official documentation unless they renounced their faith.

## Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities continued to arrest and detain persons for their religious activities, although this occurred less frequently than in previous reporting periods. Other persons were officially detained for reasons other than religion, although religion was considered to be a factor. Efforts by local officials to force Protestants to renounce their faith continued in certain areas. In some cases, officials threatened religious minorities with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply.

At the end of the reporting period, two known prisoners remained in custody primarily for religious reasons. In January 2007 Khamson Baccam, an ethnic Thai Dam man described as a Protestant leader, was arrested in Oudomsai Province. The Government was unwilling to acknowledge that he was being held, and multiple requests for information about his status remained unanswered. In 1999 authorities arrested two members of the Lao Evangelical Church in Oudomsai Province, Nyoht and Thongchanh, and charged them with treason and sedition, although their arrests appeared to have been for proselytizing. Nyoht was sentenced to 12 years in prison and died in prison in 2006. Thongchanh, whose 15 year sentence was reduced to 10 years at the end of 2006, remained in prison in Oudomsai at the end of the reporting period.

Most problems involving interference in religious practices occurred at the provincial, district, and local levels.

In March 2009 district officials banned Christians gathering to worship at a home in Nonsomboon village in Bolikhamsai Province, where an unapproved church had been destroyed. According to recent reports, local officials were allowing worship at homes to resume.

In August 2008 officials of Burikan District in Bolikhamsai Province reportedly banned approximately 150 members from gathering at a home in the village for worship services, declaring that services could be held only in a church building. Earlier in the reporting period, officials reportedly destroyed the group's church in Toongpankham village. The church had apparently been built with local permission, although it had not received provincial approval.

In July 2008 police authorities of Ad-Sapangthong District of Savannakhet Province reportedly interfered with worship by Christians in Boukham village and detained a pastor and four church members for two days; during this period they were reportedly held in foot stocks. The pastor was detained again in August along with two other church members; they were released in October. Reportedly 55 Christians were expelled from the village during this period. A senior Ministry of Public Security (MoPS) official explained that the pastor had moved to Boukham in 2005 but had failed to apply to change his household registration within six months as required; there was no confirmation of or explanation for the reported expulsion of church members by the MoPS official.

In July 2008 in Katan village, in Ta-Oy District, Salavan Province, a local Christian man died after local authorities reportedly forced him to drink alcohol; his relatives were reportedly fined after conducting a Christian burial service. A few days later local authorities reportedly detained 80 Christians from 17 families and forced them, apparently including by withholding food, to publicly renounce their faith. In September provincial and district authorities reportedly held a meeting in the village at the request of the central government in response to international inquiries about the situation. A senior government official stated that an investigation showed that the death was due to alcoholism and that the burial dispute arose from misunderstanding between Christian and non-Christian factions in the village. The official added that no individuals were forced to renounce their faith, although some may have done so voluntarily. However, according to later reports, some village residents wanted to redeclare their faith, but authorities refused to grant permission for them to do so.

There were a number of cases in which Christians were arrested for reasons other than religion, but in which religion may have played a factor.

In April 2009 the final two pastors from a group of eight Khmu pastors jailed in the Oudomsai provincial prison were reportedly released. In November 2008 six members of the group had been released from detention; each was ordered to pay \$350(Kip 3,000,000) in detention costs. The group had been stopped, searched, and all eight members arrested while attempting to cross the border from Bokeo Province into Thailand in March 2008. There was no indication that the group was trying to cross the border legally. Their situation was complicated when authorities found they were carrying documents critical of religious persecution in Laos.

