



**FIDH – International Federation for Human Rights**  
*and its member organization*

**Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR)**

**Briefing paper for the 11<sup>th</sup> EU-Laos Human Rights Dialogue**

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There has been no improvement in the human rights situation in Laos since the previous human rights dialogue between the Lao government and the European Union, which was held in June 2021. Serious violations of civil and political rights, as well as social, economic, and cultural rights, have continued to occur and have remained unaddressed. This briefing paper provides a summary of key human rights developments since June 2021. Due to the increasing challenges in monitoring and documenting the human rights situation on the ground – a trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic - it is likely that the scale and frequency of abuses are greater than those that have been reported.

**Political prisoners still behind bars**

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Several individuals who have been imprisoned for the exercise of their right to freedom of opinion and expression remain behind bars. They include:

- Ms. Houayheuang Xayabouly (aka Mouay), 33, who has been detained since 12 September 2019, is serving a five-year prison sentence on spurious charges under Article 117 of the Criminal Code (“Propaganda against the Lao People’s Democratic Republic”). Mouay is currently detained in Champasak provincial prison.
- Mr. Somphone Phimmasone, 35, Mr. Soukan Chaithad, 38, and Ms. Lodkham Thammavong, approximately 36, who have been detained since March 2016, are serving prison sentences of 20, 16, and 12 years, respectively, on trumped-up charges under Articles 56, 65, and 72 of the Criminal Code. Somphone and Lodkham are currently detained in Tan Piao prison, Vientiane Province, while Soukan is incarcerated in Kaeng Khan prison, Savannakhet Province.

### Recommendation to the government

- Immediately and unconditionally release Houayheuang Xayabouly (aka Mouay), Somphone Phimmasone, Soukan Chaithad, and Lodkham Thammavong.

The United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) found the deprivation of liberty of all four above-referenced individuals to be “arbitrary” and called for their immediate release.<sup>1</sup>

### **Enforced disappearances remain unaddressed**

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The government’s approach to enforced disappearances remains characterized by silence, inaction, and lack of political will to address them.

As the 10-year anniversary of the enforced disappearance of civil society leader Sombath Somphone approaches, the government has continued in its failure to provide details about its claim that it has continued to investigate Sombath’s disappearance and about the steps it has taken to determine his fate or whereabouts. Sombath was last seen at a police checkpoint on a busy street of Vientiane on the evening of 15 December 2012. In addition to Sombath, the fate and whereabouts of at least 13 other individuals remain unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Two communications sent jointly by various UN special procedures to the government in December 2020 and February 2021 on cases of enforced disappearances have remained unanswered [See below, *Cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms stalls*].

In addition, a request for an official country visit, made by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) on 6 May 2020, has received no response from the government.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, the government has refused to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), despite having signed the treaty in September 2008.

### Recommendations to the government

- Establish a new commission tasked with carrying out a prompt, thorough, independent, and impartial investigation aimed at determining the fate or whereabouts of Sombath Somphone.
- Reply to the communications received from UN special procedures concerning cases of enforced disappearances.

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<sup>1</sup> FIDH, *UN body says detention of government critics is “arbitrary” and urges their release*, 7 September 2017; WGAD, *Opinion No. 6/2021 concerning Houayheuang Xayabouly (Lao People’s Democratic Republic)*, 31 May 2021; UN Doc. A/HRC/WGAD/2021/6

<sup>2</sup> The 13 are: Two women (Kingkeo Phongsely and Somchit) and seven men (Soubinh, Souane, Sinpasong, Khamson, Nou, Somkhit, and Sourigna) detained by security forces in various locations across the country in November 2009; Somphone Khantisouk, the owner of an eco-tourism business in Luang Namtha Province, who disappeared after men wearing police uniforms pulled over his motorcycle and forced him into an SUV on 23 January 2007; Thai exiled political activist Ittiphon Sukpaen (aka DJ Sunho), who went missing after he left a restaurant in Vientiane on 22 June 2016; Thai exiled political activist Wuthipong Kachathamakul (aka Ko Tee), who was kidnapped by a group of 10 armed men wearing black balaclavas near his home in Vientiane on 29 July 2017; and Thai monarchy critic Surachai Danwattananusorn, who was last seen in Vientiane on 12 December 2018.

