



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Laos

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted this right in practice. Some government officials committed abuses of citizens' religious freedom.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In most parts of the country, officials generally respected the constitutionally guaranteed rights of members of most faiths to worship, but within constraints imposed by the Government. Authorities in some areas continued to display intolerance for minority religious practice, especially by evangelical Christians. The Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), the popular front organization for the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), was responsible for oversight of religious practice. The prime minister's decree on religious practice (Decree 92) was the principal legal instrument defining rules for religious practice. Although this decree has contributed to greater religious tolerance since it was promulgated, authorities used its many conditions to restrict some aspects of religious practice. Decree 92 institutionalized the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities.

During the period covered by this report, some local officials pressured minority Christians to renounce their faith on threat of arrest or forceful eviction from their villages. Such cases occurred in Bokeo, Oudomsai, and Salavan provinces. Arrests and detention of Christians occurred in Bokeo, Bolikhamsai, Salavan, and Vientiane Municipality. In December 2005 authorities in Bolikhamsai province detained a group of twenty-seven ethnic Hmong. The group--all minors but one--were residents at the Petchaboon displaced persons settlement in northern Thailand, and were irregularly sent into the country by Thai authorities who believed they were illegal immigrants. Some sources indicated that the group was Christian, and may have been detained in the country in part due to its religious affiliation. These twenty-seven Hmong were still in detention at the end of the reporting period. Additionally, a Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) in Bokeo Province was burned by village officials and six church leaders were arrested in late 2005. Five of the six leaders were later released, but one church leader died after being transferred from jail to a military hospital. In early 2006 a village chief in Oudomsai Province confiscated the land of several Christian families.

Moreover, a Christian in Salavan Province has been under house arrest since April 1, 2006 for refusing to renounce his faith. At the end of the period covered by this report, there were thirty known religious prisoners, all members of the LEC, with the exception of the twenty-seven ethnic Hmong that were deported from Thailand.

There were generally amicable relations among the various religious groups, although differences in religious beliefs among villagers led to tensions. Conflicts between ethnic groups sometimes exacerbated religious tensions. The efforts of some Protestant congregations to establish churches independent of the LEC continued to cause strains within the Protestant community.

U.S. embassy officials and visiting U.S. government representatives discussed the need for greater religious freedom at all levels of the Government. The embassy sought to encourage religious tolerance through dialogue. The embassy maintained frequent contact with religious leaders, and official visitors from the U.S. government, including the deputy secretary of state, have repeatedly encouraged greater religious freedom in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately eighty-five thousand square miles and an estimated population of 5.8 million. Almost all ethnic or "lowland" Lao are followers of Theravada Buddhism; however, lowland Lao constituted only about 40-50 percent of the population. The remainder of the population belonged to at least forty-seven distinct ethnic minority groups. Most of these ethnic minorities were practitioners of animism, with beliefs that varied greatly between groups. Animism predominated among some 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 religious beliefs had been incorporated into Theravada Buddhist practice. Catholics and Protestants constituted approximately 2 percent of the population. Other minority religious groups included the Baha'i Faith, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, and Confucianism. A very small number of citizens followed no religion.

Theravada Buddhism was by far the most prominent organized religion in the country, with nearly five thousand temples serving as the focus of religious practice and faith as well as the center of community life in rural areas. In most lowland Lao villages, religious tradition remained strong. Most Buddhist men spend some part of their lives as monks in a temple, even if only for a few days. There were approximately twenty-two thousand monks in the country, nearly nine thousand of whom have attained the rank of "senior monk," indicating years of study in a temple. In addition there were approximately 450 nuns, generally older women who were widowed, residing in temples throughout the country. The Buddhist Church was under the direction of a supreme patriarch who resided in Vientiane and supervised the activities of the church'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 maintained a following in the country. Abbots and monks of several temples, particularly in Vientiane, reportedly were followers of the Thammayudh School, which placed greater emphasis on meditation and discipline.

