

District Court that the case must be reviewed on the basis that the defence had presented new evidence.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION

Civil society activists dealing with human rights issues reported pressure from the authorities because of their work, resulting in a heightened sense of insecurity among them.

In May 2014, the Ministry of Justice proposed amendments to NGO legislation that would abolish the right to establish NGOs without legal status. If passed, the amendments would criminalize the activities of all unregistered NGOs. Some deputies called for Parliament to push through the adoption of a law similar to that passed in Russia requiring NGOs to adopt the stigmatizing label of “foreign agents” if they receive foreign funds and engage in “political” activities. In November, the parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, Constitutional Law and State Structure recommended that the proposed amendments be withdrawn.

DISCRIMINATION

The UN Human Rights Committee expressed concerns about the lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation prohibiting discrimination on grounds such as race, language, disability and ethnic origin.

On 15 October, Parliament passed in its first reading a draft law prohibiting the promotion of so-called non-traditional sexual relations, thus increasing the vulnerability of groups defending the rights of sexual minorities. The proposed amendments would criminalize any action aimed at creating a positive attitude to non-traditional sexual relationships and would restrict freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly.

Ethnic Uzbeks in the south of Kyrgyzstan continued to be vulnerable to physical attacks based on their ethnic origin. However, the authorities qualified these attacks as “petty

hooliganism”, and did not fully and impartially investigate them as alleged hate crimes.

On 4 August 2014, ethnic Uzbek Kabulzhan Osmonov needed emergency medical treatment for injuries inflicted by a group of men, described by eyewitnesses as ethnic Kyrgyz, who assaulted and beat him unconscious in an unprovoked attack at his place of work in Osh. They had addressed him as “sart”, a derogatory term indicating Uzbek ethnicity. Kabulzhan Osmonov reported the attack to his local police station but it was not until the case attracted media coverage that a criminal investigation was opened. Following this, local prosecutors and police pressured Kabulzhan Osmonov to withdraw his complaint.

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1. Will there ever be justice? Kyrgyzstan's failure to investigate June 2010 violence and its aftermath (EUR 58/001/2013)
www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR58/001/2013/en.

LAOS

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Head of state: **Choummaly Sayasone**

Head of government: **Thongsing Thammavong**

State control over the media, judiciary and political and social institutions continued to severely restrict freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Lack of openness and a scarcity of information made independent monitoring of the human rights situation difficult. The enforced disappearance of a prominent member of civil society was unresolved at the end of the year. At least two prisoners of conscience remained imprisoned. Although Laos is abolitionist in practice, the death penalty was retained as a mandatory punishment for some drug offences.

BACKGROUND

The controversy over the building of large hydropower dams continued. Dissatisfaction within the country by those forced to relocate was reported, with some communities challenging loss of land and inadequate or unpaid compensation. In August Laos announced a temporary suspension of construction and a six-month consultation on its second major dam on the River Mekong following concerns raised by neighbouring countries; the consultation process was reportedly flawed and work on the dam continued. Environmental groups claimed that the Xayaburi and Don Sahong hydropower dams would impact the food security of around 60 million people downstream. A further nine dams were planned.

In November Laos submitted its national report ahead of its review under the UN Universal Periodic Review in January/February 2015. The report failed to adequately address key human rights concerns raised during the first review in May 2010.

New proposed guidelines for the operation and activities of international NGOs working on development projects were widely criticized for their heavy approval and reporting procedures. Similarly, there was concern that proposed amendments to the 2009 law regulating local associations would place further restrictions on civil society groups.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Tight restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly were maintained. Draft laws and a decree to control the use of the internet and social media were completed by the end of the year. They included the Cybercrime Law and a Prime Ministerial Decree on management of information through the internet. The Decree enacted aimed to prevent circulation of criticism of the government and its policies. Users of Facebook were warned not to post

information that might “disrupt social order and undermine security”.

Two prisoners of conscience held since October 1999 for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly by attempting to hold a peaceful protest continued to serve 20-year prison terms. The authorities stated that two ethnic Hmong imprisoned in 2003 after a grossly unfair trial for helping two foreign journalists gather information were released early: Thao Moua in 2013 and Pa Fue Khang in May 2014. This could not be independently confirmed.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

A prominent member of civil society, Sombath Somphone,¹ remained disappeared since he was abducted outside a police post in the capital, Vientiane, in December 2012. During the year, only one vague public statement was made by the police about their investigation and no information was provided to the family. This compounded fears that the failure to properly investigate Sombath Somphone’s abduction or to attempt to locate him indicated state complicity in his disappearance, which undermined the development of an active and confident civil society.²

1. Laos: Caught on camera - the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone (ASA 26/002/2013)

www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA26/002/2013/en

2. Laos: Seeking justice for “disappearance” victim, Sombath Somphone (ASA 26/001/2014)

www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA26/001/2014/en