

Anne-Sophie Gindroz

Mekong

Vientiane

LAOS, THE SILENT REPRESSION

**A Testimony written
after being Expelled**

To Sombath and Shui-Meng

Warning

The events that are described in this book are all based on real events. Nevertheless, due to obvious security concerns, the identities of most people involved are not being disclosed, so that these persons are not exposed to any risk of retaliation.

May my words serve their cause.

The following chapters create a story out of many events, some of which occurred simultaneously, but may be described from a variety of viewpoints. The objective is to provide as full and accurate an account as possible of what actually happened. One result of this choice of narrative style is that the story does not always follow a chronological order.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this book belong to the author and they are not necessarily shared by the organizations for which the author has worked or is presently working.

Sombath Somphone is a Laotian citizen who disappeared in Vientiane on December 15th, 2012, in the evening, after having been stopped in his car by the police. The footage of his abduction was filmed by surveillance camera and broadcast on YouTube. The Laotian Government immediately denied any responsibility for his disappearance.

Sombath was 60 years old at the time of his abduction. Since then, he has never been seen again. A few months prior to his disappearance, he had organized the Asia-Europe People's Forum in Vientiane.



For more information: www.sombath.org

***Vientiane, Laos,
December 15th, 2012***

A jeep pulls over to the side of a road. The driver stays inside the vehicle. Then, he exits and walks to the police officer who is standing next to the road. A little later, a motorcycle parks in front of the jeep. The biker stops the engine and walks towards the jeep. He gets behind the wheel, starts the engine, and drives away into the traffic, leaving his motorcycle behind. A few minutes later, a pick-up truck with all its lights on appears and stops close to the motorcycle. The driver of the jeep is escorted to the pick-up truck. He gets in. The pick-up truck drives away. This is the last time Sombath Somphone was seen.

Foreword

by Maina Kiai, United Nations Special Rapporteur

Laos is something of a void on the human rights map these days: a small, land-locked country that projects an image of peace and harmony, largely stays out of the international media and secures ever-growing funds of development cash.

A casual observer might take this to mean that things are all well. We live in an era where information is abundant, after all. We read almost daily about horrific human rights abuses in virtually every country in the world. And we fall into the trap of thinking that a lack of information correlates with a lack of problems or at least that the problems are not as bad as in other countries.

But that is a horribly misguided assessment, of course, for Laos is like few countries I know.

I first began to understand few years back, when I had my first encounter with members of Laos' civil society at an international conference. My overriding impression from these individuals was the profound and all-encompassing fear that engulfed them. Their lack of trust was palpable. They did not want to talk to me with others present. They did not even want to be seen with me.

I have never seen anything quite like it. These individuals were like islands – operating in apparent isolation, prevented from exercising their fundamental human right to connect with others who shared their concerns.

Over time I learned why. Secret police had infiltrated Laos' civil society delegation. I was told that this was routine, both at home and abroad. Things – and people – are never what they seem in Laos. And that means you play your cards close to the vest. If you don't, the risks are high, as we saw so vividly with the disappearance of Sombath Somphone three years ago. And Sombath's case seems to have only created more trepidation, which is a tragic irony. He dared to affirm his convictions, and his courage and dedication should be an inspiration. Instead, it is viewed as a warning. The culture of fear is that deep.

This culture, of course, is toxic to a thriving civil society movement. Activism is based on connections, relationships, discourse, and open discussion. None of this is possible when fear crushes people's very ability to talk to one another.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that we in the United Nations human rights system have so few contacts with activists inside Laos. Or that we have so little information. And it is not for lack of trying: I have requested the Government of Laos to invite me to conduct an official assessment mission to the country every year since I became Special Rapporteur in 2011. I have met and lobbied Government officials in Geneva and New York, asking to be officially invited. All my efforts have been for naught.

Unfortunately, this information gap only feeds the cycle of fear. For if one thing can counter fear, it is knowledge and information, particularly the knowledge that you are not alone and that others share your concerns.

This is why this book is so important. If Laos is indeed a void on the human rights map, Anne-Sophie Gindroz has filled it with vivid color and detail. And in doing so, she has pierced a veil of sorts. Fear now has a face: its contours are visible; its effects are documented; its insidiousness is laid bare; and ultimately, its absurdity is apparent.

The book also makes clear that the Laotians I met few years ago are not alone. There are many of them, throughout the country, waiting for the chance to speak out. It might not be today, or tomorrow, but my hope is that this book brings them all one step closer to that day when freedom from fear shall be theirs.

And I hope that this book stirs some reflection and inflection within the international community, especially those involved in “development” in Laos, but whose actions and omissions make them party to this culture of silence and fear.

In Solidarity,

Maina Kiai

*United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful
Assembly and of Association (2015)*

Geneva, Switzerland, January 2015

The trees spread their naked branches in a white sky. Lawns are covered with snow. I walk faster to try to get warmer, but I can feel the cold through my clothes. I have not experienced the winter in a long time. I am walking up the *Avenue de la Paix* that goes around the *Palais des Nations* park, to reach the entrance door reserved for visitors.

It just happens that my trip to Switzerland early this year coincides with the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Laos at the United Nations Human Rights Council, where the human rights situation in the country is being examined. I feel both nervous and hopeful as I go to Geneva to attend this meeting. Several vehicles with the Laotian flag are parked outside the imposing United Nations building. The license plates show that they come from various European countries. A few Laotians are sharing some hot tea between two parked cars. The Laotian diaspora is here.

In the entrance hall, several monks in their orange robes wait patiently in front of the security checkpoint. When I enter the large room and I take a seat all the way in the back, in an area reserved for civil society observers, there are still a lot of empty places. The names of delegates from member countries are arranged in alphabetical order in the assembly room. A few rows down, just in front of me, there is a little commotion within a group that is visibly bothered by the lack of seats available to them. It is the Laotian representation, which came in large numbers for the occasion. The official delegation of the Government of Vientiane is already seated in the center, right in front of the main rostrum. Little by little, people take the seats next to me. I assume that they are mainly Laotians living in exile. Their faces are serious and they retain their dignity. These brothers, separated by their country's history onto two opposite sides, are now just a few rows apart.

The session is open. All speeches are strictly limited to two minutes. There is so much to say! I can't help but think of the long hours spent on meetings in Laos, trying to dodge the unpleasant questions, to avoid the sensitive subjects, to carefully stop short of using words that are taboo -- and that was when the speaking time was not strictly limited! Here, in Geneva, the restrictions imposed by the Laotian regime on basic freedoms are put into the spotlight straight away. Fourteen countries will

specifically refer to the disappearance of my friend and colleague, Sombath Somphone. Eighteen countries will ask for serious investigations of the disappearances in Laos. How I would have loved to hear similar concerns being voiced by these countries' aid agencies working in Laos! The official answers from the Laotian government bring me back to reality: *"We believe that Human Rights are best realized through local institutions and legal frameworks, taking into account the realities on the ground and aspirations of the people,"* stated H.E. Mr. Phongsavath Boupha, Minister, Head of the President's Office, in his final remarks on Lao PDR UPR session. This commitment would have more credibility if the Laotian regime were to allow organizations defending human rights within its territory. Commitment becomes true only through action.

The session ends. A small group gathers and several members of the diaspora come to greet me. They have come from all over Europe, but also from Canada and from the United States. I am being thanked, kissed, and hugged. It is a very emotional moment. Everyone has become particularly sensitive after the trial of enduring in silence the propaganda of the Laotian Government. Tears roll down our cheeks...

I am worried that such an outpouring might attract attention. So, I manage to sneak out of the assembly room. I isolate myself for a short moment in the restroom in order to collect myself and splash some water on my red eyes. Well, it didn't really work! As soon as I get out of the restroom, two people whom I had recognized from the Government's delegation are walking in my direction. It is too late to run away from them, and I can tell by their surprised smiles that it is not a good idea, anyway.

- *Anne-Sophie! What a surprise!* says the woman in a friendly way. She is obviously relieved that this review is over and she does not seem to mind my presence. She hugs me...

- *Anne-Sophie, how are you?* asks the man, as he extends his hand in my direction.

It is as if time has stopped for a moment. No more masks! Everybody stops playing the roles they are supposed to play.

- *When will you come back to Laos?*

- *When will you let me come back?* is my answer to this very odd question.

We all smile at each other and I don't feel anything ironic or fake in what seems to be a simple encounter between people who like each other. Well, at least, people who do enjoy the memory of a certain time.

I look anxiously at the rest of the governmental delegation appearing at the bottom of the escalator.

- *But, of course, you will come back. Of course!* she says to me, as she holds my arm and gives me a look in which I see more than simple courtesy. There is almost sympathy. The Minister is approaching and I really don't want the two people with whom I am speaking to feel forced to introduce me. The lady leans towards me and adds in a soft voice:
- *Nothing is ever final!*

I gently pull away and I smile right back at her sincerely. This puts an end to our brief conversation. I am shaken by what has just happened. Once again, it made me face the reality behind the stage curtains. I hurry towards the exit. I step into the cold weather outside and I can't hold back my tears.

"Nothing is ever final." I really hope she is right. And that Sombath will come back safely.

Chapter One

Write

I do not come from a country at war. I am of Swiss and Swedish origins.

I was not an illegal immigrant. I held a valid residence permit.

I was not doing anything illegal. I had a leading position in the field of international cooperation.

I was expelled from the country within forty-eight hours and separated from my family.

This is happening in a small country of Southeastern Asia that is rarely heard of: Laos.

Jakarta Airport, Indonesia, April 11th, 2013

- *You should write a book. You have so much to tell!*

I just smile.

- *Besides, you lawyers, you all know how to write. It's not like with us doctors.*

We are starting to see the luggage on the conveyor belt. I am lost in my thoughts and I observe the passengers rushing towards it with worried faces, as if they had to fight a metal monster spitting their baggage from the depths of its bowels, through its gaping jaws. She looks at me through her poorly adjusted glasses. A little tired out by the long flight, her white hair undone, she seems preoccupied by the crowd waiting for her outside the airport. We first saw each other in the boarding area in Amsterdam, as we waited for the flight to Jakarta to take off. We exchanged only a smile. Then, she caught back up with me as we were exiting the plane upon arrival. We were lining up in front of the immigration counters.

- *Do you know Jakarta?*

- *A little.*

- *Are you taking a taxi to get there?*

- *Yes. Where are you going?*

- *To a hotel not far from the airport. Do you think I can walk there?*

- *I don't think so. If you want, I can take you there.*

- *Oh, yes. That would be such a relief!*

I am thinking that she could be my mother, and that I would also be relieved if I knew that someone were helping her in a crowded airport. She asks me:

- *So, you work in Indonesia?*

- *Yes. Well, in fact, no. I mean, I don't work directly within Indonesia.*

- *In what field?*

- *Development cooperation.*

By the look on her face, I understand that she wants to know more.

- *Rural development, access to water, promotion of organic agriculture...*

- *Are you an agronomist?*

- *No, I am a lawyer.*

She starts laughing. Then, she says:

- *Everybody needs to know their rights!*

I silently nod. She adds:

- *I am a retired doctor. I worked for UNICEF for a long time, in Africa.*
 - *Where in Africa?*
 - *In Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, Kenya...*
 - *I worked in West Africa, in Mali.*
 - *I always wanted to go to Mali, but the situation isn't good there right now.*
- Have you been back recently?*
- *No, but we'll go back someday... We adopted two children from Mali, twins. Our family has African roots, now!*
 - *Oh! And you're here in Indonesia with your two children?*
 - *In fact, we already had five children when we adopted the twins. Their mother died while giving birth.*
 - *What a story!*

She pushes her stout height to the front of the crowd and extracts her suitcase from the pile of baggage that is drifting slowly by. I am still waiting for mine. She wipes the sweat from her forehead.

- *And have you been living in Indonesia for a long time?*
- *No, we just got here.*
- *And where were you before?*
- *In Laos.*
- *That's a country we don't hear much about...*
- *Indeed. It's a beautiful country...*
- *Why did you leave Laos?*
- *I was expelled.*
- *... !*

There are fewer and fewer passengers waiting, and the luggage on the conveyor belt thins itself out as time passes. Eventually, I see my suitcase.

- *You should write a book. You have so much to tell!*
- I smile.
- *Besides, you lawyers, you all know how to write. It's not like with us doctors.*
- To write a book. She is right. In more ways than one...

I remember a conversation that I had had with a journalist when I was still working in Laos.

- *Have you ever thought of writing a book?*
- She was traveling through Laos and she had stopped by my office to see me. She was intrigued by this country that was in full transformation, and she wanted to better understand the reality hidden behind the idyllic stories she heard from tourists in search of adventures and authenticity. We had had a frank conversation, driven solely by the wish to lift a corner of the curtain.

- *We journalists can offer only a glimpse of the situation at a particular moment, build a text around one particular event. But, we have to be brief, and it is impossible to unveil all the complexity of a certain reality. Besides, you have firsthand information. It's your life experience and you live that in a very intense way. It's something you really feel...*

We leave the airport in a taxi. A red sun lights up the asphalt of the highway leading to the heart of the Indonesian capital. A warm sunset reflects in her eyeglasses.

- *You can drop me here, you know. I am sorry to make you waste your time. My hotel shouldn't be too far from here...*

- *Don't worry. I still have a long trip before I get home. This little detour isn't a big deal.*

I wouldn't like to think that my mother had been left alone in the middle of nowhere.

- *It's already dark, and then there's all this traffic, she sighs.*

- *Jakarta without its traffic jams would not be Jakarta!*

We leave the highway, drive through a construction site and around a broken-down truck. Then, the taxi finally stops in front of the entrance to her hotel.

- *Here we are. I wish you a pleasant stay in Indonesia!*

- *Thank you. Take care! Who knows? Maybe, one day, I will have the pleasure of reading your book.*

Yes, I will write it. I promise. I will do it for Sombath. I will do it for all the others who have disappeared. I will do it for those who are still at risk, today, in Laos.

Chapter Two

Expatriate

- *Mum, where is Laos?*
- *In Asia, Honey.*
- *It's in Daddy's country?*
- *Daddy's country is Indonesia. It's also in Asia, but Laos is a different country.*
- *So, Asia is big!*
- *Yes, but Laos is a small country.*
- *Is there a sea in Laos?*
- *No, but there is a big river, the Mekong River.*
- *Like in Mali: we don't have the sea, but we have the Niger River!*

Vientiane, capital city of Laos, 2009

We have arrived in Vientiane, the capital city of Laos. We left Mali, where we've just spent nearly five years. It's the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. It also means that we're back in Asia. A continent where our family is deeply rooted, since the father of my children is from Indonesia. Like Laos, that's Southeast Asia.