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

The Roman Catholic Church had approximately forty thousand adherents, many of whom were ethnic Vietnamese, concentrated in major urban centers and surrounding areas along the Mekong River in the central and southern regions of the country. The Catholic Church had an established presence in five of the most populous central and southern provinces, where Catholics were able to worship openly. The Catholic Church's activities were more circumscribed in the north, although there were signs the government was permitting a revival of the Catholic community there. Three bishops, located in Vientiane, Thakhek, and Pakse, were able to visit Rome to confer with church officials. The Government did not permit a fourth bishop, assigned to the northern part of the country, to take up his post in Luang Prabang, but did permit him to travel to the north periodically to visit church congregations. The Church's property there was seized after 1975 and there was no longer a parsonage in that city; the bishop remains in residence in Vientiane. An informal Catholic training center in Thakhek prepared a small number of priests to serve the Catholic community. Several foreign nuns have served temporarily in the Vientiane diocese.

Approximately 300 Protestant congregations conducted services throughout the country for a community that has grown rapidly in the past decade. Church officials estimated Protestants to number as many as one-hundred thousand, although actual numbers were probably closer to half this figure. The LFNC recognized two Protestant groups: the LEC, which is the umbrella Protestant church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The LFNC required all Protestant groups except Adventists to operate under the LEC's overall direction. Many Protestants were members of ethnic Mon-Khmer groups, especially the Khmu in the north and the Brou in the central provinces. Protestants also have expanded rapidly in the Hmong and Yao communities. In urban areas, the LEC has attracted many lowland Lao followers. Most LEC members are concentrated in the Vientiane municipality, in the provinces of Vientiane, Sayaboury, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Bolikhamsai, Savannakhet, Champassak, Attapeu, and in the former Saisomboun Special Zone, but smaller congregations were found throughout the country.

The Seventh-day Adventist congregation numbered fewer than one thousand followers in Vientiane City, Bokeo Province, and one small Hmong community in Xieng Khouang province.

All approved Christian religious faiths owned properties in Vientiane City, although some of their properties have not been officially recognized by the government. In addition the LEC maintained properties in Savannakhet and Pakse. Two informal churches, one English-speaking and one Korean-speaking, served Vientiane's foreign Protestant community.

Within the LEC, some congregations have sought greater independence and have forged their own connections with Protestant groups abroad. As the LEC has grown, an increased diversity of views has emerged among adherents and pastors, and one or two groups quietly have sought to register with the LFNC as separate denominations. Two of the more active of these "underground" denominations are Methodists and Jehovah's Witnesses, both of which have unsuccessfully sought official government approval for their activities. Other denominations that have some following in the country include the Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutherans, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Baptists. Although the prime minister's Decree on Religious Practice established procedures for new denominations to register, the Government's desire to consolidate religious practice for purposes of control has effectively blocked new registrations. In early 2006 the Methodists once again requested to register with the Government as a religious group separate and apart from the LEC.

New guidelines issued by the LFNC in early 2004 required all other Protestant denominations wishing to establish congregations in the country to do so under the aegis of the LEC. In theory denominations not registered with the LFNC were not allowed to practice their faith. These unregistered "independent" churches expressed concern about being forced to cease activities. 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.

There were approximately 400 adherents of Islam in the country, the vast majority of whom were foreign permanent residents of South Asian and Cambodian (Cham) origin. There were two active mosques in Vientiane that ministered to the Sunni branch of Islam, but both were open to visits by Shiite worshippers as well.

The Baha'i Faith had approximately eight thousand adherents and four centers: two in Vientiane Municipality, one in Vientiane Province, and one in Savannakhet. A small number of Baha'is also lived in Khammouane Province and in Pakse City. The land on which the four Baha'i centers were located was approved by the Lao government this year for use by the Baha'is. Additionally, the government has given official approval for Baha'is to use land where they already have a cemetery. The Baha'is were planning to construct new spiritual centers in Savannakhet's Dong Bang Village and in Lat Khouay Village in Vientiane Municipality. They have received both village and district level approval to use the land, but were awaiting the official land deeds from the District Land Offices. Small groups of followers of Confucianism and Taoism practiced their beliefs in the larger cities.