<sup>3</sup> UN Human Rights Council, 48<sup>th</sup> session, *Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances*, 4 August 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/48/57

- Thoroughly investigate all cases of enforced disappearance in the country, provide regular updates to the victims' families on the status and progress of the investigations, and hold the perpetrators accountable.
- Ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED).
- Criminalize enforced disappearance in accordance with international standards.
- Arrange an official country visit by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) without delay.

### **Cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms stalls**

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The Lao government has failed to cooperate with UN human rights monitoring mechanisms in a timely manner.

The government has not responded to four communications it received from various UN special procedures on important human rights issues. These four communications related to: the situation of the Hmong indigenous community;<sup>4</sup> the disappearance of four Thai political activists in Laos;<sup>5</sup> the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone [See above, *Enforced disappearances remain unaddressed*];<sup>6</sup> and the arbitrary detention and continued imprisonment of three human rights defenders [See above, *Political prisoners still behind bars*].<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the government has not submitted its follow-up report to the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR). The report, which was due by 27 July 2020, stemmed from the CCPR's first-ever review of the situation of civil and political rights in Laos in July 2018, under Article 40 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The government was required to provide information on the implementation of the recommendations made by the CCPR on three priority issues: 1) enforced disappearances; 2) participation in public affairs and the right to vote; and 3) rights of persons belonging to minorities.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the government has never submitted the initial reports under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), despite its ratification of these treaties in February 2007 and September 2012, respectively. The two initial reports were due in February 2009 and September 2013, respectively.

Lastly, official – and, in some cases, repeated – requests for country visits made by at least seven UN special procedures have remained unanswered.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> OHCHR, *Situation of the Hmong indigenous community located in the Phou Bia region*, 28 August 2020 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25491>

<sup>5</sup> OHCHR, *Four alleged cases of Thai political activists disappearing in the Lao PDR*, 11 December 2020 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25648>

<sup>6</sup> OHCHR, *Alleged enforced disappearance of human rights defender Sombath Somphone*, 5 February 2021 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=26000>

<sup>7</sup> OHCHR, *Arbitrary detention and continued imprisonment of three human rights defenders*, 1 April 2021 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=26318>

<sup>8</sup> FIDH, *UN slams violations of civil and political rights after landmark review*, 2 August 2018

<sup>9</sup> Requests for official visits have been made by: the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing (2010); the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (2011, 2013, 2018); the Special Rapporteur in the field of

### Recommendations to the government

- Reply to pending communications received from UN special procedures.
- Submit the follow-up report to the UN Human Rights Committee without further delay.
- Submit initial reports to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) without further delay.
- Issue a standing invitation to all UN special procedures for official country visits and positively respond to pending requests for visits made by mandate holders.

### Violations of religious freedom persist

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Acts of harassment and persecution of Christians have continued to be reported.

In September 2021, it was reported that five Christian families evicted from their villages by local authorities were still waiting for new homes promised to them by government officials. The 21 residents from Pasing-Kang Village and Pateum Village, Ta-Oey District, Saravan Province, had been evicted in two separate groups in October 2020 and January 2021 for refusing to renounce their faith. Later, they were allowed to return to their villages but their homes had been demolished following their eviction.<sup>10</sup>

In Savannakhet Province, police have failed to investigate and take action against attacks and other acts of harassment by local authorities and residents against a Christian family in Dong Savanh Village, Phalanxay District. On 6 December 2021, residents attacked a funeral procession conducted by the family, accusing them of practicing a “foreign religion.” The assailants beat the coffin of the deceased with sticks, hit mourners and pallbearers with clubs, and prevented the family members from burying their relative in the local cemetery.<sup>11</sup> In February 2022, local authorities expropriated the family’s land, and residents torched their home.<sup>12</sup>

### Recommendation to the government

- End all acts of discrimination and harassment against individuals who exercise their legitimate right to freedom of religion or belief.

### infrastructure and investment projects lead to human rights violations

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The government has continued in its failure to comply with its obligations to respect and fulfill economic, social, and cultural rights of individuals and communities affected by infrastructure and investment projects. In addition, reports have continued to surface of the failure by foreign companies to uphold their responsibility to respect human rights, in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The failure has been particularly evident with regard to operations involving Chinese companies and joint ventures in which Chinese companies have a significant participation.