In early 2009 8 heads of families from a group of 10 Hmong and Khmu Christian families were reportedly returned to Vietnam. According to this report, Lao authorities had ascertained that these heads of family had moved from Vietnam to Vang Vieng in northern Vientiane Province more than 7 years earlier and had been illegally living in Laos without documentation. Vang Vieng officials were said to have allowed these 10 local Hmong and Khmu Christian families to move from Vientiane Province to neighboring provinces after a February 2007 insurgent attack on an army camp near Vang Vieng that reportedly killed two Lao Army soldiers. However, the Vang Vieng officials had not provided the legal documents required for such a move and, after a short period, reportedly required the families to return to Vang Vieng. The male heads of family--seven Hmong and three Khmu--reportedly were then detained at Vientiane Province's Thong Harb Prison. Of the original 10 detainees, one reportedly died in late 2007 and another in May 2008. The other eight remained in Thong Harb Prison for more than a year before being deported.

In February 2008 authorities reportedly arrested 58 persons from 15 families during raids on Sai Jareun and Fai villages in Bokeo Province. Those arrested were described as Hmong Christians who had fled persecution in Vietnam possibly as early as 2002 and were apparently part of the Sai Jareun Village Christian congregation. Reports circulated that some or all of those arrested had been sentenced to prison or deported to Vietnam. One foreign organization claimed that nine Hmong church leaders from the area were sentenced to 15 years in prison on February 22, 2008, as a result of these raids. However, no local sources corroborated the report of imprisonments, and the Government denied that anyone from the area was sentenced to prison. One senior official confirmed that a number of persons were deported to Vietnam, but of those deported, there was no indication that any were in Laos legally. The same official described any deportations that had occurred as resulting from the investigation of an earlier clash between authorities and drug traffickers.

In July 2007, attacks by the authorities led to the deaths of 13 Hmong Christians and arrests of others from Bokeo's Sai Jareun Village, reportedly because of a perception of some possible connection to the dwindling but still ongoing insurgency. Although the reports of the fighting appear accurate, the official government response was that those involved were actually trafficking illegal narcotics and resisted police attempts to arrest them. Bokeo Province, which borders both Burma and Thailand, is located on a major transit route for methamphetamine trafficking and thus hosts a concentration of law enforcement activity. Following the original incident, according to later reports, movement of persons within the area was highly restricted for some time, and many were jailed, including one Hmong church leader sentenced to 5 years in prison. Subsequent reports claimed that the church in Sai Jareun Village, which had numbered more than 1,000 members before this situation arose, had fewer than 30 in the aftermath of the crackdown.

In February 2007 Bolikhamsai Province officials indicated that two Buddhist monks had been arrested for being ordained without government approval and for celebrating inappropriately following the ordination ceremony. The two were reportedly detained only a short time before being released.

There were been a number of cases of officials pressuring Protestants to renounce their belief.

In July 2008 more than 500 Christians in villages in several villages in Luang Prabang Province, including Huay An in Jomphet District, reportedly came under pressure to deny their faith by judicial and police officials. The Christians were said to have been forced to turn in Bibles and hymnals that were then burned. However, according to one

nongovernment source, no one was arrested and none had renounced their religion. The provincial LFNC office was given credit by religious leaders for stepping in to help resolve the situation in Jomphet District by calling local officials, including the police, to Luang Prabang city to review Decree 92 with them. The provincial LFNC office was also credited with resolving an earlier situation in Luang Prabang's Ngoy District in which seven Christians had been arrested in January 2008 and released 3 months later. Although Ngoy District continued to have problems, according to a provincial-level Christian leader, Christians in the other ten districts in Luang Prabang were generally free to worship.

There were also reports of incidents in four other provinces in July 2008. These included two Christian leaders arrested in Khongnoy village in Vieng Phukha District and another person arrested in Sing District, all in Luang Namtha Province. According to Luang Namtha officials, the problem in Khongnoy village was caused by a religious leader from neighboring Bokeo Province proselytizing in Khongnoy village without permission; the officials denied that arrests had taken place in the case. They rejected reports that Christians had been forced to renounce their religion in Luang Namtha Province, saying that some persons had voluntarily given up Christianity when it led to conflicts within their families or when inducements to convert were not fulfilled. The Chief of Sing District denied that anyone had been arrested in July 2008.