Although the Government prohibited foreigners from proselytizing, some resident foreigners associated with private businesses or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) quietly engage in missionary activity.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, local authorities in particular sometimes violated 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, discouraged all acts that create divisions among religions and persons. The Government interpreted this clause restrictively, and cites it as a reason for placing constraints on religious practice, especially those of minority religions. Although official pronouncements accept the existence of different religions, they emphasize religion's potential to divide, distract, or destabilize. Local and central government officials widely referenced Article 9 as justification for prohibiting such religious activities as proselytizing.

A person arrested or convicted for religious offenses had little protection under the law. Persons detained may be held for lengthy periods without trial. Court judges, not juries, decided guilt or innocence in court cases, and accused person's defense rights were limited. All religious groups, including Buddhists, practice their faith in an atmosphere in which application of the law was arbitrary. Certain actions interpreted by officials as threatening could bring harsh punishment. Religious practice is "free" only if practitioners stay within tacitly understood guidelines of what was 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 inevitably attributed to the victims rather than the persecuting officials. In some cases, officials concocted patently unbelievable explanations for events in order to exonerate local officials.

In twenty 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 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 the LFNC office having responsibility for the village or district where the activity occurs.

The rules legitimized many activities that were previously regarded as illegal, such as proselytizing, printing religious material, owning and building houses of worship, and maintaining contact with overseas religious groups. However, in practice the Government was able to impose restrictions on religious activities through the required LFNC approval. The government required several religious groups, apparently with the exception of the Buddhists, to report periodically to the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC. According to some religious leaders, the government's request for such reports had recently become more frequent, indicating that in the past reports were due annually, then every six months, and recently requested after four months. There was also a restriction against publication of religious materials that applies to most religious groups, with the exception of Buddhists.

Both the constitution and Decree 92 asserted that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and instructing believers to be good citizens. The Government presumes both a right and a duty to oversee religious practice at all levels to ensure such practice fills this role in society. In effect this has led the Government to intervene in the activities of minority religious groups, particularly Christians, on the grounds that their practices did not promote national interests, or demonstrated disloyalty to the Government.

Although the state was secular in name and practice, members of governmental institutions are by-and-large followers of Theravada Buddhism, the religion of the majority of the ethnic Lao population. The Government's exemption of Buddhism from many of the Decree 92 restrictions imposed on other organized religions and its promotion of Buddhism as an element of the country's cultural and spiritual identity give Theravada Buddhism the status of an unofficial national religion. Many persons regard Buddhism as both an integral part of the national culture and a way of life. The increasing incorporation of Buddhist ritual and ceremony in state functions reflected the elevated status of Buddhism in society.

In some areas where animism predominates among ethnic minority groups, local authorities have actively encouraged those groups to adopt Buddhism and abandon their "backward" beliefs in magic and spirits. The Government discouraged animist practices that it regards as outdated, unhealthy, or illegal, such as the practice in some tribes of killing children born with defects or of burying the bodies of deceased relatives under one's home. Aspects of nontraditional religious beliefs have penetrated Protestant congregations in some areas. In Xieng Khouang Province, a Hmong Christian congregation adopted millenarian practices in its worship service. According to provincial authorities, these beliefs led a senior church member to kill his wife late in 2003, predicting her resurrection in three days. Officials from the LFNC later asked the Seventh-day Adventist Church to incorporate this Hmong congregation into its community to bring its doctrines into line with those of an approved denomination.

Although the Government did not maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See, the Papal Nuncio visits from Thailand and coordinates with the Government on assistance programs, especially for lepers and persons with disabilities.