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cultural rights (2012, 2015, 2017); the WGAD (2018); the WGEID (2020) [See above, *Enforced disappearances remain unaddressed*]; the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples (2020); and the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt (2022).

<sup>10</sup> RFA, *Lao Christians Formerly Evicted from Their Villages Still Wait For New Homes*, 20 September 2021

<sup>11</sup> RFA, *Officials tell Lao Christians to remove videos of attack by authorities, villagers*, 24 March 2022

<sup>12</sup> RFA, *Officials tell Lao Christians to remove videos of attack by authorities, villagers*, 24 March 2022

Below are some reported instances of human rights violations linked to the implementation of infrastructure and investment projects.

### ***Vientiane-Boten railway***

On 3 December, the high-speed Vientiane-Boten railway was inaugurated after six years of construction. However, as late as October 2021, reports emerged of approximately 100 families living in Dong Phosy and Dong Phonhae Villages, Hatxayphong District, Vientiane Prefecture, who were still awaiting compensation for the loss of land despite their repeated requests to the authorities.<sup>13</sup> Villagers reported that authorities had threatened them with arrests if they insisted on asking when they would be compensated.<sup>14</sup> In March 2022, Deputy Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone visited a resettlement village, where he instructed local authorities to resolve issues related to compensation and stated that those in resettlement villages should be provided with adequate sanitation and infrastructure.<sup>15</sup>

Reports also continued to emerge of workers who were not being paid for their work on the railway construction. In September 2021, it was reported that more than 100 Lao workers in Dong Phosy and Dong Phonhae Villages, Hatxayphong District, Vientiane Prefecture, had not received any pay for almost two months.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Dams***

In late September 2021, it was reported that villagers displaced by the construction of the Xayaburi dam were struggling to survive in resettlement sites, three years after being displaced. Villagers reported they lacked sufficient farmland and running water, and expressed concern about their livelihoods once financial and food support provided by the dam builder comes to an end in October 2022. The dam went into operation in October 2019.<sup>17</sup>

In April 2022, it was reported that Chinese companies were preparing to work on the construction of two major dams on the Mekong River, but no compensation and relocation packages had been proposed to villagers affected by the construction. The Pak Beng dam will be built in Pak Beng District, Oudomxay Province, and the Pak Lay dam will be built in Pak Lay District, Xayaburi Province. NGOs and local communities warned that the two dams will harm the Mekong's ecosystem and the livelihoods of people living along the river. The Pak Beng dam is expected to displace around 6,700 people living in 25 villages, and the Pak Lay dam is expected to drive more than 993 families, or 4,800 individuals, from their homes. It was also reported that neither local authorities nor the representatives of the dam builder, China's state-owned Sinohydro Corporation, had met with residents affected by the Pak Lay dam construction.<sup>18</sup>

In May 2022, it was reported that more than 650 people in 10 villages in Xiengngeun District, Luang Prabang Province, were still awaiting compensation for the loss of crops due to the rising water in the

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<sup>13</sup> RFA, *Lao Villagers Not Yet Paid For Land Lost to China-Backed High-Speed Rail Project*, 5 October 2021; RFA, *As first Chinese high-speed train reaches Laos, villagers demand overdue compensation*, 19 October 2021

<sup>14</sup> RFA, *Lao Villagers Not Yet Paid For Land Lost to China-Backed High-Speed Rail Project*, 5 October 2021

<sup>15</sup> KPL – Laos News Agency, *Deputy Prime Minister visits Oudomxay, Luang Namtha*, 3 March 2022; Vientiane Times, *Govt calls for resolution of problems relating to railway*, 3 March 2022

<sup>16</sup> RFA, *Lao Workers on China-Backed Railway Project Go Unpaid for Almost Two Months*, 23 September 2021

<sup>17</sup> RFA, *Lao Villagers Displaced by Xayaburi Dam Still Lack Farmland, Water*, 29 September 2021

<sup>18</sup> RFA, *As Lao dam plans progress, farmers worry about compensation for lost land*, 13 April 2022

reservoir of the Nam Khan 3 dam. The 60-megawatt dam, built by China's state-owned Sinohydro Corporation and operated by Laos' state-run Électricité du Laos, is built on the Nam Khan River and began operating in 2016. The villagers were relocated downstream to a newly built resettlement village but were never given new plots of farmland. Instead, they were told that they could continue farming upstream from the dam. When villagers complained to the National Assembly for relief, they were told that the issue of compensation had been resolved and they were not eligible for additional assistance.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Investment projects***