It is our first time in Laos. We arrive full of confidence, due to our experience of living in this part of the world, and with a strong desire to discover new horizons. And also with a few idyllic preconceived notions collected from travel guides. Of course, since I have come here for work, I was briefed by my organization -- with, I must add, some details that rather puzzled me. For example, I was told that there are nearly no civil society organizations in Laos. I am informed about the Communist system that is in place, and I am well aware that power is concentrated in the hands of a single political party. Nevertheless, I am not against the idea of working with a strong government, after my experience in Africa -- where too many leaders are under the thumb of their development partners, constantly changing their policies to please their partners. Indeed, it is a Communist regime and a single-party system, but it seems to be condoned by the international community. There are no alarming reports of human rights abuses taking place in Laos. At the time, as far as human rights violations were concerned, everyone had their eyes on the neighboring country, Burma, the bad guy within the region.

Vientiane does not look like an Asian capital. It's more like a big village. No skyscrapers, no fast food restaurants, no traffic jams. We settle into the first house we visit. It is a wooden house, with a large, slightly elevated deck. It has large bay windows, walls made of bamboo, and an outside kitchen. An open-design house with a soul, just as I like.

- *It is our family house*, explains the landlord, a small lady, as she shows us around.

Set back from Thadeua Avenue, you need to cross the traditional market to get there. The neighborhood is quiet, with lots of children, and located right across from a public school. In the back, there is a pond where lotus flowers grow. A little farther off, a Buddhist temple from which rise the sounds of drums, an early and muffled call to prayer. We lived there during our first two years in Laos.

Our house in Vientiane, Laos, 2010

I am asking my husband about what is written on the wall in front of our house. He is busy re-planting banana trees in the back of our yard.

- *Did you see that? They tagged that today...*
- *It's not only here. It's all along the street!* answers Tikno, as he points out the neighboring houses to me.
- *And what does it mean?*
- *The chief of the village came by to announce that work to widen the road is about to begin.*
- *When?*
- *In four days. The number written on the wall tells you how many feet they will take from the yard.*

Laos has a reputation for being slow and for idleness. Not in this case. I should note that the company chosen for the construction work was a Korean company. On the morning of the fourth day, excavators were tearing off the wall and crushing the trees that we had not been able to move back. They also removed telephone lines and pipes, which made water gush from the trench. Our yard turned progressively into a swamp. Our neighbor, who lived at the corner of the street, had just started building an extra room at the back of his house. Now, his house was partially amputated. Within a few days, the neighborhood was totally transformed, as if a typhoon had come through.

Conversations between neighbors:

- *It's a good thing they're fixing the street!*
- *Yes, we'll have an asphalt road instead of a dirt road.*
- *But is it really necessary to build a four-lane avenue?*
- ...
- *Also, there will finally be pipes to drain the rainwater.*
- *Indeed, it's not very convenient to have to go clear the troughs that flow into the pond, especially during heavy rains!*

I am taking the kids for a bike ride. One of my sons, Atias, was expecting to ride through a puddle, but he ends up plunging into a hole where the water is up to his shoulders. That provokes big laughs from his brothers and sisters. We make a stop in front of a dilapidated house, while Atias recovers his spirits and his bicycle. It's the house of a retired civil servant. He greets me.

- *Sabaidee!*

- *Sabaidee!*
- *Did you see that?* He shows me the front of his house, which has been ripped open.
- *Yes...*
- *I am going to have to rebuild it completely.*
- *But... the road project will help you, won't it?*
- *Pffft... What help?*
- *I don't know. Some financial contribution for the renovation work or a machine to help clear debris...*

He shakes his head. I ask him:

- *Isn't compensation foreseen in your laws?*

He stays silent for a moment. Then, he lowers his voice and says:

- *I am retired and I want to live in peace. I don't want to rot in jail for the rest of my life.*

We get back on our bikes. I can't help but think: if a former civil servant in Vientiane prefers to give up on his rights like that, what must be the situation for rural people who live in more remote parts of the country?

A few weeks later, as I was coming back from work

The sun is already low as I start driving on the dirt road. The machines have made some progress, but, because of the rain, the construction site has turned into a real pool of mud. I don't want to get stuck. So, I decide to pull over to the side of the road and continue on foot. A little farther along, I see a woman with her cow. She smiles at me. She approaches me:

- *Sabaidee! Do you live here?*
- *Not far from here. Over there.*
- *This, here, is my field.* She shows me the side of the road that they have started to widen.
- *Right there?* I point at a pile of big concrete pipes stored there.
- *Yes, this is where I used to grow rice.*
- *And you had to sell your land to them?*

She shakes her head and comes closer. She covers her mouth half-way with her hand and mumbles that she didn't receive any compensation.

Vientiane is in the middle of a significant transformation. Construction sites pop up everywhere like mushrooms, and cranes suddenly appear out of nowhere. Corrugated sheet fences erected in different parts in the city mark out the wide areas to be developed. Large banners covered with ideographs show the presence of the powerful Chinese brother in the Laotian capital.

I drive the kids to school. Vientiane's French School is located on Thadeua Avenue. Behind the building, there is a large strip of land bordering the Mekong River. It is Don Chan, with its quiet village surrounded by an agricultural area where the inhabitants grow all sorts of vegetables. Some of these farmers have developed organic farming, and they supply quality products to consumers in the capital city. The organization that specializes in rural development for which I work helps several farmers' groups in Vientiane and its surroundings to organize and to manage a small organic vegetable market that is open twice a week. But there is a new governmental project called "*Vientiane New World*" that is supposed to be developed on their land¹.

I have been invited to the French School to speak about poetry to high school students. While I am waiting for classes to start, I gaze at the peaceful scenery of Don Chan, and feel inspired to write these few verses that I dedicate to the students:

Just behind the gates
Lie the vegetable gardens
Still and quiet
An oasis of peace

Soon will come
Large-footed Excavators
Don Chan they will devastate
To make it a construction site

Because of this piece of land
And of its inhabitants
We need to rid ourselves
So as to erect large buildings

From your school
You shall be privileged
To witness these great changes
That we call Development

¹ This building complex includes the villas where the Heads of States stayed during the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) organized in Vientiane in October, 2012

At my office in Vientiane, Laos, 2012

The Laotian lady, who came to talk to me, takes a seat in front of me and stares at me with her big, dark eyes. She smiles and seems to be expecting a sign. She bursts into a laugh to hide her embarrassment.

- *What can I do for you?* I ask.

She has a cute face surrounded by long, black hair that falls down to her hips.

- *I heard that you are increasingly interested in land issues.*

- *Yes, it's true,* I answer.

- *I have been told to come and talk to you.*

She sighs, gets comfortable on her chair, and starts talking.

- *My parents built their house on a piece of land here in Vientiane that belongs to a Laotian. It is a large piece of land that they share with twenty-five other families. The owner had agreed that these families could stay on it. Some have been living there for more than forty-five years. Although we don't have any land title, we have always paid the land taxes. More than thirty years ago, the landowner moved to live in the United States.*

She pauses and glances out the window. Then, she goes on:

- *We have recently learned that the brother of the landowner had accrued some debts. He has used the land as collateral. His creditor, Dr. T., is a very powerful person here in Vientiane. He sent his lawyer to us, who came to give us the news. The lawyer said that, from now on, the land belongs to Dr. T., and that we have to vacate the premises.*

- *And you haven't tried to fight back?*

- *We did! We wanted to protest, but the lawyer then threatened to take legal actions against us.*

- *What about the chief of the village? What does he think of all this?*

- *The chief of the village has called a meeting and we were told that everybody had to be there. We all signed an attendance sheet. And, you know what happened?*

- *No...*

- *They then used that attendance sheet to put our signatures on another document: a declaration according to which we admitted to renting this land from the creditor, Dr. T.*

- *That's incredible! So the chief of the village is part of this scam?*

She stops. I refrain from asking more questions, because I see how deeply this story is affecting her.

- *We felt betrayed. Then, three people, one of whom is in the military, committed themselves to try and negotiate a solution with Dr. T.*

- *And?*

- *Dr. T. started by explaining that this piece of land was going to be used for*

a great cause, and that he was going to build a research center there to fight cancer. Anyway, we didn't get very far because people got scared...

- *Scared about what?*

- *One of our three representatives suddenly died after having met with Dr. T. Rumor had it that "bad spirits" had been used against him. Then, the soldier ran into trouble. His commanding officer ordered him to give up any claim to this land. We tried to seek some help from the National Assembly, but the chief of the village refused to sign our request and the letter was never sent...*

She looks at me and then adds:

- *You see? We are not very courageous people here in Laos.*

- *You have rights. They should be respected. That's all.*

- *It's too late...*

She shows me a few pictures. It's a solidly-built house. There is a covered deck that enhances the entrance. The doors are of wood, just like the window shutters. Inside, there are bedrooms with air conditioning, a big tile-lined kitchen, a living room with large bay windows, a hallway lit by ceiling lamps...

- *Is this your house?*

- *That's where I was born and raised. That's where my parents live with my brother and my sisters.*

There are more photos, but the look of them changes. They show objects piling up on the ground. A woman is taking a curtain down. A man on a ladder is dismantling the ceiling panels...

- *What has happened?*

- *We were forced to individually sign an agreement with Dr. T.*

- *To vacate the premises?*

In the photos, one can now see walls with wide-open holes where the doors and windows had been; debris all over the floors; front walls ripped open...

- *Yes, and we had to demolish our houses by ourselves if we wanted to keep some of the material, door frames, the...*

She bursts into tears. I take her in my arms.

- *I am sorry, Anne-Sophie... but it's still too recent. It was only three months ago...*

I give her some time to recover herself.

- *You know, this house, it was the investment of a lifetime for my parents! All in all, our family has invested around 80,000.00 USD!*

- *What was in your agreement with Dr. T.? Did he give you some compensation?*

- *We have received... 1,500.00 USD and we had to demolish the house at our own expense.*

I am speechless.

- *Where do your parents live now?*

- *My father didn't survive this ordeal. My mother went to stay with one of my sisters, somewhere else... My brother and my other sisters are piling up in some sort of a shelter. It's not even a house... Dr. T. has promised that we would have another piece of land in an area that is supposed to be used for construction of the railway. We don't want to rebuild, because we have no guarantee. They didn't give us anything in writing.*

She concludes:

- *It's a very painful story. We had built this dream of being able to live all together, my sisters, my brother, and my parents under the same roof. But it's all destroyed. We have nothing left...*

As I go home, my heart is heavy and pictures of distress fill my head. In the meantime, my family and I have moved to a place farther from the construction sites, on the outskirts of the city. That night, I didn't sleep much. At first light, I am sitting on the deck. Rice fields are spreading in front of me. A row of coconut trees displays their bristling shapes across an orange sky. A group of monks is walking single-file along a rocky path. They stop in front of each house to give their blessing in exchange for the alms that women kneeling on small mats hand to them. I take a deep breath, greeting this tableau of serenity.

Laos is a country full of paradoxes, and its reality is quite complex. An expatriate can live a comfortable life over there, without paying attention to the problems that must be faced by part of the population. As a professional, you could just focus on your job and limit yourself to working relationships. You can be happy with appearances. Or you could choose to look under the surface. I made my choice.

Chapter Three

Exploited (the Land)

- *Tell me, Mom, is Laos a poor country?*
- *Most people don't have a lot of money. Many people live in small houses made of wood or bamboo.*
- *What do they do to get food?*
- *They farm the land, they raise a few cattle, and certain communities also find food in the forest.*
- *Do they also fish in the Mekong River?*
- *Yes, nature is full of resources. There is gold and...*
- *Gold?*
- *Yes, deep down in the ground or at the bottom of the rivers.*
- *So, if there is gold, it's not a poor country! If people have such a treasure, they should be rich.*

A Laotian village by the Mekong River, 2009

There is a lot of commotion in the village: the meeting just ended and the officials are about to leave. The slanting rays of the evening sun shine on the thatched roof that shelters the elevated area where important matters are discussed. The news had spread even before the Government representatives reached the village. Now, people have mixed opinions.

Earlier they had attended the meeting that started like this:

- *It is good news*, begins the chief of the village.

Then, a man wearing a uniform, who is clearly suffering from the heat, makes a presentation to the villagers.

- *The Party and our Government wish to develop our country.*

Up to this point, there has really been nothing to find fault with. The village has been waiting a long time for a clinic to be built and for the school renovation that has been promised for ages.

The man in uniform asks for something to drink. Then, he adds:

- *In order to develop our beautiful country, our ambition is to become a major electricity producer!*

Most houses in the village use electric light bulbs powered by small hydroelectric turbines that are lined up along the Mekong River. These tiny turbines are tied to bamboo poles, and the electricity that is produced is transported through a tangle of electrical wires.

The man explains that the big neighboring country, Thailand, needs a lot of electricity, and that Thailand is willing to buy energy produced by other countries. For its part, Laos has mountains and rivers, wending their way through the valleys, which represent an important potential source for the production of hydroelectric energy.

- *We need to maximize this potential by building big dams!*

People in the room nod their heads.

- *And that's exactly what we are going to do right here. That way, you're going to contribute to the national development efforts and to making our country the Battery of Southeast Asia!*

Someone has a question:

- *When you say 'build a dam here,' where do you mean, exactly?*

- *Here, on the Mekong River, right there*, says the man, who seems to be

suffering increasingly from the heat. He adds:

- *Therefore, the village will need to be evacuated, since the water level will rise. This whole area will be flooded.*

People exchange worried looks.

- *You will be relocated upstream in new houses that will all have electricity. You will have a new school, a clinic, a new road...*

- *What about our rice fields?*

- *The company is committed to supplying you with rice for three years!*

- *But our lands are here...*

- *Every family will receive a piece of land that's about 100 feet by 100 feet on which to build their house. Then, the company will help you to develop new activities that will generate income, like raising cattle, for example.*

Before leaving, he talks a little more about compensation, but without saying how much or how it will be calculated, or even when it will be paid.

Now that the meeting is over, villagers are talking in small groups. The chief of the village summarizes what has just happened:

- *This dam is a good thing. We are going to have a brand new village, with good roads. This project is going to improve our living conditions tremendously.*

But some villagers are commenting:

- *These are just promises. The company will need to fulfill them!*

- *Here, we have good lands and our fields are fertile.*

- *Besides, we have our vegetables gardens all along the river. Everything is going to disappear...*

- *Personally, I don't feel like leaving. I spend my afternoons on the Mekong and the fishing is good. If this dam forces people to move off their lands, how do we know that it is not also going to force the fish in the water to leave?*

- *We will have new houses and electricity. But, if we can't feed ourselves anymore, what's the point?*

A little to the side, the women are discussing. Some feel optimistic. Others are more skeptical.

