



## PRESS RELEASE by Mekong Watch

### The Wife of a Victim of Enforced Disappearance Makes an Appeal at a Public Seminar in Japan; The Need for the Japanese Government to Cooperate on Human Rights Issues in Thailand and Laos

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A public seminar titled “What is ‘Politically Enforced Disappearance?’ Considering Development and Human Rights Issues through Abduction Cases in Thailand and Laos” was held on May 25, 2013 in Tokyo, by the Institute of Asian Cultures, Sophia University, in cooperation with the Japanese NGOs Mekong Watch, ayus: Network of Buddhists Volunteers on International Cooperation, and the Development Education Association and Research Center.

At the seminar, Ms. Angkhana Neelapaijit, who lost her husband by enforced disappearance and since then has become a human rights activist and President of the Justice for Peace Foundation, shared the information on cases occurring in Thailand and the difficulties that victims’ families face. She called on the Government of Japan to cooperate in the prevention of enforced disappearances. Also, Mekong Watch introduced the case of social activist Mr. Sombath Somphone and the current situation of civil society in Laos. They called for the Government of Japan to insist that the Government of Laos increase efforts toward the release of Mr. Sombath, and also improve the conditions for civil society organizations to conduct their activities.

Mr. Somchai Neelapaijit, the husband of Ms. Angkhana, disappeared in Bangkok on March 12, 2004. As a human rights lawyer, he was defending persons who claimed they were tortured by the police because they were suspected of having connections with terrorists in Southern Thailand. Mr. Sombath, a winner of the Ramon Magsaysay Award, an award often considered as Asia’s Nobel Prize, and who has made a significant contribution to poverty reduction and on education for youth in Laos, disappeared in Vientiane on December 15, 2012 while on his way home, and is still missing. For the disappearance of Mr. Somchai, the involvement of police is evident. For Mr. Sombath’s case, there is evidence that police stopped his car and a person who came later with another car drove him away.

Ms. Angkhana reported that, "There are so many family members of victims of enforced disappearance. However, many are not able to appeal their cases judicially, due to poverty and the lack of knowledge about laws. And even if they appeal their cases, under the current laws in Thailand, public officials are more protected than the citizens. Moreover, in some cases where the suspect of the crime is a police officer, the police are not aggressive in their investigation." Also, Ms. Angkhana pointed out that human rights issues, including enforced disappearance, should be considered as a common issue of ASEAN. She also demanded that the Government of Japan encourage the Thai and Lao governments to ratify "The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (ICPED)," an UN convention which came into force on 2010. (Thailand and Laos have signed the convention but have not yet ratified it.)

Mekong Watch reported that, "Today, on May 25, it will be 3361 days since the disappearance of Mr. Somchai and 161 days for Mr. Sombath. Each day the truth is not being sought makes another day of suffering for their families. What lies behind the case of Mr. Sombath is the difficult conditions for the Lao public to speak freely about issues or policies, such as those for land." Mekong Watch also raised concern that there could be even more limitations on the activities of citizens, since an article signed by the Prime Minister in the January 2013 issue of the government journal 'Nak Boriharn' (which means 'manager' or 'administrator') indicated the need to strengthen the monitoring and management of civil society organizations such as NGOs to maintain the safety and the peace of the state.

Mr. Satoru Matsumoto, an Associate Professor at Hosei University who has been a friend of Mr. Sombath's, spoke of his personality and work, and emphasized that, "It is important to perceive the human rights as universal. In Japan, awareness of human rights is increasing due to the abduction of Japanese by North Korea. This awareness, however, is for the human rights of Japanese people, although recognizing the issue's importance regardless of nationality is needed."

There were about 50 participants at the seminar including students, journalists, NGOs, researchers and the general public. There were comments and questions such as, "I did not know how serious the situation is," and "What could we do to prevent enforced disappearances?"

Ms. Yuka Kiguchi, the Director of Mekong Watch, reviewing the discussions of the seminar, stated that, "the Government of Japan should encourage the Government of Laos to investigate Mr. Sombath's case, prevent further occurrences of enforced disappearance, and also not limit civil society activities. In addition, when considering ODA policies for Laos, the Government of Japan should give more weight to the human rights perspective."