

Laos: Former Thai prime minister Anand urges Vientiane to find missing activist Sombath Somphone

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Former Thai prime minister Anand Panyarachun has appealed to the Lao government to do more to locate the missing activist Sombath Somphone, who disappeared in Vientiane nearly a month ago.

Anand, who attended the launch of a film at the Bangkok Arts Centre on Thursday evening, said he didn't want to debate the circumstances of what occurred to Sombath - who exiles claim was abducted by government officials after being stopped at a police checkpoint in the capital.

But he urged Vientiane to do more to investigate, saying the 60-year-old social activist was a "very good man".

Speaking during a debate on reconciliation televised by Thai PBS after the film showing, Anand said the disappearance of Sombath was bad for the region.

"I hope the Lao government would assume a more active role in finding out the truth of this particularly unwelcome event," he said.

"It does touch on the value of human rights. There are disappearances [when people go missing] and enforced disappearances [when people may have been seized by the state]." "You can't have enforced disappearances - it's not something we like in this part of the world."

The remarks by Anand are among the strongest yet by supporters in Thailand and throughout the region, and add to growing pressure on the socialist regime to come up with a more credible response on this matter.

The circumstances of Sombath's disappearance were revealed on a closed-circuit video widely circulated on social media. It shows Sombath's jeep stopping at a police checkpoint on December 15 and then being led away by two figures in plainclothes.

Vientiane has denied any knowledge of the affair, but Lao exiles say the incident fits a pattern of harassment of activists by the conservative Lao regime, which has a poor human rights record and is notoriously secretive.

Fears have also been voiced privately by supporters that Sombath has a health condition that could be aggravated if he is being detained secretly somewhere.

Earlier this week, former Thai senator Jon Ungpakorn called for the end of Asean's policy of non-interference at a seminar which highlighted Sombath's abduction.

"I feel that answers are needed," Jon said. "The government has the responsibility to answer questions as to what has happened to him. The government of the Lao PDR [People's Democratic Republic] is not really taking up this responsibility."

Both Jon and Anand are former Magsaysay Award winners, as was Sombath, who won the award in 2005 for community leadership.

Sombath headed the Participatory Development Training Centre and was well-known for building up civil society independent of the government and opposing the Lao government's views on how development should occur, especially large infrastructure projects like the Xayaburi Dam.

Jon, who was a senator from 2000 till 2006, said the abduction of Sombath is a vital test for Asean's new human rights mechanism.

Rights activists warned yesterday that they will continue to lobby the Lao leaders because they believe the regime knows more about the incident but has refused to disclose details publicly.

Anand, who was prime minister twice for short periods in the early 1990s, is one of the region's most distinguished statesman. His remarks followed a discussion about reconciliation after the screening of the film "Cambodia Dreams", by veteran filmmaker Stanley Harper, at the Arts Centre yesterday.

P.S.

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