- *With the new clinic, it will be easier to get medical treatment for our children.*

- *Yes, but why not build a clinic right here in our village?*

- *Personally, what worries me is not so much what will happen on the land, but what will happen with the river.*

- *During the dry season, we women are in charge of the gold panning on the banks of the Mekong.*

- *On lucky days, I can make up to 65,000² kip a day!*

- *Once the dam is built, we won't be able to look for gold.*

² The kip is the local currency in Laos. 65,000 kip is worth about \$8.00.

Another village in the northeast of Laos, 2010

Hongsa, in the northeast of Laos, is a region famous for its Elephant Festival. There, they maintain a tradition based on elephants that makes Hongsa something of a gold standard in Elephant celebrations. Its green hills and its forests are a perfect environment for elephants. Nevertheless, not so long ago, Hongsa had also gained notoriety because it was the chosen site for the future largest coal-burning electrical plant in the country. In 2010, the huge construction site was launched. It boasts, among other things, a 23-square-mile open-pit lignite mine, a dam, a reservoir, and the power plant. Before approval by the Laotian Government for this project, this whole area was supposed to be dedicated to eco-tourism.

The eco-tourism idea was a bet that the absolute beauty of Hongsa and its elephants would attract tourists and generate money for the locals. But this didn't match plans made in Vientiane, where projects on an international scale are being designed: a coal-fired power plant to produce energy to be sold to the big Thai neighbor. Who cares if entire forests need to be cut down and villages swallowed whole? When you talk about development, you need to have ambition and be able to see the Big Picture! The main objective here is national economic growth, even if local concerns seem to be a bit overlooked. The mine and the plant are located within less than 4.5 miles from the village of Hongsa.

In 2009, the Elephant Festival attracted more than 80,000 visitors, who came to Hongsa to admire the beauty of the pachyderms and the skill of their mahouts. The event generates extra income for the local economy, and this potential could have been even further developed. But the Laotian Government doesn't see it that way. Local communities have been asked to cooperate with the Government to work for the development of the Nation.

- *You will have to leave this area and return your lands, because the land belongs to the State.*

In Hongsa, people are worried about the elephants: they won't survive without their forests and their grazing areas, and the solutions offered to date don't solve the problem. The lands proposed for resettlement are occupied by communities already living there. And if the elephants have to move too far, they risk causing damages during transit, and they will anger other villages along their route.

The coal-fired power plant is going to bring deep and irreversible changes to Hongsa. The villagers don't have a clear idea yet of the impact this project will have

on them, and they haven't really had a chance to voice their concerns. In Laos, the space for consultation is limited and in-depth discussions about issues regarding development are nearly non-existent. Local populations, who should be consulted on any project likely to affect their living environment, have scarcely anything to say. As to the organizations trying to defend their cause, they are rapidly put under a great deal of pressure. This is something that some investors understand all too well -- for example, the Thai companies in charge of building this coal-burning electrical plant. In Thailand where this type of polluting project is highly controversial, many people are fiercely opposed to such construction. Therefore, it is much easier to build such a plant in neighboring Laos and, then, to import the energy being produced. All of this is undertaken in the name of development.

Meeting room in Vientiane, Laos, early 2011

- *I want to thank you for attending this meeting and I hope that, just like me, you have learned something this afternoon about the national development strategy of Laos.*

I have just closed the meeting. The participants are slowly leaving the room. I am gathering my documents, while chatting with some people who haven't left yet. It is often after the formal part that the really interesting information is shared. So, I am taking my time.

- *OK, at least, the objective is clear: Laos will become the "Battery of Southeast Asia" by 2020. That explains the countless hydroelectric projects, says one person.*

I can't help but react as I clear a cup of coffee from the table:

- *I still have a hard time understanding this new passion of the Laotian Government for dams. They sell most of the energy that's being produced to neighboring Thailand. Then, they buy the electricity back from Thailand for their own consumption, at a higher price...*

- *Oh, but there's an explanation...*

- *What is it? I ask.*

- *It's related to the history of the forests in this country.*

- *I don't understand...*

- *Here in Laos, the timber business has made many prominent families very rich to the extent that most primary forests have quickly disappeared. Development partners in Laos became alarmed by the growing deforestation and the disappearance of invaluable trees. They demanded the creation of natural protection areas.*

- *Even though it's not always a guarantee that the environment will be preserved...*

- *Indeed, but it still makes the exploitation of wood more complicated.*
- *What is the connection with the dams?*
- *Well, one way to be able to exploit the remaining forests is to deforest an area that is going to be flooded in order to create a reservoir for a dam!*

On our way to the northern border of Laos, May, 2011

- *We'll be there soon,* says my friend with a smile, while stretching out on the back seat.

We left Vientiane three days ago. We have been driving for three days to reach the northernmost province of the country, the one that borders the big Chinese neighboring country. Tomorrow, we'll go to the village.

The next day, we enter a wooded area. Bamboo shacks pile up along the winding road.

- *These are the villagers,* he says with a sigh.

We stop the car on a narrow strip of dirt.

- *Sabaidee!*
- *Sabaidee!* says the woman who is breastfeeding her baby.

Stuck to the road
Bamboo shacks
A village in disarray
Barely hanging there

Right after a curve
Some makeshift shelters
Faces appear
We read bitterness here

This road leads to the Chinese border. Children are playing on the asphalt. They rush to the side every time a passing truck signals its presence with a loud honk of its horn.

The young woman invites me to enter her house. I feel dizzy when I look through the poorly fitted bamboo boards. Since the strip of land on the side of the road is too narrow for the tiny cabin, the shack has the feel of instability on the edge of a ravine. Clothes, a few tools, kitchen utensils are piled up inside. It feels like these people had to move there in a hurry, and that they barely had time to pack their personal belongings and take a few objects. Two children sleep in the back of this single room, on a mat suspended between sky and earth.

- *Come! Let's go to the village. Let's walk!*

We go down the slope and get to a valley farther down.

We walk through a rice field, then cross a stream, and we climb up another hill.
Then, we reach a deserted village.

Built on stilts
Of these vast houses
Only their spirits remain
A dying village

Rotting houses
Roofs in shreds
A few beams resisting
Time and its pass of the plane.

We choose empty paths and enter a few of these houses. Everything is still, stuck in time: large empty mangers, silent millstones, and motionless hoes. The fireplaces are cold. The granaries are empty. The looms are quiet.

The deserted village
Supplied by land and rice fields
Cattle and grazing space
Natural springs, fish, and a river

But without any negotiations
Nor even an explanation
They suffer the sentence
Of a forbidden city.

It is a ghost village, where a few inhabitants are still resisting. They refuse to leave the place, and thus share it with the spirits. The architecture of these houses is very unique and shows a particular savoir-faire.

- *There are only a few villages like this one left in Laos*, explains my friend. *Here, people have managed to preserve their traditions even in the architecture of their houses, but everything is about to disappear...* He sighs.

This cultural gem did not weigh much in the Governor's decision to evacuate this area in order to turn it into a large rice-growing zone. The fact that rice was already grown there did not matter much, either, since the goal was to move to an industrial level by modernizing this sector of agriculture. Another sad point is that

this village is unlucky enough to belong to an ethnic group that is traditionally and legendarily hostile to a different ethnic group. Well, it so happens that the Governor of this province belongs to the latter group. The opportunity was just too good to pass up.

May these ruins be the true witnesses of human absurdity!

Arbitrary decisions
That neither tears nor prayers
Can reverse
Sow the seeds of anger

In the breeding ground of suffering
Of injustices borne
In the seeming indifference
Shall grow the flowers of rebellion.

A few days later, we are back on the road to return to Vientiane. It is again a three-day trip to reach the capital of Laos, and other discoveries will unfold during our journey...

- *Stop the car!* I shout.
- *Excuse me? Are you all right?* my friend asks me.
- *No, it's not about me...*
- *What's going on?*
- *For a while now, we've been driving through villages surrounded by rubber trees. Look! All the hills around are covered with rubber trees, and these plantations spread all the way down to the riverbanks. Where are the rice fields and the vegetables gardens?*

I step out of the car.

- *Where are you going?* asks another one of my travelling companions.
- *Come on! Let's go talk to the villagers!*

We climb up the slope separating us from the first houses.

- *Sabaidee? Is anyone here?*
- *Sabaidee!*

A man with grey hair appears on the doorstep. He offers us a big, toothless smile and invites us to sit on small wooden stools.

- *How are you?* we ask him.
- *I'm fine.*
- *Is this your plantation?*

I point at the rubber trees whose branches touch the fence around his house.

- *No, those don't belong to me. My field is a little farther.*

- *Oh! So, you also planted rubber trees?*
- *Everybody around here plants rubber trees.*
- *Does that work out well for you?*

He doesn't answer. I don't press him.

- *Have you been growing rubber trees very long?*
- *It's been five years. We still need to wait another year or two for the trees to start producing.*

Indeed, it takes about seven years before rubber trees can be tapped to collect rubber latex. In order to do so, people cut a groove in the bark of the tree and a whitish liquid drips out of it into small cups attached to the tree's trunk.

- *Why did you start growing rubber trees?*

He pours a local alcohol into a small glass, swallows it straight back, and then he hands me the tray. His prematurely-aged wife, her back bent from all the work, adjusts her ragged *sin*³ and sits by her husband.

- *We were told by the Government people to grow rubber trees. They said that it was a great business, that Chinese people buy the rubber, and that it was a growing market.*

This is the story of a farmer
Who grows rice on his land
But he is told one day
To do it another way

He must grow rubber trees
That is what the Chinese buy
These are the investments
His Government desires.

I drink down the rice wine that burns my throat and warms my belly.

- *At the beginning, I didn't want to. We don't have a lot of land. It's just one rice field up in the hills that feeds us -- my wife, my children, and me.*

He asks his wife to go and get something.

- *The Government came back with the Chinese company. They distributed seedlings and asked us to plant them.*
- *You didn't have to pay anything?*
- *No. They told us that when harvest time came, we would divide our production in two and share it with the company.*

³ The "sin" is the traditional Laotian skirt made of a woven piece of cloth and decorated with various patterns associated with different ethnic groups.

His wife comes back and hands him a dirty container that he wipes with a filthy towel.

- *So, how many did you plant?*

- *I planted 2,400 rubber-tree seedlings in my rice field. At the beginning, it all went fine. We kept on growing rice. Then, the trees started growing and the branches formed a sort of cover. The rice doesn't grow anymore...*

So, our farmer
While praying a little
Planted in his rice field
The seedlings of change

When the tree of rubber
Outgrew its hole
It overshadowed the earth
Depriving the rice
Of any sunlight.

He opens the container, smells the contents, then pours the liquid into the bottle sitting on the tray.

- *Now, we have to buy the rice we eat... Since the rubber trees don't produce anything yet, we sell our corn to have a little money to buy rice.*

- *It's not easy... I say.*

- *No. What's more, we have to buy herbicides from the Chinese to treat the plantation.*

I glance at the plastic container, hoping that I haven't drunk any of this. He continues his story:

- *The Chinese company came back and suggested we divide the plantation in two.*

- *What do you mean? I don't understand.*

My heart skipped a beat.

- *I mean, the company said that, instead of waiting to split the harvest in two, they were taking 1,200 trees now and the other 1,200 would be mine.*

According to the contract farming system fostered by the Laotian Government, a system known as 2+3, the farmer provides the land and the labor, while the company provides the know-how, the inputs, and the market. At harvest time, the benefits are split in two between the producer and the company. In this case, the terms of the contract had obviously been reinterpreted, and definitely not in the farmer's favor.

- *So, if I understand correctly, you have transferred half of your rice field to the Chinese company...*

He looks down and pours himself another drink.

In the meantime, he lost
Half his field
That the Chinese got
For the price of some seedlings

The rice field is gone
The farmer left alone
A life quite precarious
Without rice; without money.

- *Anyway, the other half of your rice field is still yours. What if you decided to plant rice again?* I ask.

He shakes his head:

- *That's impossible. The trees belong to the Chinese company!*

I am speechless. It is an extremely lucrative deal for the Chinese. They get the farmers to plant the trees without having to pay for the work. Then, they get half of the land as a reimbursement for the seedlings, without even having to rent the land, which is cheaper than land concessions.

- *And you're saying that everybody in the village grows rubber trees? With the same company?*

- *Yes! Here and in the other villages, too.*

I am trying to find the words to comfort him.

- *I hope that you'll be able to harvest soon and that you'll get a good price.*

- *We still don't know anything about the price. When we asked about it, we were told it would depend on the market...*

Of course. Now, since this Chinese company has a monopoly in the region, how likely is it that the purchase price will be a fair one?

I politely decline the tray with the glass full to the top. My head is spinning and I don't know if it's the alcohol or the story that makes me sick. We thank our host and we go back to our vehicle. We remain silent.

A little farther along, we drive past one of the big advertising billboards praising the advantages of the notorious "*Rubber Trees to Replace Opium Program*", a jewel of the Chinese cooperation implemented in the north of Laos.

Hard to resist
When it's said such practice
Is a model of cooperation
For opium eradication

Although, the farmer here
Never grew opium
And the rubber trees in this little hamlet
Replaced fields only of rice.

I am thinking about this farmer and his wife. A whole life of hard work to end up like that, working for free for a Chinese company that has taken over his land.

The story of a farmer
Who has lost his fields of rice
Lost his illusions and lands
And who dreams of another way...

Vientiane, Laos, August 24th, 2012

"The ultimate goal of development cannot be limited to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, but has to be reflected in the people's well-being."

Sombath Somphone

Chapter Four

Expropriated (the Community)

- *Who owns the land?*
- *Whoever farms it?*
- *Whoever lives on it?*

- *Whoever has a land title?*
- *Whoever has occupied it for generations?*

- *Whoever generates economic profit from it?*
- *Whoever preserves it and takes care of it?*

- *The people?*
- *God?*

- *In Laos, the land belongs to the State.*
- *But who is the State?*

In a village, South of Laos, early 2011

- *All our fruit trees are gone! There's nothing left!*

He looks tense and his voice is shaking. For several days, they have been hearing the engines of tractors buzzing around the village. Last night, his wife even tried to stand up between their orchard and the machines. But nothing stops them. They need to rush to finish the work. They want to clear the whole place to make room for the new plantation of rubber trees. Thousands of acres. For just one single company. A neighbor, who is shaking his head, joins him.