Muslims in the small Islamic community 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. Muslims were permitted to go on the Hajj. Groups that conduct Tabligh teachings for the faithful came from Thailand once or twice per year. Since 2001 the Government has more closely scrutinized the activities of the small Muslim population but has not interfered with the community's religious activities. In 2005 and 2006 a local Muslim leader represented the Government, along with members of other religious groups, at an Interfaith Conference on Religion in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The small Seventh-day Adventist Church, confined to a handful of congregations in Vientiane and in Bokeo Province, reported no government interference in its activities in recent years, and its members appeared to be free to practice their faith.

The Baha'i spiritual assemblies in Vientiane and Savannakhet cities practiced freely, but smaller communities in Khammouane and Savannakhet provinces have periodically faced restrictions by local authorities. The Baha'i assembly previously encountered difficulties

establishing its ownership of the Baha'i center in Vientiane; however, in 2005 authorities granted approval for use of the property by the Baha'is. Baha'i local spiritual assemblies and the national spiritual assembly routinely held Baha'i nineteen-day feasts and celebrated all holy days. The National Spiritual Assembly in Vientiane met regularly and has sent delegations to the Universal House of Justice in Mount Carmel, in Haifa, Israel.

The Government observes two religious holidays Boun That Luang (the end of Buddhist Lent) and the Buddhist New Year in April. It recognized the popularity and cultural significance of Buddhist festivals, and most senior officials openly attended them. The Government generally allowed major religious festivals of all established congregations without hindrance. In the past, local officials in some areas obstructed Christian congregations' observance of religious holidays such as Christmas. Some church officials indicated that Christmas activities in 2005 were more restricted than in past years, particularly in Vientiane Municipality.

Authorities required new denominations to join other religious groups with similar historical antecedents despite clear differences between the groups' beliefs. In March 2004 the LFNC's Order Number 1 required all Protestant groups to become a part of the LEC or the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The order states that no other denominations will be permitted to register, a measure to prevent "disharmony" in the religious community.

There was no religious instruction in public schools nor were there any parochial or religiously affiliated schools operating in the country. Several private pre-schools and English language schools received support from religious groups abroad, however. In practice many boys spent some time in Buddhist temples, where they received instruction in religion as well as in 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, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Catholic Church, operated Sunday schools for children and young persons. Baha'i spiritual assemblies conduct religious training for children as well as for adult members.

The Government required 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government's tolerance of religion varied by region and by religion; evangelical Protestants associated with the LEC, and other Protestant groups that would have liked to be recognized as separate from the LEC, continued to be the target of most restrictions. Although not subjected to harassment, the Government observed the Buddhist hierarchy closely. The Buddhist Supreme Patriarch, or Sangkarat, maintained close links to the Government. As a result of the Government's decentralization policy that diffused power to provinces and districts, central government control over the behavior of local officials was weak. Local officials were often unaware of government policies on issues such as religious tolerance due to the absence of rule of law, coupled with the incomplete dissemination and application of existing laws and regulations. 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, the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department encouraged local or provincial governments to resolve conflicts on their own and in accordance with Decree 92.

The larger urban areas such as Vientiane, Thakhek, Pakse, and Savannakhet cities experienced little or no overt religious abuse, according to religious leaders in those areas. The large Protestant and Catholic communities of several provinces, including Xieng Khouang, Khammouane, and Champassak, reported no difficulties with authorities. Relations between officials and Christians in these areas were generally cordial. Throughout the country, however, religious practice reportedly was restrained by official rules and policies that allowed properly registered religious groups to practice their faith only under circumscribed conditions.

Between 1999 and 2001 local authorities closed approximately twenty of Vientiane Province's sixty LEC churches, primarily in Hin Hoep, Feuung, and Vang Vieng Districts, and approximately sixty-five LEC churches in Savannakhet and Luang Prabang provinces. With a more relaxed policy of religious tolerance beginning in 2002, most of these churches were allowed to reopen, particularly in Vientiane and Luang Prabang provinces. However, officials in several districts of Savannakhet Province did not allow local congregations to reopen five or six of Savannakhet's approximately forty churches and they remained closed at the end of the reporting period. Officials in Khamsan Village continued to refuse permission to the village's LEC congregation to reopen its church, which was closed in 2003. Officials in Muang Feuung district of Vientiane Province granted permission for LEC members to reconstruct a destroyed church in Phone Ngam village in 2005 and the church has since reopened.