Also in July 2008 there was a report that local officials pressed families in Attapeu Province to give up Christianity, although a visit by a provincial LFNC official was described as having resolved that situation. Officials reportedly put two persons in prison in Phongsali Province's Samphan City in an effort to force believers to renounce their faith. Other Christians were said to have been pressured to renounce their beliefs in Houaphan Province's Muang Aet District. In November 2008 seven families in Nam Reng village in Oudomsai Province were reportedly also pressured to renounce their faith; the six families refusing to sign a renunciation document were reportedly ordered out of the village. According to one report, they eventually moved to another village with a Christian community. At the end of the reporting period no further information was available, and Oudomsai provincial officials denied any knowledge of the case.

There were no reports of expulsions of Protestant families who in early 2007 had faced threats of expulsion from their villages if they did not renounce their beliefs.

There were no updates in four previously reported 2006 and 2007 cases of arrests and detentions of 18 Protestants for periods ranging from three weeks to six months or more. Three pastors, considered the leaders of a group of ethnic Khmu Protestants arrested in Khon Khen Village in November 2006, were jailed for approximately one year before they were released by the end of 2007.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

During the reporting period, local officials in some areas attempted to force Protestants to renounce their faith; however, there were no reports of successful forced religious conversion, including of any minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States. There were also no reports during this period of any minor U.S. citizens abducted or illegally removed from the United States.

In Xunya Village of Luang Namtha Province, where an original 45 Christian families, numbering more than 200 persons--mostly Yao, Khmu, and Hmong--more than ten families have reportedly renounced their religion under pressure from the police during the last 2 years.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government's record of respect for religious freedom, particularly in regard to Protestant minorities, continued to be marred by problems at the local level, with incidents of persecution occurring in many provinces. However, some positive steps were taken during the reporting period to address specific religious freedom concerns.

In its official pronouncements in recent years, the Government called for conciliation and equality among religious groups. The LFNC continued to instruct local officials on religious tolerance and often sought to intervene in cases where minority religious practitioners, particularly Christians, had been harassed or mistreated.

Some areas where abuses were reported during the past 3 years experienced improvements. Conditions in Xunya Village of Luang Namtha Province have stabilized since 2007, when central-level LFNC officials apparently helped to ameliorate ongoing conditions of harassment by visiting Luang Namtha and issuing a document supporting the right of Christians in Xunya Village to worship. Although at least 10 families renounced their Christian faith in the area over the last 2 years, the situation was reported to be improving at the end of the reporting period--with LEC officials able to visit the village and village Christian families reportedly finally allowed to gather in small groups for worship.

In May 2007, the LFNC's director of religious affairs held a country-wide seminar that included attendance by 95 Vientiane and provincial-level representatives of all four approved religions to review religious rights granted under the Constitution and in the law and to discuss resolving religious and ethnic issues.

In July 2007, the LFNC held a second meeting for religious leaders and officials from Vientiane Municipality and Vientiane Province, including from the provincial, district, and local levels. Those attending were to take back lessons learned to be applied locally. Officials from the LFNC also traveled with representatives of the LEC to several provinces to promote better understanding between LEC congregations and local officials during the reporting period.

Leaders of an international NGO that has sponsored two major international conferences on "Religion and the Rule of Law" visited Vientiane in October 2008 and won government approval for the country to host a third iteration of this conference in Vientiane in late 2009 or early 2010. In June 2008 senior government and LFNC officials had participated in the NGO's second conference in Beijing, which examined key issues relating to freedom of religion. Government officials had attended the NGO's first conference on the same subject in Vietnam in 2007.

The Catholic Church reported a number of improvements over past reporting periods. An ordination of a Catholic priest in January 2009 in Khammouan Province continued to demonstrate a significant improvement from past restrictions. In February 2009 baptism of 710 new Catholics in Vientiane Province, some of whom had been waiting for as long as 15 years for permission to be baptized, was another significant step forward for the Catholic Church.

The Government also permitted the Bishop of Luang Prabang, who serves from Vientiane, to visit the north more frequently to conduct services for the scattered Catholic communities in Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Bokeo, and Luang Namtha, but it continued to restrict his travel and deny him residence in Luang Prabang.