- *This morning, I went to see my coffee plantation, but there was absolutely nothing left! Not one single shrub! They have uprooted all of them. Then, they burned everything.*

He scratches his head. Then he wipes his forehead with his sleeve and tries to smile with a dazed look, as if he cannot believe it. How could his field disappear within a few hours? No later than yesterday, he was there to check on the ripeness of the coffee beans, which had started to take on a fairly reddish tint.

- *We're going to have a good harvest this year,* he had said to his wife, when he had gone back to the village.

And this morning, not a trace of a single coffee shrub! Nothing left of his field but this ochre piece of land plowed from one end to the other. Even the fence has been destroyed. It feels like a bad dream. The voice of the foreman arriving to verify the progress of the work quickly brings him back to reality.

- *You knew perfectly well that this was going to happen! We told you!*

The foreman is standing straight upright. He is wearing a white hard hat and his arms are folded across his chest. He adds:

- *We went to see the chief of the village and we told him that our company had a contract signed by the Governor of the province himself. You knew it!!*

The adjoining hillsides are already covered with rubber trees. In some areas, it's only regular lines of budding plants on the slope. In other areas, it's deep and dark forests. Forests that are made up of only one type of tree, all of the same size. Forests with no animals, and branches with no birds. Some kind of green deserts. These plantations unfold like a carpet surrounding the houses.

- *Yes, but the villagers had only agreed on a hundred acres and you have taken everything!* notes the orchard owner.

- *Listen! Our contract covers a 25,000-acre land concession for a 90-year period of time.*

There are many such agreements in Laos. The market is favorable, and the Chinese demand for rubber to make tires is expanding. The automobile industry in the most populated country in the world is a huge market, full of potential for a small neighboring country that has some land and needs money. The problem is that those who benefit from these opportunities are mainly foreign economic operators and it is too often at the expense of local farmers.

- *We were also told that there would be compensation. How will we be compensated by the company?* asks the other farmer, with his coffee field in mind. He seems to be hotter and hotter. It looks like his shirt is no longer sufficient to wipe away the sweat running down his temples. He has not yet finished repaying his loan, and he was counting on this coffee harvest to pay off some of his debts, but everything is gone now!

- *You didn't even give us the time to harvest the coffee beans... It was just a matter of days!*

The foreman is now becoming extremely annoyed. He is a busy man and has other fish to fry. So, he replies:

- *You will be compensated. You will be compensated. On the condition that you can show evidence of your losses.*

- *How can we do that? I am telling you again that there isn't one standing fruit tree left in my orchard! In fact, there is no orchard anymore...*

- *Well, then! That's going to be a problem. We can't compensate you for imaginary fields and orchards!!!*

They clear the land during the night. They burn bamboos and tree trunks in the dark. The rest is crushed by the vehicles' caterpillar tracks. Come daybreak, it is just as if nothing had ever existed on this Laotian land that has been eviscerated.

Both men are stunned by what they have just heard. They are still unable to clearly understand the extent of this disaster. On their way back, they walk along an older part of the rubber plantation. Another nearby village has previously experienced the same fate. Workers are busy weeding between the lines of young trees. They are spraying a chemical product that gives off a strong smell. One of the workers stops for a moment, and comes to sit on the side of the path.

- *Sabaidee!* he says to the unlucky men.

- *Sabaidee!* they answer together. *You work for the plantation?*

- *Yes, I come from this village,* he says, as he points at the bottom of the hill. *This here used to be our pastures before...*

He squats on the embankment and continues telling his story.

- *You know, it wasn't always like this. We used to have rice fields and cattle. Our village lived in harmony. When the representatives from the Party and the Government were visiting, they were always full of praise for our community. They commended our perseverance in work and our productive lives.*

He pauses for a moment, as if he were re-living the past:

- *Then, the Vietnamese company came. They told us that if we gave them our land, they would develop our village. They promised we'd have electricity, a clinic, roads... They also promised we'd have paid jobs with a 1,000,000 kip⁴ monthly salary! It seemed so terrific that some villagers agreed to transfer all of their land to the company!*

For a moment, he has a vague look in his eyes, and a sad smile drifts to his lips.

- *Eventually, the company didn't stop there. They occupied nearly all the village land.*

- *Did you receive any compensation?* asks one of the men.

He sighs. That is a painful topic.

- *Not for the pastures... No compensation. I used to be a herder, but what do you want me to do with my cattle without any pasture land? At the beginning, I did try to keep my cattle, but some of them got into the plantation and damaged the rubber trees. I was sentenced to pay a heavy fine, and I sold part of my cattle so I could pay.*

He pauses, shakes his head while staring at the ground, and then he goes on with his story:

- *After that, when the company started extending the plantation up to the outskirts of the village, I had no more choices...*

- *What do you mean?*

- *They dug a big trench all around the village. Think about it: six-and-a-half feet deep and three feet wide! To protect their rubber trees against animals! They trapped us along with our animals inside our village...*

- *What?*

- *Like I said. We did try to negotiate, but they told us that the trench was part of the plan that had already been approved by the authorities.*

- *So?*

- *Well, nothing then... I sold the rest of my cattle and I asked to work on the plantation...*

Both villagers are lost in their thoughts. The herder concludes:

- *Now, here I am spraying herbicide on my own pastures. This poison contaminates our soil and gives me a hell of a headache...*

He takes his head into his hands. Another worker comes to join them. He sits down.

- *Sabaidee! We're from the same village,* he explains, while pointing at his

⁴ The equivalent of \$123.

co-worker.

- *So, you also had livestock?*
 - *No, I was just a farmer. I had a rice field over there,* he says, showing one of the hills where there are rubber trees now.
 - *What happened to you?* ask both men.
 - *The village had agreed that the company could develop clearly-defined plots of land. But, they quickly extended their plantation beyond the limits. They took over pastures. They cut down the forest. They occupied our fields...*
 - *Did you ask the Government for help?*
 - *Yes, a small group of people went to see the Chief of the District and then the provincial authorities. Nothing changed...*
 - *So?*
 - *So, we eventually sent some representatives to Vientiane. We thought that in such a big city, we would surely find someone to listen to us.*
 - *So they went all the way to the capital city?*
 - *Yes. They made several trips. Each time, the village raised money to buy them bus tickets and cover their travel expenses. Finally, our representatives met with high-ranking officers of the Government. They came back with a letter. It has been three years already...*
 - *What was written in the letter?*
 - *This letter was like a dream! Can you imagine? An official letter from the Office of the Prime Minister of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos, addressed to the Governor of our province, asking him to solve the problem of our village. Hope was back!*
 - *What did the Governor do?*
- The man sighs and, while pulling weeds between his feet, he continues his story.
- *After several visits to the Governor, he ended up writing a letter, too.*
 - *To the company? To make them return your land?*
 - *No. He wrote to the Chief of the District to ask him to take care of our problem. He probably thought that it was within his duties, since the problem was taking place in his jurisdiction.*
 - *So?*
 - *The Chief of the District also wrote a letter.*
 - *To whom?*
 - *To the chief of our village, asking him to work out a solution directly with the company.*

The man stops talking. There are no more weeds between his feet. His hand is just hanging there at the end of his arm, wedged against his knee.

- *So, now, you work for the company...* concludes the man who just lost his orchard.

- *What happens to a landless farmer? He becomes a farmhand to work on his own land. What else can he do?*

His companion adds with a bitter smile:

- *You know? We're the lucky ones. Many others were not so lucky!*

- *Do they pay you well?*

- *Whenever they do pay us...*

- *What do you mean?*

- *It's been two months now since we've been paid anything. Since the plantation is not profitable yet, they told us: "Wait for the company to make some money before it can pay its workers!"*

- *We won't sell our land!* exclaim both men.

The workers look at them, disheartened:

- *You still don't seem to get it. The land doesn't belong to you.*

- *But my family has been farming this land for generations!*

- *We pay the land taxes every year!*

- *Yes, but the land is not yours,* one of the workers interrupts him.

- *It's our ancestors' land! It's the land of our village!* both men protest vigorously.

- *No. And certainly not when a company offers to "maximize its economic value"* adds the other worker.

- *This land feeds us. The spirits live here...*

- *In Laos, the land belongs to the State and the State can use it for the development of the country, in the interest of all of us.*

Silence.

- *Well, we'll ask for compensation. That's the law in Laos.*

- *Yes, it's the law in Laos,* repeats the landless farmer. *It's the law...*

- *My coffee plantation is really worth something and...*

- *For my rice field, I received the equivalent of three rice harvests.*

- *That's it?*

- *That's it.*

- *How can you pay three harvests for a whole rice field? You're going to spend the money to pay for rice and then the money will be gone. Whereas the rice field feeds your family and the families of your children.*

A supervisor shows up between the lines of rubber trees. Both workers get up and say good-bye.

- *Good luck! May your efforts be rewarded! And keep this story to yourself: if they hear that we're complaining, we could lose our jobs on the plantation.*

- *Thank you. Good luck to you, too.*

Both men start walking again.

- *We will also go to Vientiane if we have to, and we won't come back unless we receive fair treatment.*

- *Yes. What do we have to lose? We don't have anything anymore.*

- *We're not afraid. We're ready to die. With no land to farm, we're going to die anyway.*

Hongsa, in the North of Laos, September, 2011

To exploit this open-pit lignite mine that spreads out over 23 square miles, they need to relocate several traditional villages. Some inhabitants of Hongsa have been compensated, while others are still in negotiations. Most of the land required by the lignite mine project is farmland, rice fields, or forests. Local communities, who form different ethnic groups, are closely tied to their environment and to natural resources for their survival. For them, the forest is like a supermarket: they find materials to build their houses there; medicines to treat diseases and wounds; all they need to feed themselves; and a few other products that they can sell at the market. But the mine has taken over the land, destroyed the forest, and diverted the rivers.

- *Every day, five trucks full of timber come out of there. They're going to destroy it, down to the last tree...*

Everybody in the group falls silent. The Governor had, indeed, promised to provide each family with five acres of farmland. But, the land offered to them is already occupied by another village... They know they are not in the best position to negotiate. It is an important project that has been decided by important people and that requires important investments.

Villagers talk about today's consequences, but they don't know what the future consequences will be. Nobody has told them anything about the mining operation *per se*, about waste combustion and storage. They have taken care to explain to the villagers nothing about the contamination of air and water by heavy metals, the use of chemical products, the acid rains. They did certainly say that they would build a hospital, but they didn't tell them that the villagers themselves would be its first patients -- as, by living next to a coal mine, they will find themselves seriously exposed to chronic diseases and at risk of lung cancer.

The little group is now a bit higher on a hill. Underneath them, the construction site has transformed the valley into a huge quagmire. In the center rises the chimney of the future coal-fired power plant that will stand between the main lignite deposit and the place where a mountain of ashes will slowly accumulate.

- *We're going to live right next to a giant ashtray...*

***On the road that connects the South of the country to the capital city,
early October, 2011***

The bus is overcrowded and it moves slowly, progressing through the villages, swallowing mile after mile. They left early, at dawn, with little in their pockets, but with their hearts full of hope. A hot wind is blowing through the open window, brushing the faces of the sleeping passengers. A child on his mother's lap is weeping. She rocks him to make him go back to sleep. A popular Laotian song plays in a loop on the radio. Every time the bus stops briefly, it is surrounded by street vendors selling cold drinks and food to go: spicy green mangoes; sticky rice wrapped in bamboo; boiled peanuts; grilled corn; mini chicken skewers... Little by little, as the hours go by, the floor of the vehicle becomes covered with trash.

They ate a little, but with not much appetite. Their stomachs are knotted because of the importance of their mission. They are on their way to the capital city. They have been chosen by the whole community to bring a message: "The land must continue to feed the village."

- *Be brave, and may the great men of Vientiane hear you,* the chief of the village solemnly wished them.

It is their first time in the capital city, except for one of them who has some family in Vientiane.

- *We will get there before nighttime. We will stay at my cousin's home.*
Some of them feel intimidated by this big city, but they won't back down.

At the end of the afternoon, the bus reaches the outskirts of Vientiane. There are more and more houses along the road that becomes ever wider. Sturdy houses built right on the ground now replace traditional wooden elevated houses. Then, the bus enters the terminal and the noise is amplified. The villagers are disoriented in this large crowd of travelers arriving and leaving. They are jostled by porters, hailed by shopkeepers, and accosted by ticket vendors.

- *Whom do you plan on seeing?* asks the cousin who came to pick them up.

- *We don't know yet, but we thought about the National Assembly.*

- *Yes, indeed. Some members of the Assembly are open-minded and they listen*

to the people. Nevertheless, they have limited power. They won't be able to intervene directly to solve your problem.

- What we want is for the people to know what is happening. It's not just about us! There are many farmers who lose their land, whole villages that are being smothered by industrial plantations and that don't even have rice fields to grow food anymore!

On National Radio, Vientiane, October 6th, 2011

- Dear Listeners, we are back with our daily broadcast, dealing with topics that are of concern to you. Today, it is my pleasure to welcome our guests, who come from a beautiful village in the South of Laos.

- Sabaidee!

- Your village is presently facing a problem with a Vietnamese company that wishes to plant rubber trees on your land.

- Yes, that's right.

- How many acres did the company use at the beginning?

- At the beginning, the plan was to use a hundred and four acres.

- A hundred and four acres? That's what the villagers had agreed upon?

- Yes, and also the local authorities.

- What happened next?

- Nobody had agreed for more than one hundred and four acres. We don't know who approved it...

- Do you mean that the company spread its plantation beyond these one hundred and four acres?

- Yes, they spread it way beyond that. They took up 300 acres more than that.

- So, instead of taking one hundred and four acres like it was agreed upon, the company has taken up 404 acres?

- Correct.

- Was everything bulldozed?

- That's it (...). The problem is that these families have no other land.

- So, how do they survive?

- Some of them now work on the rubber trees plantation.

- Therefore, this means that people have no other choice now but to work as farmhands on their own land.

- Yes, that's right (...).

- Who did you try to contact to solve this problem with the company?

- We contacted the local authorities.

- And?

- *All they told us was to trust the Party and the State.*
- *That's all?*
- *Yes.*
- *Is that why you decided to come to Vientiane?*
- *Yes, to defend our rights. The law allows us to submit a written request to the government. (...)*

At the end of the broadcast, listeners can call and go on the air. The Governor calls from his Southern province and explains the official version on the radio. The radio program host is not intimidated, and he counters. He defends the position of the villagers. After that, other listeners call, criticizing the lack of responsibility shown by the local authorities to solve this land problem.

In a Southern province, an angry Governor violently hits his large desk with his fist, and his loud voice explodes like a thunderclap:

- *How could he dare? How could he dare disrespect me like that? How could he dare talk back to me? How could he dare question my word? He will pay for his arrogance. He will pay for that!*

He grabs the handset of his telephone and dials a number in Vientiane.