During the reporting period, there were no reported LEC church closures apart from one church that was burned by village officials in Houaysay Noi Village in Bokeo Province. Six church leaders were subsequently arrested and imprisoned in late 2005. One of the church leaders, Som Sack, a former district governor, became ill while in prison and was moved to a military hospital where he died in November. Some religious figures noted that the Government had stopped paying Som Sack his retirement pay after he had converted to Christianity a few years earlier. Two arrestees were reportedly released in early December 2005 and the remaining three in late December.

In 2004 the Government quietly allowed a handful of new churches to be constructed, including the first Catholic Church built in northern Laos since 1975, a Catholic church in Bolikhamsai Province, and four new LEC churches in the former Saisomboun Special Zone and Bolikhamsai Province. Vientiane Province authorities also permitted LEC Christians to rebuild a destroyed church in Phone Ngam Village. In contrast to the past policy of denying all such requests, several provinces also permitted some Christian congregations to expand or renovate long-standing churches.

As many as 200 of the LEC's nearly 400 congregations do not have permanent church structures and conduct worship services in members' homes. Since the promulgation of Decree 92, officials from the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department have said that home churches should be replaced with designated church structures whenever possible. At the same time, village and district-level LFNC offices often refused permission to construct new churches, and home churches remained the only viable place of worship for many LEC congregations. The LEC

encountered difficulties registering new congregations and receiving permission to establish new places of worship or repair existing facilities, particularly in Luang Prabang City, Attapeu, Luang Namtha, and Savannakhet provinces.

In addition authorities required new denominations to join other religious groups with similar historical antecedents despite clear differences between the groups' beliefs. In at least two provinces, Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang, authorities used threats of arrest of senior church leaders to force "independent" churches loosely affiliated with the U.S.-based United Methodist Church to return to the LEC. In other areas of the country, however, independent churches have generally been allowed to conduct services without hindrance by local authorities. As of early 2006, however, some village and district officials appear to be taking a stronger stance against unauthorized Methodist congregations.

The authorities remained suspicious of patrons of religious communities other than Buddhism, especially evangelical Christian groups, in part because these faiths do not share the high degree of direction and incorporation into the government structure that Theravada Buddhism does. Some authorities criticized Christianity as a Western or imperialist "import" into the country. In the past decade, the LEC suffered the brunt of local-level efforts to close churches, arrest church leaders, and force members to renounce their faith. The LEC's rapid growth over the last decade, its contacts with religious groups abroad, the active proselytizing on the part of some of its members, and its independence of government control contributed to government suspicion of the church's activities. Some authorities also interpreted Christian teachings of obedience to God as signifying disloyalty to the Government and ruling party. There was also strong evidence that the Communist Party leadership viewed Christianity as a tool of western countries to undermine the Communist political system. In view of this, the government's hostility to organized Christianity can be seen as the defensive measure of a regime bent on securing its power against all potential threats. The LEC membership was comprised mostly of ethnic Mon-Khmer tribes and the Hmong, two groups that historically have resisted central Government control, which contributed to the Government's distrust of the LEC.

During the period covered by this report there were no reports of official interference with or denial of permission to hold religious celebrations in churches, but there were reports that Christians in villages were not allowed to hold Christian celebrations in their homes, thus restricting Christian activities to church buildings only. There were no reports of security forces stopping vehicles during Sunday worship hours to prevent villagers from traveling to attend worship services.

