

Hmong Americans from St. Paul, Minnesota Arrested in Laos: U.S. Congressional Statement

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Sheng Xiong, the wife of a Hmong-American citizen from St. Paul, Minnesota, arrested and imprisoned in Laos in 2007 without charge, along with the Center for Public Policy Analysis (CPPA), in cooperation with Members of Congress and the U.S. Congressional Forum on Laos, released the following statement. The statement is being issued nationally and internationally by Sheng Xiong and policymakers in Washington, D.C. in response to the Lao government's ongoing imprisonment of her husband and his two Hmong-American colleagues as well as the Lao government's lack of cooperation. The Lao government, and its military and security services, continues to offer no help or factual information regarding the three Hmong-Americans that it arrested and jailed in Laos in 2007.

Mrs. Sheng Xiong's statement was originally presented and read before the US Congressional Forum on Laos on Jan. 31, 2008, in 122 Cannon House Office Building in the U.S. House of Representatives Washington, D.C.

Mr. Hakit Yang and his two Hmong-American colleagues were private, non-political U.S. citizens traveling to Laos as tourists and to seek potential business or investment opportunities. They were not affiliated with any organization or political group.

The following is the statement before the U.S. Congressional Forum on Laos of Mrs. Sheng Xiong, the wife of Hakit Yang, and spokesperson for the families of three Hmong-American citizens from St. Paul, Minnesota currently being jailed in Laos by the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (LPDR) regime:

"I want to thank Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, Congressman Frank Wolf, Congressman Patrick Kennedy, Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin and other Members of the U.S. House of Representatives for co-hosting today's U.S. Congressional Forum on Laos in cooperation with Mr. Philip Smith, Executive Director of the Center for Public Policy Analysis, Dr. Jane Hamilton-Merritt, Lao Hmong scholar; Vaughn Vang of the Lao Human Rights Council of Wisconsin and Minnesota; Khamphet Moukdarath of the United League for Democracy in Laos and T. Kumar, Advocacy Director of Amnesty International. I appreciate their leadership on the current human rights crisis in Laos, especially facing the Hmong people, and the serious situation regarding the arrest and imprisonment in Laos of my husband, Hakit Yang, and his two Hmong-American colleagues from St. Paul, Minnesota last year.

The U.S. Government granted Normalized Trade Relations (NTR) to Laos in 2005. Today, it encourages citizens to consider foreign investments in the communist state despite the country's atrocious human rights records and the unjustified arrest, jailing and continued detention of three Hmong-American citizens from St. Paul, Minnesota including my husband Mr. Hakit Yang.

On July 10, 2007, Hakit Yang, Congshineng Yang and Trillion Yuhaison departed the United States for Laos to pursue business investment opportunities. The men were staying at the #5 Guest House in Phousavan, Laos when they were arrested by secret police forces. They were detained in Phonthong Prison and later transferred to an unknown destination. Several unofficial reports suggest they are being detained in the North of Laos near the Vietnam border.

The last phone call and communication was received from Yuhaison on August 26, 2007 at approximately 9:00 am (CST). Yuhaison called Hakit's older brother Xai Yang, and stated that he was calling from a security guard's cell phone and confirmed that all three men had been arrested without warrant. Yuhaison

sounded very worried and wanted Xai to contact the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane right away.

A US Embassy staff confirmed with local Lao authorities that three US Citizens were arrested, however, the authorities refused to release any names. According to the U.S. Embassy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could not confirm the situation over the phone, but it appeared they knew about the cases.

The U.S. Embassy contacted the Lao government who denied having any record of the men entering their country and any U.S. Citizens being detained or arrested. Later, the Lao government changed their previous denials and admitted that the men did indeed enter Laos, but allegedly claimed that they had allegedly departed Laos via the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge on August 29, 2007. Despite repeated requests from the US Embassy no departure cards have ever been produced as evidence for their departure. Other documents produced are clearly bogus and fabricated allegedly claiming to support the Lao government's false claims that my husband and the other two departed from Laos to Thailand, which is not factual.

It has been many months since the arrest and disappearance of Hakit Yang, Congshineng Yang and Trillion Yuhaison. To this day, our family has not received any concrete answers from the US Embassy in Laos nor the State Department. I have been in contact with the other men's families and they also have not received any answers.

The US Government and US Embassy have a responsibility to inform US Citizens that there are no real protections in place to safeguard their civil and legal rights. The US Government has failed to properly hold the Laos Government accountable for the disappearance of these US investors.

Hakit, Congshineng, and Trillion represent the first of many US investors and tourists to travel to Laos under the new Normalised Trade Relations agreement but their disappearance clearly proves that no US Citizen is safe in Laos and no US citizen should invest in the current Lao regime until proper protections can be put in place, to safeguard the civil, legal and human rights of all US Citizens traveling to Laos.

I respectfully ask that the US Government and US Embassy in Laos continue to investigate the arrest and disappearance of Hakit, Congshineng, and Trillion and to press the Lao government for humanitarian access to the three U.S. citizens and their unconditional and immediate release.

The Lao government continues to jail my husband and the two other Americans from St. Paul that he was traveling with in clear violation and contempt of international law. Lao and Hmong Americans should not invest in the current regime in Laos, the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic. NTR Trade Status to Laos should be revoked by the U.S. Congress; and, U.S. foreign aid and assistance to the Lao regime should also be cut by the U.S. Congress and U.S. Government completely, including all de-mining funding, until at least such time as my husband Hakit Yang, Congshineng and Trillion, as Hmong-American citizens, are released from prison in Laos and brought home safely to America and their homes and families in St. Paul, Minnesota.

We will not forget and not give up fighting until we have truthful answers and the Lao regime releases Hakit Yang, Congshineng and Trillion. We appeal to the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Government and international community for assistance in pressing the Lao regime to release our family members and restore human rights and freedom to them so that we can be reunited and these American citizens can return home once again from this terrible darkness."

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The Center for Public Policy Analysis (CPPA) is a Washington, DC-based think-tank and research organization focused on national security and foreign policy issues.

Website: www.centerforpublicpolicyanalysis.org

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