Province of Xieng Khouang, North of Laos, April, 2012

After several hours on the road that lies along the side of the hill, our vehicle finally reaches the village. We are in a province in the North of Laos, not far from the Vietnamese border. The steep slopes of the mountains are farmed by peasants who are used to challenging the laws of gravity. From the vantage of the ochre road weaving through this scenery of peaks and ravines, we can't even see the fields downstream, because the ground is so steep.

Once we have reached the village, we get out of the vehicle, noting the lively activity around the river. Children are playing in the water, women are washing clothes, young people are filling up water barrels, buffalo are quenching their thirst, poultry are having a bath... A little farther off, pico-hydro are attached to bamboo poles, and these mini-turbines are supplying the houses with electricity. A group of fishermen pull out fishing nets and offload them.

- *Sabaidee! How was the fishing? Good?*
- *Yes, we are catching more fish since we have established preservation zones.*
- *Great. Is the chief of the village around?*

They take us to his house. We climb the ladder that leads to the main room and we seat ourselves on the floor. It is a large room, and four generations of the same family live there. In the back, there is a burning fireplace that holds a pot. The mats rolled against the walls are used to sleep by the inhabitants when they turn this space into a bedroom at night. On the walls, there are posters of the Party, barely readable directives, and portraits of stern senior officials. The furniture consists of low stools that are placed around small bamboo tables for meals, and a shelf where some personal belongings pile up. The chief of the village receives us warmly and invites other inhabitants to join us. We discuss the various activities going on in the village: the building of latrines; the vegetable gardens; the training being carried out to help improve children's nutrition; etc.

Very quickly, the conversation focuses on one major concern: the mining concession. We learn that a company has started extracting gold from the river. For the moment, the extraction site is located downstream from the village, but excavators have already begun moving upstream, and they are coming closer. The villagers don't know exactly what has been agreed between the company and the local Governor. All they know is that an agreement has been signed and that there is nothing left to negotiate. The whole district has recently been designated a special economic zone -- just like other regions in the country that are strategically located along the borders with China, Vietnam, or Thailand, and are, therefore, particularly attractive to foreign investors. It is too bad for the environment, as regulations to mitigate environmental impact are only very minimally enforced. It is too bad for the local communities affected by such investments, and whose rights are being abused. But, in the end, it's all about the development of the country!

Back in a village in the South of Laos, early June, 2012

When they went to Vientiane and agreed to speak on National Radio, they aimed to attract the attention of the central authorities regarding the conflict between their village and the rubber company. But after they returned to the South, things did not get any better. First, the chief of the village was replaced. Deemed too lenient with the protesters, he was forced to resign. The authorities sent in a former soldier, with a strong sense of duty, a man originally from another village, so as to limit any inclination toward misplaced sympathy.

Then, the bulldozers came back, devastating other lands, destroying part of the forest, the sacred tree, the garden of the spirits, the altar, and the cemetery. The company did not respect the village's traditions and it profaned holy places. The company settled its campsite there and, since then, misfortune has struck the whole village. There have been several deaths, many bizarre diseases. A young man passed away suddenly. A house caught fire. A woman plagued by fever went through episodes of dementia. The ancestors are unhappy because the community was not able to preserve peace in the village. A ceremony needs to be organized to calm the spirits of the ancestors, to pray for their forgiveness and ask for their protection.

The villagers hurry to get the shaman. They go to a remote place in the forest. They sacrifice a piglet. They pray and chant in the smoke of incense sticks. A group of people has fallen down on their knees under a tree that is several centuries old. Its trunk is wrapped with long, colorful cloth strips. In its twisted branches they hang a little spirit house in which they have lit two yellow candles. With his eyes half-open, the shaman continues chanting, while slowly swinging his skinny body. The ancestors are not far away... The spirits have been calmed by the ritual, and the sick woman has finally recovered, but other hardships are ahead of the villagers.

The new chief of the village calls a meeting with the men who took the trip to Vientiane. He tells them how disappointed he is with them. This initiative was a bad idea. The district authorities have asked him to ensure peace and harmony in the village. His mission is to make sure all villagers support the development projects in the area, because these projects are part of an ambitious plan aimed at developing the country.

- *Laos can no longer remain backward, content with simple subsistence agriculture. Laos must progress and shift to market-oriented agriculture, because Laos must become part of the global market.*

The eyes of the village chief light up. His face shows the satisfaction of one who has carried out his duty.

Same village, a week later

People in the village heard the vehicles arrive early this morning. First, the children came to make a circle around the visitors. But the youngsters were intimidated by sight of men in uniform emerging from the van, and they hid themselves behind the adults, who started gathering in the center of the village. Shortly thereafter, the chief of the village is summoned to designate those among the villagers who went to Vientiane *"and who continue to stir up troubles within the midst of their community."*

On that day, seven people are arrested. One of the villagers who went to Vientiane is absent. So, they will take his brother to the police station to be imprisoned with the other six. He will be released a few days later, when his brother, in turn, is arrested. And his pregnant wife will deliver her baby while her husband is in prison with the other six villagers.

Any contact with family is forbidden. They don't have the right to consult a lawyer. The interrogations focus on the support they received for their trip to Vientiane. The police are trying hard to unmask potential instigators or accomplices. Never will the takeover of their land by the Vietnamese company, nor the villagers' legitimate claims, be mentioned.

I have been working in Laos for three years, and I wonder. What is the meaning of development? What is poverty?

In Laos, the law defines poverty and the criteria ruling development. So, it says:

“Considered as a Developed Household, any household that meets the following criteria:

- 1. All household members develop a political awareness, and a respect for the law.***
- 2. The household shows internal solidarity and solidarity with outside (...)***

Certified as a Developed Village, any village that meets the following Development criteria:

- 1. Strong village leadership.***
- 2. All villagers develop a political awareness, a respect for the laws, and show internal solidarity and solidarity with the outside (...)***

Excerpt from Articles 7 and 8 of Prime Minister's Office Decree No. 285/PM on Poverty and Development Criteria for 2010-2015, 13th October 2009.

Chapter Five

Expurgated (the Speech)

Expurgated is the Speech. Censored is the Press. Stripped down is the Narrative. Filtered are the Words.

- Who is afraid of freedom of speech?
- Those who are not ready to hear certain questions.
- Because they don't have the answers?
- Because they don't like the questions.

My office in Vientiane, January, 2012

- *Did you hear the news?*
- *What news ?*

I put my bag on my desk while pushing aside a pile of documents that I still need to sort. I have files all over my shelves. They are well labeled, waiting for the loose sheets that are piling up on my table to be added to them. Still, I can't get around to "tidying all this up," due to a lack of time or a lack of motivation.

- *It's about the radio program "Discussing The News."*
- *Is that the program they broadcast every day on National Radio?*

I am mechanically gathering the scattered sheets of paper. There is a selection of articles that were printed between two meetings; reports from the field that I have already read but that require follow-up; a few decrees or reference texts that I use too often for them to be put back on a shelf.

- *Yes, that's the only program that allows listeners to call in while it's on the air, in order to ask questions or share their opinions.*
- *Yes... It's a rare space open for public debate.*

There are also my personal notes. Everything I have to do: the people I need to contact; the discussions I need to pursue; the ideas that need to be developed; the information that needs to be confirmed; the visits to be paid; the organizations that must be put in touch; the requests to be answered; the letters that need to be finished; the meetings that must be prepared... Too many ongoing activities to just hide them in a binder or a cardboard box.

- *Well, it's over!*
- *What do you mean, it's over?*
- *The program has been banned from the air. We just heard about the decision that will take effect immediately.*

I fall onto my chair. Just when we were starting to feel some hope. It was a sign of openness, a space for people to be heard -- and the indication of some degree of tolerance for criticism.

- *What is the official reason? Any written decision?*
- *No. The radio host was simply summoned by the Director of the radio station, who told him about the decision made by the Ministry of Information.*

Nothing in writing. No reason given. Just an order to be obeyed. Without any questions to be asked.

- *I suppose some people didn't like the last programs...*
- *Mmmmmh. Wasn't it about the villagers who had lost their land?*
- *Yes.*
- *Some problems are dangerous to bring up.*
- *Especially when they are not officially acknowledged.*

Ministry of Agriculture, Vientiane, one month later

- *Well, I want to thank you for your visit and for our frank discussion.*
My colleagues are about to end the meeting. They are visiting from the headquarters of our organization and, during these yearly missions, traditional courtesy calls to our governmental partners usually take place.

- *Mr. Deputy Minister, we congratulate you on the quality of our partnership. We hope that, in the future, we will reinforce our cooperation.*

I am seething. Too many topics haven't been addressed. The Deputy Minister turns towards me.

- *Are you planning on going on a field visit in the near future?*

- *In fact, I just came back from the field. I visited a village that is presently facing a land problem. A company has cleared the village's agricultural land and their rice fields to grow rubber trees there.*

He frowns and pretends he is thinking for a moment. Then, he says:

- *Oh, yes! We are well aware of this situation. Representatives of this village came to see us. The problem is about to be solved.*

Then, he turns to my colleagues, who seem to be uncomfortable in front of this unexpected turn of events:

- *You know, it's the only case that is really problematic in Laos.*

I am completely stunned. This man has such a nerve! If the Ministry of Agriculture doesn't know the scale of the problem that concerns more and more farmers in all the provinces of the country, then who is supposed to know about it? I say:

- *Well, it's not just that village. There seem to be about twenty-five villages affected by this particular land concession.*

- *You people from the non-governmental organizations, you only focus on a few problems instead of looking at the bigger picture!*

My colleagues sink further into their armchairs.

- *On a national level, you will find similar situations in all the provinces, and...*

- *There are so many positive examples where local communities benefit from foreign investments. Why don't you ever talk about these?*

- *Because we don't talk enough about the problems and the scale of these is being underestimated.*

My colleagues look as if they want to stand up and leave now, but the Deputy Minister is not finished:

- *Do you have any evidence? Can you give me some figures?*
- *I know of only a few cases, but we have documented them, and I'd be more than happy to send you the information we have available.*

My colleagues are already standing. We shake hands. The atmosphere becomes less tense. The Deputy Minister walks us out and says a few words about my outfit:

- *The Laotian "sin" suits her well. It's not the case for all foreign ladies, you know. But she is thin and stylish.*

He smiles at me. I smile back. We have known each other since before he became Deputy Minister. We have already had a few heated discussions and have gone through tense moments. Still, we continue to talk to each other and, for that reason, I appreciate him.

Much later, my own organization will blame me for that conversation. I will be accused of having gone too far, of having provoked a confrontation and having made the Deputy Minister lose face. It would certainly have been better had I shut up when the problem so close to my heart was simply being overlooked. It would have been better for my colleagues. Not for the farmers who are losing their land.

My office in Vientiane, March, 2012

I am meeting the radio host who has been fired.

- *So, did you get an answer?*
- *The Director of the radio gave me some explanations.*
- *Is it your program with the villagers about the rubber tree plantation that motivated this decision?*
- *Yes, it's related to that program, and also to the other case about an industrial coffee plantation.*
- *But, what are the reasons they gave you to terminate your program like that? What did you do wrong?*
- *In Laos, the mission of the media is to "maintain national harmony." That's what I didn't do when I spoke about the conflict between the local communities and the company. Then, too, the media must present the facts in an "objective manner." I didn't do that, since I let the villagers express their opinion. So, it was biased.*
- *Isn't freedom of speech guaranteed by Article 44 of your Constitution?*
- *You know how it works here...*

With a resigned smile, he adds:

- *They asked me to go back on the air.*
- *Really? Let me guess! There must be some conditions, right?*
- *Yes. First, the topics will have to be approved ahead of time. There will be no more calls from the listeners. The name of the program will be changed.*
- *That's it?*

- *I will have to start my program by reading a reminder of the mission of the media in Laos.*

He stays silent. I look at him over the tops of my glasses, with an inquiring air. He shrugs:

- *If I refuse, they will say that I'm the one who doesn't want to run the program anymore.*

- *So, you're going to accept...*

- *No. Not on these terms!*

He is willing to negotiate, but he isn't ready to sell off his freedom. He doesn't do cheap journalism. He wants to inform people and to give a voice to those who cannot be heard. He won't give up.

In a partner organization's office, Vientiane, two years prior

- *We should do something during the boat racing festival⁵.*

The room is crowded. We are a small network of people who share the same concerns and feel the same need for action. We are talking about the water, the water of the rivers. The water of this sacred river that borders the country, connecting China, where the river begins, all the way to the delta in Vietnam. The level of the Mekong River has never been so low. Large sand banks are emerging on the surface, making it almost possible to cross by foot from the coast of Vientiane to the opposite Thai side. People were quick to blame the Chinese and their upstream dams to explain the exceptionally low water level. What is going to happen to Laos, as the country is planning to build nine dams on the Mekong mainstream? It makes you think. Especially the people who came to meet here this afternoon.

- *We should put together a photo exhibition.*

- *But what would be the purpose?*

- *To show how important water is in general!*

- *To say that "Water is Life!"*

- *OK, let's make a list: Water is used for...*

- *Water is used for consumption...*

- *For hygiene. And it's important to health.*

- *Household uses: to wash, to cook...*

- *Water is used for agriculture and to irrigate fields.*

- *Then, there are the dams and the power production.*

- *There are activities such as fishing, transportation... riverbank gardening, thanks to the sediment...*

- *The cultural importance of water with the boat festival...*

⁵ Celebrated every year at the end of Buddhist Lent.

- *And the beauty of the scenery along the Mekong River; that's also very important!*

A few weeks later, while the preparations are well underway, in a festive atmosphere with everyone contributing some free time to the success of this event, I receive a phone call from a member of the group.

- *Hello? Sabaidee! How are you?*

- *We have been summoned by the Government. We need to go there this afternoon.*

- *What is it about?*

- *Our water exhibition.*

- *But I thought we had already received an authorization?*

- *Yes, but the Water Resources and Environment Agency must approve the content of the exhibition.*

- *There shouldn't be any problem. We are only presenting photos. The only written comments we are using are quotes from official documents.*

- *I have a bad feeling...*

Although he has a lot of experience and is not easily intimidated, I can feel he is nervous. He adds:

- *Our network is unofficial. We are not registered anywhere.*

- *Who has been contacted?*

- *A few members of the group, only Laotians.*

- *Maybe it would be a good idea to go together, don't you think so? That way, we could show that this group is made up of a large and diverse number of people and organizations.*

- *No, just a few of us are going, only Laotians. We don't want this to seem like a show of force.*

- *I understand. Still, you could have a few Falangs (foreigners) with you. Even if we don't say anything, we could just sit in the back. It might have a positive impact on the outcome of the discussion.*

- *No, they have only contacted a few Laotians. We are going to try to solve the problem amongst ourselves, without foreigners.*

- *As you wish. Make sure you consult the others, and if you change your minds, even at the last minute, we can come.*

He is not calling back. But, towards the end of the afternoon, he stops by my office. Exhausted. Obviously, this meeting has taken a toll on him.