Longstanding restrictions on the Catholic Church's operations in the north left only a handful of small congregations in Sayaboury, Bokeo, and Luang Namtha; however, there were signs during the reporting period that the Government was easing its control over the Catholic community in the north. The Government permitted more frequent visits by the Bishop of Luang Prabang to the north to conduct services for the scattered Catholic community there, but it continued to restrict his travel. There were no ordained Catholic priests operating in the north. Several church properties, including a school in Vientiane, were seized by the Government after 1975 and have not been returned, nor has the Government provided restitution. In early 2005 authorities allowed Catholics in Ban Pong Vang of Sayaboury Province to construct a new church with assistance from the Papal Nuncio Office in Bangkok. This was the first Catholic Church built in the north since the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. In the central and southern parts of the country, Catholic congregations practiced their religion relatively freely.

In late 2005 the Catholic Church planned to conduct an ordination in Bolilkhamsai Province. The government initially blocked the ordination, which would have been the first Catholic ordination in the country since 1975; however, in June 2006 the ordination was allowed to proceed in Vientiane Municipality along with the ordination of a deacon in Champassak Province.

The Government prohibited foreigners from proselytizing, although it permitted foreign NGOs with religious affiliations to work in the country. Foreigners caught distributing religious materials could have been arrested or deported. Decree 92 specifically authorized proselytizing by local citizens, providing the LFNC approves the activity. In practice the authorities interpreted proselytizing as an illegal activity that creates divisiveness in society. Authorities sometimes seized religious tracts and teaching materials from local Christians entering the country from abroad and arrested and expelled foreigners attempting to proselytize. In early 2006 two South Koreans were reportedly arrested for proselytizing in Bokeo Province and were expelled.

Although Decree 92 authorized the printing of non-Buddhist religious texts and allowed religious materials to be imported from abroad, it also required permission for such activities from the LFNC. The LFNC did not authorize Christian or Baha'i denominations to print their own religious materials, although both groups had been seeking permission to do so for several years. Some believers bring religious materials into the country; however, these persons face possible arrest. Because of these restrictions, some approved Christian congregations complained of difficulties in obtaining Bibles and other religious materials. During the reporting period, several Christians were arrested at the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge for attempting to bring Bibles into the country. They were generally detained for a few days. Several non-Christian groups indicated that they have not been restricted in bringing religious materials into the country.

The Government generally did not interfere with citizens wishing to travel abroad for short-term religious training; however, it required that such travelers notify authorities of the purpose of their travel and obtain permission in advance. In practice many persons of all faiths traveled abroad informally for religious training without obtaining advance permission or without informing authorities of the purpose of their travel. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs usually granted exit visas, but on occasion it refused travel permission to persons going abroad for what it regarded as suspect activities.

Identity cards did not specify religion, nor did family "household registers" or passports, two other important forms of identification. On occasion authorities withheld new ID cards or household registers from Christians because of their religious beliefs or threatened to withhold official documentation unless they renounced their faith.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities continued to arrest or detain persons for their religious activities. Most detentions that occurred during the period covered by this report were short, varying from a few days to a few weeks. At least five Christians were detained for several days after attempting to bring

Bibles into the country at the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge. At the end of the period covered by this report, there were thirty religious prisoners: two in Oudomsai Province, one under house arrest in Salavan Province, and twenty-seven in Bolikhamsai Province. Conditions in prisons were harsh; like other prisoners, religious detainees suffered from inadequate food rations, lack of medical care, and cramped quarters.

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 twelve years in prison and Thongchanh to fifteen years. The men remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report despite appeals that their case be reviewed.

In July and August 2004 authorities in Kasi District, Vientiane Province, detained four LEC Christians for several months. The LEC maintained that they were detained because of their religious activities. In late 2004 authorities arrested two ethnic Yao Christians in Long San District of Vientiane Province for proselytizing, according to LEC sources.

In early 2005 authorities in Muang Phin District of Savannakhet Province detained twenty-four ethnic Brou Christians associated with the LEC at the district police office for several days in order to force their renunciation of faith. All but two of the men recanted their faith. These two men were imprisoned for approximately one year, but were reportedly released in early 2006. Officials in Sayaboury arrested an LEC pastor in June 2005, claiming that he had criticized members of the provincial administration. According to the LEC, he was released in late 2005.