In early November 2021, it was reported that water from the tailing ponds at the Lao Kaleum gold mine in Sekong Province overflowed into water sources in the area. Residents in Ateng and Ka-Ouang Villages complained that the mine's chemical waste had killed fish and that they experienced a lack of potable water due to the contamination.<sup>20</sup>

In April 2022, it was reported that residents in Viengkham Village, Saravan Province, were refusing to hand over community land to a Chinese company - identified by the Lao name Jayching - that was seeking a concession for banana farming. Overall, 40 families in the village would be affected by the loss of land.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ)***

Frequent and consistent reports emerged of serious human rights violations - particularly against women - committed with impunity by Chinese employers in the Golden Triangle SEZ in Tonpheung District, Bokeo Province.

In early August 2021, it was reported that workers were prevented to leave the SEZ during a prolonged lockdown triggered by an outbreak of COVID-19.<sup>22</sup> On 6 August, hundreds of workers from Myanmar staged a protest in the SEZ to demand that authorities allow them to return to Myanmar or provide them with food and financial aid - including for COVID-19 testing - to enable them to remain in the country.<sup>23</sup> Following the protest, on 9 August, at least half of the nearly 2,000 Burmese workers in the SEZ were allowed to return and employers pledged to "look after" the rest of the Burmese workers during the 4-18 August lockdown.<sup>24</sup> Workers at the SEZ's infamous Kings Romans Casino said that because of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic they had not been paid for months and could no longer afford food or rent.<sup>25</sup>

In the first half of 2022, numerous cases were reported of Lao and Thai women who had been held against their will in the SEZ for being unable to pay debts contracted with their employers for food, housing, and other expenses, such as COVID-19 tests.<sup>26</sup> Women have been generally lured into working

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<sup>19</sup> RFA, *Laos shrugs as villagers lose farms to dam reservoir*, 2 May 2022

<sup>20</sup> RFA, *China-backed gold mine in Laos pollutes local river, killing fish*, 2 November 2021

<sup>21</sup> RFA, *Lao villagers refuse to cede land for Chinese-owned banana farm*, 4 April 2022

<sup>22</sup> RFA, *Migrant Workers Stranded by COVID-19 Lockdown Desperate to Leave Laos SEZ*, 4 August 2021

<sup>23</sup> RFA, *Myanmar Workers Stranded by COVID in Lao SEZ Protest to Return Home*, 9 August 2021

<sup>24</sup> RFA, *Myanmar Workers Stranded by COVID in Lao SEZ Protest to Return Home*, 9 August 2021

<sup>25</sup> RFA, *Migrant Workers Stranded by COVID-19 Lockdown Desperate to Leave Laos SEZ*, 4 August 2021

<sup>26</sup> RFA, *Lao women held by Chinese-run casino plead for help*, 18 January 2022; RFA, *Lao authorities rescue women trapped in Chinese-run economic zone*, 8 February 2022; RFA, *Hundreds of Lao women trapped in Chinese-run SEZ, unable to pay off debt*, 8 March 2022; RFA, *Last of 15 Thais trapped in Laos' Golden Triangle SEZ are rescued*, 15 March 2022

in the SEZ by deceptive ads that promised well-paying jobs and good working conditions in the SEZ.<sup>27</sup> In reality, they became victims of human traffickers and were forced to work long hours as “chat girls” who used social media and messaging apps to contact potential customers to try to convince them to invest or buy shares in the Kings Romans Casino.<sup>28</sup> When the women could not meet their sales quotas, they were detained against their will and, in many cases, forced into prostitution.<sup>29</sup> In numerous instances, passports and ID cards were confiscated by their employers as well.<sup>30</sup>