- *Sabaidee!*

- *Sabaidee! So, what about this discussion? Did it go well?*

He sighs.

- *You could put it that way, I guess. The exhibition will take place if we agree to comply with their demands.*

- *That is to say ?*
- *No photographs of the dams...*
- *What? This country has the ambition of becoming the “Battery of Southeast Asia”; the hydroelectric sector is the engine of economic growth; the media talk about the benefits of the dams every day... and we cannot show one picture of them?*
- *We were told: “No dams.”*
- *They are doubtless afraid that we might use photos that have not been retouched, different from the images shown in the hydropower companies’ brochures, with beautiful reservoirs full of blue water...*
- *That’s not all, he cuts in. We are not allowed to use certain quotes.*
- *But I don’t understand. The only small texts that have been chosen come from their official documents.*
- *That’s what I told them.*
- *So, what’s the problem?*
- *There are quotes about the negative effects of the dams.*
- *All of this comes from their own evaluations. These documents are supposed to be disclosed to the public.*
- *We can use only official documents, but we can take only positive quotes from them.*
- *This is ridiculous! They are censoring their own reports. I cannot believe it!*
- *It’s this way or we won’t have an exhibition.*
- *You know, I’m really wondering if, sometimes, it wouldn’t be better not doing anything, instead of doing something that ends up having no meaning at all. Everything is so manipulated...*
- *We’re in Laos. We have to deal with this reality. We’ll do our exhibition and we’ll go all the way.*

A few weeks later, the open-air exhibition is set up in a temple yard by the Mekong River. Officials who had been invited to the opening ceremony announced at the last minute that they wouldn’t be able to attend. In addition to the exhibition, various activities are taking place: debates, games, and cultural performances. A large cloth stretched at the entrance for people to write their opinion on is quickly covered with all kinds of comments that bear witness to how much the public is interested in the topic of water.

My office in Vientiane, May, 2012

- *You’re back? Welcome to Vientiane! So, what news from the northern mountains?*
- *Well, my dear, you know that the district was designated as a special economic zone. Now, changes are already being felt!*

- *Are you talking about the village we visited together, where a company had started extracting gold from the river?*
- *Yes, that one and some others, too.*
- *Has the gold mining already reached the village?*
- *They settled upstream, about one and a half miles.*
- *And?*
- *Well, it was predictable. Excavators are destroying the river, devastating its banks and excavating its bottom. There are no fish anymore. People are getting sick. The number of patients registered at the local clinic has increased tremendously for this month of May.*
- *I am guessing that the water has been contaminated by the chemicals they use to extract gold...*

***In a village in the southern part of Laos,
end of June, 2012***

The seven villagers who had been arrested in the South of the country have been released. Upon their release, each villager was forced to sign an agreement stating that he would not attempt anything anymore concerning the conflict with the Vietnamese company. They must stay away from any illegal activity and they must abandon any claim to their lands.

It was a way to get rid of the problem without solving it. These villagers were never told why they had been arrested. They were never officially indicted. They didn't receive a copy of the document they had signed. Later on, local authorities denied having ever arrested villagers whose land had been taken away. There were also rumors that the Governor of the province had received one hundred twenty-four acres of rubber trees from the company. An effective way to ensure his unwavering support of this plantation project.

***In a district in the northern part of Laos,
August, 2012***

I am sharing with the district chief our concerns in relation to a mining operation located in his district. Extracting gold from the bottom of the river seems to have caused a water contamination problem. The reaction of the local authorities was to commission an inquiry. A small team of investigators – comprising, among others, the administrative chief, an army officer, and the son of the Deputy Governor -- was sent to the village in question. There was no meeting with the villagers nor was there any group discussion. A dozen of carefully-selected inhabitants were interviewed separately and individually by the administrative chief, who was actually the person

who had negotiated with the villagers on behalf of the company for their consent to the mining operation itself. At the time, he had used very convincing arguments: *“If you don’t accept the compensation they offer you, you’ll be brought in to the district.”*

The presence of an army officer was probably a guarantee of their being able to collect the statements they had counted on for the purposes of this investigation. As to the Deputy Governor’s son, he was not only an investigator, but also an operations supervisor for the mining company. This investigation led to a review of patients’ data recorded in the register of the health center, resulting in a reduction in the number of reported sick people. And, finally, it emphasized something we had completely overlooked until then: the villagers don’t need our organization’s project.

Even though this investigation didn’t meet minimum standards for objectivity, the results were up to the Governor’s expectations.

Vientiane, September, 2012

Excitement is increasing in Laos. In a few weeks, the capital city will for the first time host the prestigious official summit between Asia and Europe⁶ (ASEM). The country has been preparing for this event for months now, with huge construction sites to build the facilities needed for such a big event. A complex of luxury villas, designed to house heads of state and government from two continents, is under construction. A convention center is also being built to host the summit. The infrastructure necessary for the accommodation and transport of the numerous delegations is being developed, which means that the airport has been modernized and the main roads of the city have been widened.

Apart from the logistical challenges, there is something else at stake for the government of Laos. Given its wish to strengthen its position on the international stage by hosting the next Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Laos must also agree to host the parallel meetings, and in particular the meeting of the non-governmental organizations of Asia and Europe called the People’s Forum⁷ (AEPF).

In order to prepare this ninth Asia-Europe People’s Forum, and to collect the opinions of Laotian society, consultations are being conducted in all the provinces of the country. It is a way to make sure that the Laotian population will be able to validly contribute to “the people’s vision of development.”

⁶ The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is made of 53 countries and regional organizations. Every other year, heads of state and government meet at a summit.

⁷ Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF)

The man in charge is Sombath Somphone, a leading figure in Laotian civil society who is known as the founder of the first non-governmental organization in the country, and who is now, for the first time, opening space for public debates in Laos. All kinds of people will take part in this consultation process: farmers, workers, women, entrepreneurs, monks, HIV positive people, people with disabilities, young people, etc.

Nobody talks about monetary income or poverty. Rather, the focus is on what makes people happy and what makes them suffer. Everyone has something to say. Eventually, four major topics emerge as being the pillars of development: the economy, the culture, the nature, and the spirituality.

Vientiane, October 8th, 2012

The Asia-Europe People's Forum is starting in a week. While the consultations held in the different provinces are coming to an end, an article that is about to be published in the *Vientiane Times* is being circulated. It provides a preview of the main conclusions of this consultation process. The article is entitled: *"Listening to the People's Voice."*

Quotes: *"Preliminary findings can be grouped into four major themes that emerged as contributing most to the people's 'happiness' or 'suffering':*

First good governance. Across all social groups, the people strongly emphasized the need for wise leadership and good governance (...) in particular to consistently enforce laws and ensure social justice. (...) [They] indicate a keen interest in role for the nascent civil society to contribute to inclusive development.

Then, improved sustainable livelihoods and social protection, (...) [and] having a range of economic opportunities. (...)

Then good health and adequate education: (...) accessibility to and establishment of good schools, with good teachers (...) Health [is] reflected not only [in] their actual physical condition, but also their emotional and psychological well-being. If health and education are strong components of "happiness," then there is very strong reason for their continued enhancement to be policy priorities of the state.

Finally, protection of natural resources. Natural resources-based economic growth, underpinned by expanding Foreign Direct Investment, is pressuring traditional livelihoods and valuable environmental assets. (...) This is leading to widespread "suffering." Many rural Lao families and communities retain serious concerns about land security. At the same time, deforestation is severe and non-sustainable land and water use are rising. People want policies that will ensure sustainable natural resources management. (...)

Now, how do we use these clear public messages to inform where the country is

heading at this crucial time? How do we integrate them into national debates and planning or budgeting mechanisms?"

The article concludes: *"The people have spoken. We encourage the Government to make a substantive response, so that this becomes a true national dialogue on common development concerns and interests as Lao PDR moves forward."*

The co-authors are:

Minh H. Pham, the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Lao PDR;
Sombath Somphone, founder of Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC),
Magsaysay laureate⁸ and Co-chair of the ninth Asia-Europe People's Forum.

***Still in Vientiane, the next day,
October 9th, 2012***

New twist in Laos. Like many other people in Vientiane, I receive the following message:

Dear all,

This is to inform you that the article about to be published in the Vientiane Times entitled "Listening to the People's Voice" was not yet a final version and had been shared without the agreement of my co-author, the UN representative in Laos. I am therefore requesting your help in withdrawing this draft article.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Sombath Somphone

To quote some people who commented on this incident, *"the Lao people have spoken, the Lao government as well."*

***Ninth Asia-Europe People's Forum, Vientiane,
October 18th, 2012***

The way the Laotian media covered the People's Forum perfectly displays official propaganda in action. During the People's Forum, a young woman bravely tells her story of the situation in a village whose land was grabbed by a Vietnamese company that converted rice fields into rubber plantations: *"The villagers can no longer produce enough rice to eat. The presence of this company creates a lot of problems in the village. Without their land, people are poorer now..."*

The next day, the *Vientiane Times* publishes a front-page article entitled *"Land, development issues top agenda at People's Forum."* It tells the story of the

⁸ The equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize in Southeast Asia.

young woman as follows: *“She said she agreed with the government’s policy to promote rubber plantations as local villagers could earn money by working as labourers on the plantations. In the past, she said, many families in the village had no cash income because their village was located in a remote area. But after a rubber company came to plant rubber trees around their village, they didn’t go hungry because they had money to buy food after working as labourers.”*

There is no mistake: they specifically pretend they are quoting the young lady. They even give her name and the name of her village. In fact, the next day, she starts receiving angry calls from relatives in her village who protest vehemently.

When I enter the big hall where the plenary session of this last day of the Forum is going to take place, I see the young woman with a copy of the *Vientiane Times* in her hands. She is shaking her head in disbelief. I suggest to her that we ask a representative of the Lao Association of Journalists for advice, but he doesn’t seem to want to cooperate much:

- *You could go to the Vientiane Times to talk to the editor or to the journalist who wrote the article.*

We immediately leave and walk down the street to the office of the *Vientiane Times*. I ask to speak to the journalist. The receptionist points at a silhouette just then slipping out of the building. Leaving the young woman at the reception desk, I manage to catch up with the man just before he gets into a car parked by the sidewalk.

- *Sabaidee!*

- *Sabaidee! Excuse me, but I don’t have much time,* says the man, clearly in a hurry.

- *Don’t worry! It won’t take long!*

I keep talking to him while standing between him and the car.

- *Are you the author of this article?* I ask him, placing the front page of the *Vientiane Times* under his nose.

- *Yes, but...*

- *May I ask if you were present during the debate that you reported on in your article?*

- *Yes, of course!*

- *Then, you must have misunderstood.*

- *No, I understood perfectly.*

- *Then, could you explain to me the discrepancies between what was said and what you have written?*

- *You know, in an article, it’s impossible to tell everything that’s been said. A selection must be made and...*

- *I perfectly understand. But what about the words you put into this young*

woman's mouth?

- *I'm sure there are people in her village who are happy about the rubber plantation!*

- *Maybe. But if you're going to quote her directly, you can't make her say things she didn't say. You are a professional journalist. You know ethical rules better than I do.*

He is a professional journalist, but he is a journalist in Laos. Here, there are also other rules that apply. A friend of mine, who was able to talk to the editor, confirmed that feeling.

- *The press is a tool serving the government's interest. Facts are being rearranged. Reality is being re-created so as to suit those who hold power.*

With the help of the Forum organizers at the international level, we try to exercise a right of reply to this article. It is in vain.

Censorship operates at all levels. Everybody is subjected to it, international organizations operating in Laos, too. It makes me think back to an informal conversation with a Laotian official who was feeling a bit tipsy. This happened in a restaurant in March 2010...

In a restaurant in the capital city, March, 2010

The remains of the buffet are strewn on the table. Beer bottles have been drained and now hold court among the empty plates. Shirt collars have been unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up. This meal is to commemorate the signing of an agreement with the government for a new project that we are about to start. As small glasses of *lao-lao*, a traditional rice whisky, are being served, the atmosphere suddenly becomes markedly less formal.

Since alcohol can disinhibit even the most uptight of civil servants, we are being let in on some confessions. I am talking to the representative of the Foreign Affairs Department, the Ministry responsible for approving any agreement submitted by an international organization. I tell him:

- *Eventually, in our case, the procedure did not take too long after all: only three months to sign our "Memorandum of Understanding"...*

I am well aware that, in some cases, it can take several months or even years. The person I am speaking to turns to me while placing his empty *lao-lao* glass on the table:

- *Yes, in your case there was no problem, because you didn't use the wrong words.*

- *Oh, but what do you mean by “the wrong words?” I ask candidly.*
 - *Human rights!* he says, without hesitating.
 - *I see, I say, as I pretend to be thinking. So, does it mean that, if you receive a proposal dealing with human rights, you will reject it?*
- He smiles as if he were about to share the ultimate trade secret. Then, his breath heavily charged with alcohol, he tells me:
- *No, we don’t reject it. We just don’t process it. As simple as that!*

***Ninth Asian-Europe People’s Forum, Vientiane,
October 18th, 2012***

Any screening of the film that featured this infamous consultation process held in the provinces was forbidden during the People’s Forum, and the DVD copies were required to be removed from the participants’ bags. Publication of *“The Lao Vision Statement,”* the final document resulting from these inclusive consultations, is also not authorized during the People’s Forum, *“having not officially been approved by the Laotian Government.”* The box containing the hundreds of paper copies was found empty on the last day of the Forum. It seems that the major problem was the use of the term “suffering.”

Officially, there is no suffering in Laos. This is certainly what the Minister of Foreign Affairs meant in his speech during the closing ceremony of the Forum: *“If New York is the city that never sleeps, Vientiane is the city that never cries.”*

Except that, today, many people are crying in Laos.

Chapter Six

Expressed (the Word)

Expressed the word, this which tracks another facet of reality, behind the growth figures and poverty statistics.

Be the voice of those who are not invited to the meeting rooms.

A compelling need to speak out. For those who cannot speak for themselves.

Inaction is not neutral. To remain silent is taking side.