In December 2005 authorities in Bolikhamsai Province detained a group of twenty-seven ethnic Hmong. The group--all minors but one--were residents at the Petchaboon displaced persons settlement in northern Thailand, and were irregularly sent into the country by Thai authorities who believed they were illegal immigrants. Some sources indicated that the group was Christian, and may have been detained in Laos in part due to its religious affiliation. These twenty-seven Hmong were still in detention at the end of the reporting period. Complicating this case, the government refused to acknowledge it was holding the group.

Forced Religious Conversion

Efforts by local officials to force Christians to renounce their faith continued in some areas. In some cases, officials threatened religious minorities with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply, and on a number of occasions acted on these threats.

In October 2004 officials in Ban Phiengsavat Village of the former Saisomboun Special Zone reportedly expelled a group of nearly seventy Khmu Christians after the Christians refused to give up their beliefs. In February 2005 a second expulsion took place in Ban Kok Pho Village of Bolikhamsai Province only a short distance from Ban Phiengsavat.

In April 2006 district officials in Salavan Province reportedly arrested an LEC member, Mr. Adern, who refused the village chief's order to recant his faith. His was reportedly one of four Christian families that had lived in the village, two of which had been forced to leave by the time of his arrest. Mr. Adern was under house arrest at the end of the reporting period. During the first ten days of house arrest he was reportedly bound with wrist and ankle shackles, but was then unshackled and allowed to move freely in his home.

Lands belonging to several Christian families in Ban Huang Village of Oudomsai Province were reportedly confiscated by the village chief and redistributed to other villagers in early 2006. Some other Christians who previously lived in the village were said to have moved to Phongsaly Province after being pressured by the village chief. According to Lao officials and the LEC, the land confiscation issue was resolved, but there was no clear explanation regarding what was done to resolve the situation.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government's record of respect for religious freedom, particularly that of Christian minorities, continued to be marred by problems at the local level, with incidents of persecution occurring in many provinces.

In its official pronouncements in recent years, the Government called for conciliation and equality between religious faiths. The LFNC continued to instruct local officials on religious tolerance. Officials from the LFNC traveled with representatives of the LEC to several provinces to promote better understanding between LEC congregations and local officials.

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 conducted meetings with officials and Christians in some villages where there had been religious tensions.

Although initially delayed by several months, the fact that the Government allowed Catholics to ordain a priest and a deacon in June 2006 was a positive development.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

For the most part, the various religious communities coexist amicably. Society places importance on harmonious relations, and the dominant

Buddhist faith generally is tolerant of other religious practices. There was no ecumenical movement to date. Local cultural mores generally instill respect for longstanding, well-known differences in belief. However, interreligious tensions arose on rare 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 have arisen over the refusal of some members of minority religious groups, particularly evangelical Christians, to participate in Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies.

In December 2005 an LEC pastor, Mr. Aroun Varaphong, was murdered in Bolikhamsai Province after preaching at a pre-Christmas service. At the time of this report, there was reportedly no progress in the murder investigation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador cited the promotion of religious freedom as one of her priorities after her arrival in Vientiane. She raised the issue of religious freedom in calls on all major figures in the Government. The ambassador also spoke directly about religious freedom with provincial governors in her visits to the provinces. Other embassy officers discussed religious freedom with a range of central and provincial officials.

The embassy maintained an ongoing dialogue with the Department of Religious Affairs in 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 all major religious leaders in the country during the period covered by this report. Embassy officials actively encouraged religious freedom despite an environment restricted by government-owned and controlled media.

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 posted on its website material relevant to religious freedom in the country. In March 2006 a foreign affairs officer from the Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country and met with the LFNC to encourage greater religious freedom, registration of the Methodists as a recognized religious group, permission for the Catholic Church to proceed with a planned ordination, and the release of five religious prisoners. Moreover, both Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Eric John visited the country during the reporting period and encouraged greater religious freedom during their meetings with the prime minister and foreign minister. John also discussed religious freedom issues with the foreign minister during another visit in April 2006.

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