Timid attempts by the Lao authorities to tackle this issue are unlikely to curb abuses. On 22 February 2022, new regulations came into effect that required all SEZ employers to sign labor contracts that ensured workers had a safe workplace, insurance benefits, and fair wages.<sup>31</sup> The authorities also prohibited forced labor and required regular monitoring and reporting of work and living conditions to the provincial management office.<sup>32</sup> However, labor officials and former SEZ workers said the measure may not be enough to stop labor and human rights abuses, partly because Lao authorities have little power to enforce laws, rules, and regulations in the SEZ, access to which is blocked by Chinese employers.<sup>33</sup>

On 14 June 2022, local authorities said police had “rescued” 477 workers between May 2021 and May 2022, including about 200 women who were victims of human trafficking.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Land disputes***

Human rights abuses also continued to be reported in connection with land disputes. For example, on 10 April 2022, Lao Army soldiers beat and detained five residents of Houay Nam Yen Village, Naxaithong District, Vientiane Prefecture, claiming the group and their families were living on land owned by the military. Locals said villagers had lived in the area and farmed the disputed land for several decades and had temporary land titles. The five villagers were detained at the Vientiane Military Division for “re-education” and were not allowed to see their family members. There was no information as to whether the five were subsequently released.<sup>35</sup>

### **Recommendations to the government**

- Ensure the respect of obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in relation to the implementation of all infrastructure and investment projects in the country.

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<sup>27</sup> RFA, *Debt-trapped Lao ‘chat girls’ forced to sell sex in China-run economic zone*, 19 December 2021

<sup>28</sup> RFA, *Debt-trapped Lao ‘chat girls’ forced to sell sex in China-run economic zone*, 19 December 2021; RFA, *Last of 15 Thais trapped in Laos’ Golden Triangle SEZ are rescued*, 15 March 2022; RFA, *Another 3 Thais rescued from Laos’ Golden Triangle*, 18 March 2022

<sup>29</sup> RFA, *Debt-trapped Lao ‘chat girls’ forced to sell sex in China-run economic zone*, 19 December 2021; RFA, *Hundreds of Lao women trapped in Chinese-run SEZ, unable to pay off debt*, 8 March 2022; RFA, *Lao authorities rescue nearly 500 workers from Golden Triangle SEZ*, 21 June 2022

<sup>30</sup> RFA, *Lao women held by Chinese-run casino plead for help*, 18 January 2022

<sup>31</sup> RFA, *Lao officials propose new labor contract to protect workers in Chinese-run SEZ*, 25 February 2022; RFA, *Lao authorities rescue nearly 500 workers from Golden Triangle SEZ*, 21 June 2022

<sup>32</sup> RFA, *Lao officials propose new labor contract to protect workers in Chinese-run SEZ*, 25 February 2022; RFA, *Lao authorities rescue nearly 500 workers from Golden Triangle SEZ*, 21 June 2022

<sup>33</sup> RFA, *Lao officials propose new labor contract to protect workers in Chinese-run SEZ*, 25 February 2022

<sup>34</sup> RFA, *Lao authorities rescue nearly 500 workers from Golden Triangle SEZ*, 21 June 2022

<sup>35</sup> RFA, *Lao villagers beaten, detained by soldiers in land dispute*, 12 April 2022

- Immediately ensure that fair and adequate compensation is awarded to all individuals and communities affected by infrastructure and investment projects, including compensation for their loss of land, livelihood, and income.
- Suspend all planned hydropower projects pending a comprehensive, independent, and transparent review of such projects and an assessment of alternative options for energy planning and development revenue.
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (OP-ICESCR).

### **Dam collapse survivors still face hardship**

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The right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food and to adequate housing, has remained unfulfilled for many survivors of the July 2018 deadly collapse of the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy dam in Attapeu Province.

In late June 2021, it was reported that most of the survivors were still living in temporary shelters. In addition, survivors reported that the dam builder, Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy Power Co. (PNPC),<sup>36</sup> had stopped the payment of the monthly allowance of 250,000 kip (about US\$17) per person and reduced the allocation of 20 kilograms of rice per person since January.<sup>37</sup> PNPC claimed it could not make the payments to the villagers because of its own financial difficulties. However, while neglecting survivors of the disaster, the company managed to rebuild the dam and begin commercial electricity generation.<sup>38</sup>

In late July 2021, it was reported that about 3,600 survivors living in temporary shelters in Thaseangchanh, Hinlat, Samongthai, Thahinh, Mai, and Dongbak Villages, Sanamxay District, Attapeu Province, were still facing hardship due to unsuitable land for rice cultivation and the lack of permanent housing.<sup>39</sup>

In late December 2021, it was reported that displaced survivors were still waiting for the completion of the 700 permanent houses that authorities had promised would be delivered by the end of the year.<sup>40</sup> Local authorities attributed the delays in the house construction to COVID-19 lockdowns and difficulties in importing some construction materials from Thailand.<sup>41</sup>

### **Recommendation to the government**

- Ensure that all survivors of the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy dam collapse receive adequate compensation for their losses and harm suffered and that their rights to livelihood, adequate housing, food, health, work, and education are fulfilled.