My office in Vientiane, February, 2011

- *You look exhausted...*
Glancing over my glasses, I address my associate, who has just entered the room. She lets herself fall into her chair.
- *Is something wrong?* I ask.
She takes her head into her hands, closes her eyes, then explains:
- *During the meeting, I mentioned the Sayaboury dam.*
- *Mmmmh, THE famous Sayaboury dam... The first dam planned on the Mekong.*
- *Yes, well, can you imagine that during this meeting with aid agencies, some claimed they do not know what it is all about?!*
- *You're kidding?! But, this dam, if it's built, could affect more than 200,000 people here in Laos, and I don't know how many more in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam!*
- *I am not kidding! Some of them came to see me at the end of the meeting to ask for more information on the Mekong Agreement and the consultation process.*
- *That's too easy. We will make sure that no one can ever use this excuse again!*

The Sayaboury dam is a hydroelectric megaproject that is part of Laos stated ambition to become the "Battery of Southeast Asia." It will be erected in the province of Sayaboury, some 150 kilometers from the city of Luang Prabang, a renowned tourist destination that has been classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. This Sayaboury dam is the first of a series of eleven dams planned for the lower Mekong, nine of which will be located in Laos. But the Mekong is considered to be the world's second richest river in terms of its biodiversity, after the Amazon. The States crossed by the Mekong, namely Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, have reached an agreement to regulate, in a spirit of consensus, any initiative taken to construct a dam on the river's main stream. This includes, in particular, the obligation of the project holder for prior notification, and the obligation to consult and to reach an agreement with neighboring States, taking into account the concerns expressed through public consultations by populations likely to be affected by such a dam.

Following a thorough study of the cumulative impacts of these eleven

planned dams on the river, the Mekong River Commission (MRC)⁹ recommended a 10-year moratorium on the construction of any dam. This moratorium is justified by the importance of the Mekong to the subsistence of the populations; by the predictable significant and irreversible impacts that will result from any dam; and by the lack of scientific knowledge concerning the river ecosystem.

The Sayaboury dam is the first project to be subjected to this consultation procedure and constitutes an important precedent for the ten other dams that will follow. We cannot miss our chance!

Still in my office, a few days later

- *Do you have the list of addresses?*
- *Yes. We're going to cast the net far and wide!*
- *Very good...*
- *So we have the aid agencies, the international organizations...*
- *Local organizations, because civil society is the first to be involved.*
- *Yes, with mass organizations...*
- *We will also write to our partners in the government.*
- *You think they'll understand?*
- *I'm ready to explain the process. We have nothing to hide. Our organization works in rural development. We can justify an interest in a mega-project that will affect the food security of a large number of people. It's legitimate to ensure that decisions on a project of this magnitude are made in accordance with the Government's commitments.*
- *So, we send it?*
- *We send it.*

For our part, we also inform our Laotian collaborators about what is at stake with respect to this dam, and we encourage an internal debate. It turned out to be an edifying experience.

- *But why meddle in all this? It's the Government's business, right?* one asks.
- *Yes, what can we do? Asking too many questions attracts trouble,* answers another.
- *And anyway, we cannot decide. It's the "bigwigs"!* concludes a third, accompanying his words with a gesture pointing towards the ceiling. Someone reacts. A discussion is taking place between our Laotian collaborators:
 - *We know that. But what are we going to gain with this dam? We know that 95% of the electricity produced will be exported to Thailand. The people of Laos will suffer the negative effects...*
 - *But we cannot oppose development!?*

⁹ Which groups together the riparian states.

- *It is not a question of opposing, but of knowing how one wants to develop.*
- *Yes, there may be other solutions... To do it on a smaller scale or to do it elsewhere than on the Mekong...*
- *Or to do what first serves the interests of the Laotian population...*
- *Hence the importance of the consultations. They are provided for in the Mekong Agreement signed by the Government.*

My office in Vientiane, March, 2011

- *Not much reaction so far...*
- *Public consultations are taking place regarding the same dam in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. But nothing seems to be happening in Laos.*
- *But it is here that this dam will be built!*
- *Well, at least we have reached one goal: nobody can pretend to be unaware of this project anymore...*

It's March. In a few days, it will be the United Nations World Water Day. Actions are being taken in many countries around the issue of water.

- *Couldn't we do something here in Laos? I ask.*
- *Yes, surely. We should launch an internal discussion on the subject and solicit ideas from our collaborators, suggests a colleague.*
- *I'll ask the question through our online discussion group. That way, our teams on the field will also be able to contribute.*

Several leads are suggested. Very quickly, a consensus emerges to link this World Water Day with this first dam mega-project on the Mekong. I take stock:

- *There are several proposals. The main idea is to encourage public disclosure of more information on the Sayaboury dam, and in particular on the foreseeable impacts of this dam.*
- *Yes, it's important. Some experts speak of a profound modification of the Mekong ecosystem, which could lead to the disappearance of more than forty species of fish, including the famous giant catfish... she explains while looking through a few documents.*
- *From what I understand, the major problem is that a dam would block the route for species that need to migrate in order to reproduce. However, there is no technology available yet to effectively overcome this problem.*
- *They are talking about fish ladders... she smiles, incredulous.*
- *And who will teach the fish to use ladders?*
- *There are also changes in the sediments that naturally settle on the river banks and allow the villagers to grow vegetable gardens, she continues.*
- *Well, but again, what matters is for this debate to take place among Laotians. Not among international experts...*

- *And for that, the available studies must be made public.*

We come back to this essential point: access to information. Blocking access to information deprives people of a fundamental right.

- *The Laotians themselves would have to ask to be consulted...*
- *Or at least that the subject be debated in the National Assembly.*
- *What about a petition, requesting that information be disclosed to the public?*
- *It is one of the few legal democratic mechanisms available... It would be interesting if this petition were to be handed to the National Assembly by personalities from within Laotian civil society. In my country, in Switzerland, this type of event is put into the public eye. It can even be festive!*

She brings me back to reality:

- *Yes, but we are in Laos... Others have proposed printing T-shirts. There are even suggestions of logos and slogans.*
- *Why not...*

I am pointing out to her that one of our colleagues warns us against any action that might resemble a demonstration, whether when viewed up close or from afar.

- *That's clear! The last people who tried to organize a demonstration in this country are still behind bars.*
- *That is, those whose fate we know about...*

Visit to our project by the Ministry of Agriculture, Vientiane, September, 2011

- *I'd like to talk to you about a problem...*

She looks at me over her glasses, dubious. We left Vientiane early this morning to accompany government officials on a field visit to a group of organic producers in a neighboring province village. This is an initiative we have been supporting and that is beginning to bear fruit. The experiment is generating income for farmers, helping to develop the local economy while preserving the environment. We want to give more visibility to this project, to promote alternatives. But the dominant thinking is well entrenched, and it is not easy to counter arguments such as: *“the agricultural sector needs foreign investors in order to grow, because local agriculture is not profitable”* or *“industrial plantations are needed to solve the world’s hunger problem.”*

The National Director of Agriculture is a rather affable little woman, who is prepared to listen. But she is part of a system that unfortunately leaves her little room for maneuver.

- *Last week, I was in the South of the country and I visited a village whose land was requisitioned for a rubber-tree plantation, I explain.*
- *Yes, that is part of the country's development strategy. It is in keeping with the policy of converting land into capital, she replies.*

- *I certainly understand. But the problem is that the rubber trees were planted on land that the villagers used for their subsistence farming. Now, it seems that there is also a law protecting the rice fields...*

- *Absolutely. A land concession for an industrial plantation should not affect rice-growing areas.*

- *But that is what has happened in this village. In your position as the National Director of Agriculture, would it not be your responsibility to ensure that this law is enforced?*

She frowns and thinks for a moment. Then she resumes:

- *In fact, it is the responsibility of another Directorate, the one that deals with Inspections. Yes, they are the ones who are equipped to send a mission to the field in order to investigate this case.*

Then, leaning towards me, she indicates the large gentleman who has taken a seat in the front of the vehicle:

- *He is the National Director of Inspections.*

As soon as we reach our destination, I manage to approach him, to set out this case.

- *Mmmmh. A rubber-tree plantation? On rice fields?*

- *I was wondering if you could investigate this matter, because this plantation seems to be developed in violation of certain statutory provisions...*

- *Yes, but it is a land concession that has originated the problem, declares the man. In this case, you should contact the Ministry of Environment. They are the ones who know what to do about land matters.*

A few days later, when I bring this case before the Department in charge of land issues, I will be referred to the Ministry of Agriculture:

- *You understand, this is agricultural land that has been abusively used by the company in question.*

Back to square one. This is all too often the fate faced by those who try to solicit the support of the authorities to resolve the numerous conflicts between villagers and companies. We move from one level to another, from one department to another, from one jurisdiction to another. And, ultimately, the winners are the great developers who generously help Laos in converting its land into capital...

Vientiane, November 2011

During the month of November, the Round Table Meeting is being held, an annual event that brings together donors, aid agencies, and the Laotian Government represented at the Ministerial level. This is a sort of High Mass at which an inspection is made of the year's progress, of the development priorities for the upcoming year, and of pledges of financial aid. Around macroeconomic indicators and statistical tables, mutual congratulations are offered for good cooperation, and one rarely addresses the subjects that deserve to be debated.

It is, however, a strategic space for civil society organizations that wish to have their voices heard and bring some substance to the discussions. For, as the head of a Laotian association confides to me: *“We, the local organizations, can never meet with our Prime Minister to talk about development. While foreign companies have easy access to talk business...”*

The Round Table Meeting is also a well-shielded area, access to which is closely monitored, despite the commitments made by the international community to make this mechanism more inclusive, in particular by inviting non-governmental organizations. But in Laos so far, local organizations have never been able to participate in a Round Table Meeting. Only a few international non-governmental organizations have been invited. Last year, when I had been acting as the spokesperson for foreign NGOs¹⁰ in Laos, I had expressed the need to include representatives of Laotian civil society in this process, recalling the general commitments made at the international level under the development effectiveness global agenda. This year, it was expected that some local associations would finally be admitted. To no avail. The fact that, prior to this event, some Laotian civil society leaders dared to raise the problem of land evictions being suffered by more and more peasants in the country, led the government to cancel, at the last moment, the invitations made to the Laotian associations.

As the official meeting is about to start, discussions are taking place in the hallway between diplomats and representatives of aid agencies about this last-minute decision. I approach and express the hope that this disappointment will also be expressed in plenary assembly to the members of the Government.

I greet the director of another international NGO and take a place next to him:

- *Hello! Thank you for being the spokesperson of international NGOs for this Round Table Meeting. I sincerely appreciate it. I had more or less prepared to play this role again, since until late last night no one else had yet volunteered.*

- *I hesitated... he replies. It seems that the format of the discussions has changed this year.*

He is nervous.

- *Yes, we do not read long written statements anymore. Time is limited to short speeches, followed by one question. It will be less boring!*

Together, we review the agenda and define the key moments for weighing in.

I look around.

- *Not only did they not invite local organizations, but they also reduced the*

¹⁰ NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

number of participants from international NGOs. You know, you must also say something about the absence of Laotian civil society.

- *Frankly, I'm not comfortable with that one.*
- *We can refer to our last year statement. In addition, everyone has made commitments at the international level for more inclusive dialogues.*
- *What if you did it?* he insists.
- *Fine...*

Silence is never neutral. By participating in a meeting, one engages one's responsibility. Too many agency representatives attend meetings without taking the floor. They thereby accept the terms, the composition, and the agenda of the meeting. When a discussion takes place in the absence of important actors and one fails to raise that point, one effectively endorses this state of affairs. When the agenda does not cover some key issues, those keeping silent are actively participating in hiding these issues. When the subject is discussed only superficially or partially, and we do not address essential aspects, we accept that these be ignored. It is the weight of silence.

The previous year, the Round Table Meeting had been held under the theme: "Growth and Equity." We mostly talked about economic growth, not so much about equity... For this year, the local organizations had prepared: Sombath Somphone had invited them and he was diplomatically savvy enough to bring the Government into the process, so as to obtain an indirect endorsement of the approach. This led to a joint statement, the first of its kind, in which some thirty Laotian associations joined their voices to make recommendations to their authorities and also to donors, regarding how to better work together for a people-centered development. Today, no representative of these Laotian associations is at the Round Table Meeting to convey these important messages.

Addressing my neighbor, who is nervously going through his notes:

- *Yes, I will weigh in this first time, and you will continue with the next interjections.*

The official part begins. No one has yet raised the issue of the absence of local organizations, and the hallway discussions seem to have remained in the hallways. I ask for the floor.

When I sit back, my heart beats like crazy and the tension makes my legs painful. My voice did not waver during this impromptu interjection. By announcing that the Laotian organizations had consulted each other on their participation in this Round Table Meeting, and by asking the Government to help disseminate their statement, I have just discredited the Minister of the Internal Affairs -- who, asked to react to my speech, is lost in doubtful explanations as to "*a lack of preparation of local organizations*" or "*a timing problem.*" Conscious that the poor man is

losing face, I feel the blood beating in my temples and a vice clasps my head.

My intervention will at least have the effect of getting the conversation going, since several participants will then highlight the importance of associating the Laotian civil society with the Round Table Meeting.

The coffee break is announced. A Foreign Affairs official confronts me even before I can leave my seat, and he asks me to hand him the statement of the local Laotian associations...

- *I don't have it. It is an initiative of the Laotian associations. As an international organization, we intend only to ensure that, despite their absence at this event, their statement can be shared. You will have to directly ask the Laotian associations in order to obtain the text.*

Despite the promises made, we will have to wait until the next year's Round Table Meeting to see the Laotian organizations finally sharing their statement...

***First Preparatory Meeting of the People's Forum,
Vientiane, January, 2012***

- *Sabaidee, Sombath!*
- *Sabaidee, Anne-Sophie. You were also invited by the Foreign Affairs?*
- *Yes... Isn't a bit odd, however, that it's the Government inviting us to talk about the People's Forum?*
- *This is the first time such an event is being organized in Laos. The Government certainly wants to do it right.*
- *No doubt...*

It will be a first: a People's Forum in Laos! We aren't really sure if we should believe it will happen, but it is a dream opportunity to give a voice to the people and to value the local organizations that are facing so many challenges to be recognized by the Laotian Government.