Christian leaders cited overall progress toward religious freedom, remembering that Christmas services were not permitted as recently as 2006 in Vientiane Municipality. Progress was seen as spreading to the provinces. In December 2008 observers found encouraging the ability of the central LEC leadership to undertake training programs for provincial religious leaders and provincial government officials in Oudomsai and Luang Prabang provinces with support from both provincial governments. Training was held in Vientiane province at the Provincial and district levels, and preparations were underway to extend the training to the village level. By the end of the reporting period, observers also saw improvements in Phongsali Province, with LEC adherents able to travel to Vientiane for training and public baptisms. Luang Prabang Province, with a reported 10,000 Christians generally

free to worship at 48 sites and with 10 of 11 districts regarded as generally problem-free at the end of the reporting period, was seen as setting a positive standard.

The LEC continued to conduct an active program of public service during this reporting period, providing developmental assistance and organizing social welfare projects in several areas that had previously experienced religious intolerance. In conjunction with the LFNC, the LEC continued to conduct meetings with officials and Protestants in some villages where there had been religious tensions. Senior LEC leaders increased their contacts with the international religious community as the LEC became a full member of the World Council of Churches in 2008.

The Baha'i were increasing their training activities in Pakse city in Champasak Province. They were also working with the LFNC office in Thakhek city to reestablish links with Baha'i adherents believed to still live in villages in Khammouan Province, where there had been more than 1,000 believers from 200 families in the past. The Baha'i were also becoming more active in researching linkages in Oudomsai, Xiang Khouang, and Luang Prabang Provinces. In addition to being allowed to establish a new center in Bolikhamsai Province, the Baha'i gained their first adherents there from the Hmong minority group. The Baha'i also gained their first adherents in Salavan Province.

In early 2009 more than 100 Lao Baha'i leaders and adherents joined Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Thai counterparts in attending a regional Baha'i conference in Cambodia, one of 41 regional Baha'i conferences being held worldwide at the time.

In May 2008 one property in northern Vientiane Province, originally owned by Government but approved for Baha'i use, was officially deeded to the Baha'i. The Baha'i's request for the deed was supported by the LFNC.

Baha'i local spiritual assemblies and the National Spiritual Assembly routinely held Baha'i 19-day feasts and celebrated all holy days without interference. The Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly in Vientiane met regularly and has sent delegations to the Universal House of Justice in Mount Carmel, in Haifa, Israel. LFNC officials have also visited the Baha'i center in Haifa.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The various religious communities generally coexist amicably. Society places importance on harmonious relations, and the dominant Buddhist faith generally is tolerant of other religious practices. Local cultural mores generally instilled respect for longstanding, well-known differences in belief. However, interreligious tensions arose on some occasions within some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to proselytizing or disagreements over rights to village resources. Efforts of some congregations to establish churches independent of the LEC or associated with denominations based abroad led to some tensions within the Protestant community. Frictions also arose over the refusal of some members of minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is a key priority of the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane. Embassy officers regularly discussed religious freedom with a range of Lao Government officials.

The Embassy maintained an ongoing dialogue with the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC. The Embassy informed the LFNC of specific cases of arrest or harassment. The LFNC in turn used this information to intercede with local officials. Embassy representatives met with a range of leaders of all religious groups in the country during

the reporting period. Despite an environment restricted by government-owned and -controlled media, Embassy officials actively encouraged religious freedom.

The Embassy actively encouraged high-level visits as the most effective tool for eliciting greater respect for religious freedom from the Government. The Embassy also regularly posted on its website material relevant to religious freedom in the country. A specialist from the Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country twice during the reporting period and encouraged greater religious freedom while meeting with senior government officials at the central, provincial, and district levels. The Embassy strongly supported the successful invitation by leaders of an international NGO for Laos to host an international conference on "Religion and the Rule of Law" in Vientiane in late 2009 or early 2010.