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<sup>36</sup> PNPC is a consortium made up of four companies: South Korea's SK Engineering and Construction and Korea Western Power; Thailand's Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding; and Lao Holding State Enterprise (LHSE).

<sup>37</sup> RFA, *Lao Flood Survivors Still Struggle, With Cash and Rice Support Now Cut Off or Reduced*, 30 June 2021

<sup>38</sup> RFA, *Three Years On, Lao Flood Survivors Still Dealing With Aftermath of Dam Collapse*, 22 July 2021

<sup>39</sup> RFA, *Three Years On, Lao Flood Survivors Still Dealing With Aftermath of Dam Collapse*, 22 July 2021

<sup>40</sup> RFA, *Lao dam collapse survivors still wait for new homes amid construction delays*, 22 December 2021

<sup>41</sup> RFA, *Three Years On, Lao Flood Survivors Still Dealing With Aftermath of Dam Collapse*, 22 July 2021



## **Insufficient minimum wage increase**

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A long overdue minimum wage increase is likely to be insufficient to address the rapidly rising costs of food, daily necessities, and gasoline in Laos.

On 11 June 2022, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare announced the government had decided to increase the monthly minimum wage from 1.1 million kip (about US\$74) to 1.3 million kip (about US\$87) for private sector employees. The increase was expected to come into effect in August.<sup>42</sup> According to the Lao Statistics Bureau, the country's inflation rate stood at 12.8% in May 2022 - a 9% increase during the first five months of the year compared to the same period in 2021.<sup>43</sup>

## **COVID-19: Harsh jail sentences, food shortages, prisoners infected**

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Anecdotal information points to instances in which the government's COVID-19 response failed to fully respect and fulfill its human rights obligations.

In some cases, people responsible for the spread of COVID-19 received harsh prison sentences. On 15 July 2021, a municipal court in Vientiane handed long prison terms to six Lao nationals convicted of illegally bringing Thai men infected with COVID-19 across the border in April that year. The six were sentenced to jail terms ranging from five years and 45 days to 19 and a half months in prison. All six were also sentenced to heavy fines.<sup>44</sup>

In September 2021, it was reported that many villagers in several southern provinces suffered food shortages due to prolonged and strictly enforced pandemic lockdowns that prevented people from working and resulted in the closing of most markets and stores.<sup>45</sup>

Rare reports of COVID-19 outbreaks in the Lao prison system also surfaced. In late August 2021, local authorities said that about 700 of the 1,500 inmates in the Savannakhet Provincial Detention Center had been infected with COVID-19 and that two inmates had died from the virus on 24 and 29 August 2021.<sup>46</sup> On 5 October 2021, 40 prisoners in Xaysettha District, Vientiane Prefecture, were found to be infected with COVID-19. According to local authorities, the virus spread from newly-detained inmates who were neither tested for COVID-19 nor isolated from other prisoners, leading to a rapid contagion in the facility.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Xinhua, *Lao gov't agrees to increase minimum wage*, 17 June 2022

<sup>43</sup> RFA, *Low wages and soaring inflation push Laotians to Thailand*, 19 June 2022

<sup>44</sup> RFA, *Laos Sends Six COVID-19 Super-Spreaders to Prison*, 16 July 2021

<sup>45</sup> RFA, *Villagers in Southern Laos Cope With Food Shortages Amid COVID Lockdowns*, 16 September 2021

<sup>46</sup> RFA, *Lao Prisoners Who Feared COVID-19 Infection Recaptured After Brief Jailbreak*, 31 August 2021

<sup>47</sup> RFA, *Forty Lao Prisoners Found Infected With COVID-19*, 6 October 2021