At the coffee break, we exchange our first impressions:

- *We must take advantage of the preparation of this Forum to get the Government to cooperate more closely with Laotian non-governmental organizations, Sombath observes.*
 - *You know Sombath, I totally agree with you. But the government must give you enough leeway for it to truly be a People's Forum.*
- Sombath puts his cup down and asks me:
- *What are you suggesting?*

- *That we go and talk to the Government representatives. We thank them for having convened this meeting. We ask for more elbow room for local organizations. We make it clear to them that this Forum is a shared responsibility... We are not going to tell them that normally the Government should not interfere in a People's Forum!*

- *Mmmmh. But you saw, they have already prepared a list of names for the members of the Forum Organizing Committee to be set-up. We risk catching them off-guard, Sombath worries.*

- *Frankly, might as well know now. Because as far as I am concerned, if this has to be something completely controlled by the Government, I might as well not be part of it.*

He hesitates. Sombath is a person of wisdom who prefers to play the card of conciliation by avoiding confrontation. He is also a man of values.

- *Fine, let's go talk to them. I will come with you and make the introduction. I'll let you argue...*

- *No problem, Sombath. You can count on me.*

We enter the VIP lounge, where the officials take their coffee amongst themselves, away from the others. We are welcomed and listened to. It is probably more the financial argument -- difficulty in securing funding from aid agencies if the process is perceived as being driven by the Government – rather than the pro-civil society reasoning, that persuades them.

- *So what do you suggest?* asks one of the officials.

- *First of all, I think you should carefully balance representativeness in the Forum Organizing Committee, in terms of composition and responsibilities.*

- *Mmmmh...*

- *It would also be good for the Laotian civil society to be represented in the chairmanship of this Organizing Committee.*

That is how a position of co-Chair for the Asia-Europe People's Forum was created, and Sombath was elected by his peers to occupy it.

***In the premises of our organization in Vientiane,
March, 2012***

- *We received an invitation to participate in a meeting of the Asian Development Bank.*

- *Ah... What is it about?*

- *It's about the application of the decrees on compensation and resettlement of people affected by investment projects.*

- *Interesting...*

A few hours later, as I pass in front of the Secretariat of the NGO's network working on land issues¹¹ :

- *Uh... the Asian Development Bank phoned...*

She looks at her feet, visibly embarrassed.

- *And?*

- *They are asking that the network not be represented ... by its chairperson.*

- *Oh, right? I am on the Asian Development Bank's blacklist? After all, this may be a personal performance indicator! I burst out laughing!*

***A meeting of development partners,
Vientiane, a year earlier***

- *It is therefore a question of bringing out the value of the land by giving it an economic value. Uncultivated land must be converted into a productive resource that contributes to the country's economic growth.*

To support his speech, he scrolls diagrams, statistics, and projections onto the screen, which are supposed to irrefutably demonstrate how everything and every resource has a potential economic value that must be made productive through investments. Local associations are organizing a debate on development issues. Some international consultants are invited. We talk about mining extractions, revenues for the government, hydroelectric ambitions, modernization of agriculture. The presentations follow one another and the debate is slow to kick off.

A large company's representative and some experts from international financial institutions take the floor, but there are far too few responses from the public. I stand up to express some doubts about the model being presented, arguing that an "un-exploited" natural resource can nevertheless have an economic value for the community that manages it, and that it can contribute to maintaining food security. Is there no other inherent value in a river or a forest, other than its solely economic value? How do we set the price of biodiversity? What is the worth of a land that will feed the children and the grandchildren of the peasant who farms it?

The World Bank expert, who has faith only in economic growth, reacts in a flash:

- *Development is about changes. And changes are always messy. Those who want to keep their hands clean should leave the country!*

¹¹ The network is the Land Issues Working Group (LIWG), to whose head I was elected as chair in 2011 until my expulsion.

***Xieng Khouang Province, northern Laos,
July, 2012***

- *Since the mining operations started upstream of the village last May, the number of patients has increased sharply...*

- *Other villages have also reported negative impacts.*

Upset looks are exchanged. The field team operating in this northern province feels helpless. I listen to them:

- *We tried to discuss the matter with the Vice-Governor, but he is not willing to listen to us.*

- *His son is in charge of supervising the gold extraction operations.*

- *The river is now only a series of polluted ponds...*

- *But people continue to consume water for their domestic needs!*

I shake my head, then suggest:

- *If attempts at the local level fail, central-level authorities must be alerted. We signed an agreement with the Government for our project. It is time to mobilize their support. After all, we are in a partnership, and as partners, we have shared responsibilities to ensure our project can be implemented in a conducive environment.*

- *Ah! We just received the lab results for the water samples! she exclaims, bursting into the office.*

- *So?*

- *... The cyanide content is four to five times higher than the maximum value permitted by Laotian standards!*

- *We have the evidence. It's time to use it.*

Vientiane, August 17th, 2012

An article is published in the *Vientiane Times*: "*Vientiane authorities have decided to build a new highway as part of efforts to expand the urban development to other areas (...). This project will be operated under the government's policy to convert land into capital by reserving 200 meters of land on either side of the road for sale, to cover the cost of construction.*"

It is official: the Mayor of Vientiane himself, Mr. Soukanh Mahalath, announces that the lands taken from the villagers are intended to be re-sold in order to reimburse the company in charge of building the road. How can we expect, under such conditions, that the compensations paid to the villagers will be fair, since the aim is to maximize the profit of this land transaction? "*According to Prime Ministerial Decree No.92 issued in 2005, the compensation for villagers affected by a development project needs to be sufficient to ensure that the affected villagers will be better off afterwards.*" It is hard to see how these two logics can be reconciled...

This highway crosses four villages to lead to a future industrial zone located in a rice-field plain known for its soil fertility.

Vientiane, September, 2012

We are preparing the People's Forum. One of the themes will be land grabbing. This is a major problem shared by many countries in the Mekong region and beyond. As I am in charge of organizing one of the panel discussions, I contact a few people who have been evicted from their land to take part in this session. Among them, former organic farmers who were forced to abandon their activities after being relocated to non-fertile land. Just like Don Chan fishermen who have been re-settled 26 kilometers away from the Mekong, these farmers must re-invent their own existence.

All those contacted respond favorably to the invitation. But as the Forum approaches, the authorities become nervous. Especially concerning Don Chan: while on the banks of the Mekong construction work is accelerating in a race against time, it is not the moment to recall that the luxury villas in which the invited heads of state will be sleeping during this summit are built on lands from which peasants have been evicted! The former inhabitants are visited by security authorities, who urge them not to speak to foreign journalists or to international organizations. The arguments used are persuasive enough to convince the villagers to back off. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the Government is preparing public interventions by "their villagers," ensuring that in each session of the Forum, a politically correct image is given of the country and what is happening there.

In Laos, speech can take the color of blood.

*A village in the suburbs of Vientiane,
October, 2012*

- *I have documents to show you...* he says in a low voice, clutching a sheet protector under his arm.

- *Documents? What are they about?*

Sitting in the shady courtyard of one of the village's farmers, I admire the vegetable garden that unrolls its cultivated plots down the slope. We are in one of the villages bordering the capital city. It is a fertile area. It produces vegetables, peppers, organic greens sold in an outdoor market that producers organize twice weekly. But the tranquility of the area is merely apparent. Soon, the area will have to be evacuated -- vegetable gardens, rice fields, houses -- to make way for an investment project. Boundary markers have been planted everywhere, marking off the land concession. We are in one of the four villages that will be affected by the construction of the highway. At the end of the stretch? A future industrial zone.

He pushes aside the plate of boiled peanuts and spreads a few photocopied pages on the table.

- *It's the contract, he whispers.*
- *What contract?*
- *The contract for the construction of the road.*

The road is the first stage planned in the development project of the zone.

- *It's signed by whom?*
- *The Vientiane authorities and the construction company.*
- *What about compensation?*
- *In the contract, the price is fixed at 100 million kip per hectare.*
- *Mmmmh, 100 million kip per hectare, that's 10,000 kip per square meter. So, one euro per square meter.*

- *We have already said that we refuse this price, because the present value of our land here is not 10,000 kip, but almost 50,000 kip per square meter. And also we do organic farming: we have been investing in our land for years...*

- *Did they start paying?*
- *Some villagers have accepted...*

He lowers his eyes and keeps silent. Then he adds:

- *But they didn't get 100 million kip per hectare...*
- *Oh, really? How much did they receive?*
- *They were paid... 5 million per hectare.*
- *What? But that's 20 times less than what's in the contract!*

I make a quick calculation in my head: 5 million kip per hectare, that makes 0.05 euro per square meter. Compared to the market price, it's about 100 times less!

- *Why would people accept such a ridiculous price?*

He sighs and shakes his head.

- *The first ones to accept are the civil servants, who risk losing their jobs if they refuse what is offered to them. Then there are those who yield to pressure...*
- *What kind of pressure?*

He looks at me, with a smirk.

- *You know what I'm talking about. You know the system here!*

Yes, I know what he is talking about: you get a visit from the village chief once, and then more and more often. Speeches gradually turn into threats. Then, security representatives come to find the families at their homes, before summoning them to the police station.

He continues:

- *There are those who are already in dire straits because of their debts and see therein a solution to their problem...*
- *Sure, but they could sell their land and get much more!*

- *Not anymore... Who wants to buy here, when everything will disappear?*

He catches a chicken pecking peanut shells and holds it in his lap.

- *Make a copy of this document. A friend gave it to me. We cannot do anything here...*

His wife comes and joins us. She pushes a lock of hair behind her shoulders. Then, pointing to their house:

- *We have always lived here and we built this house little by little. We do not want to be rich; we just want to continue cultivating our land and later pass it on to our children.*

Her eyes are filled with tears. Her husband remains pensive. Then, in a grave voice, she adds:

- *We will resist as long as we can...*

Vientiane, October 17th, 2012

The Asia-Europe People's Forum opens its doors. The tone is set from the first day on. As I am taking my place for one of the thematic discussions, I recognize, sitting in the audience, a government official wearing an NGO badge. While in his official position, he is a man with a strict look, always wearing a very correct government uniform. Now, he is dressed in jeans and sandals. One way to better match his look of today with his NGO badge... He seems to absent-mindedly follow the debates, except when a Laotian takes the floor. He then assiduously takes notes. And when the audience is invited to ask questions, he gets up, crosses the room, climbs onto the stage, passes behind the panelists' table, and places a paper in front of the single Laotian speaker, who will then read it aloud, by way of answering the question addressed to him.

At the end of the session, I approach this government official, as he is chatting with a Thai activist who is wearing a broad red headband.

- *Sabaidee!*

- *Oh, sabaidee, Anne-Sophie!*

- *So, what are your impressions of this first day of the Forum?*

- *Mmmmh, nothing special... he answers.*

- *I saw you just now going up onto the stage, I comment.*

- *Yes, I helped our fellow countryman answer questions.*

- *Ah, I see...*

- *Yes, these are not easy questions, and amongst Laotians, we must help each other out!*

He sincerely seems to have good intentions, and has nothing to hide about his maneuver. He is so disarming!

In my office in Vientiane, October 20th, 2012

Message:

Dear Anne-Sophie,

I am in the process of mobilizing support from the Government and some aid agencies to carry out my program with the media. From the Government side, I am getting positive signs, but more time is needed (...). We can start small and implement this project step-by-step, until we reach the objectives as explained in the attached document.

Sombath

I open the attached document. It is titled “Media and Young People as Agents of Change.” This is how the text begins: *“When human rights are observed, respected, and protected in a society, its people feel secure. When institutions are enforcing and respecting the rule of law, the public will have confidence in its governance. When schools are giving proper education, its people will have discipline and behave orderly and respectfully, thus requiring less law enforcement. When these three inter-related conditions are met, a society will be peaceful, law-abiding and very livable. Only then that government can claim that its rule is truly for the people and by the people.”*

We will not have time to cooperate on this project...

Vientiane, October 29th, 2012

The 2012 Round Table Meeting is coming up, this big annual gathering to discuss the development of Laos. Ministries are actively preparing for this event: holding meetings one after the other; piles of documents are produced; key messages to be presented are defined; figures and statistical data are aligned to support the whole narrative...

Meeting of the Governance Sector in Laos, attended by officials from the government and aid agencies. A chart projected on a large screen shows the main axes of the governance, such as *“the participation of the population in public affairs”* and *“respect of fundamental rights.”* In the next column, presenting results achieved, it reads *“AEPF and NPA decree.”*

AEPF, the Asia-Europe People's Forum, has just ended. If it is true that more than a thousand people from both continents took part in the Forum, I doubt that this is a very credible indicator of the Laotian population's participation in public

affairs. As for the NPA decree, this applies to non-profit associations (NPA), a term used to refer to NGOs (because “non-governmental” organization has an “anti-government” connotation in Laotian language). This decree regulates the registration of Laotian associations by the Government and is generally considered “a major step forward.”

However, local associations seeking official recognition are subject to police investigation with, at best, an injunction from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to change the name of the organization, its objectives, or some of its board members - and in the worst case, a blocking of the procedure for failure to obtain the necessary recommendations.

- *You still haven't gotten your registration?* I ask her.

My Laotian interlocutor has long been involved in the defense of women's rights.

- *No, it's still blocked...* she sighs.

- *But, your organization has been active for nearly 20 years. Everyone recognizes the quality of your work!*

- *Yes, but the Lao Women's Union¹², which is our supervisory authority, refuses to give us its approval.*

- *For what reasons?*

- *You know, we do more for women in Laos than this Union! It's certainly a rivalry issue...*

- *What do they have against you officially, though?*

- *We do not have enough political consciousness.*

- *...!*

No way, therefore, for associations that are not yet registered to hope to participate in a meeting organized by the Government. Meaning that those who could make the most valuable contributions to the debate are being excluded.

In this meeting on Governance in Laos, nobody has yet spoken the word *corruption*, although the country has just lost a few places in the rankings of most corrupt countries done by Transparency International, landing this year at the 167th position out of 174, sharing the same rank as Libya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. I finally ask for the floor:

- *As stated by Head of the Party Central Committee's Propaganda and Training Board, "corruption causes real poverty among large portion of the population." One area particularly exposed to collusion of interests and corruption is the Natural Resources sector, and especially land related contracts and concessions. This definitely puts affected communities in a weak position to negotiate fair compensations, and creates a lot of conflicts, because there is an important implementation gap. (...).*

¹² The Lao Women's Union is one of the mass organizations that are structures attached to the Communist Party.

I sit back down slowly. I know I am increasingly under pressure. I affect a great calm, and I rest my elbows on the table, so as not to allow a glimpse of the slight trembling that agitates my hands. Nothing should show through the mask, nothing that could undermine the resoluteness of my speech.

The words were carefully chosen to bring the subject to this distinguished audience. Talking about rights and abuses of power necessarily upsets. I am aware that in raising this issue, I have just crossed a line. Another one... In the dull agenda of the meeting, this kind of speech – a bit too passionate -- is a stain. We are in Asia and we express ourselves with restraint. We are in the presence of development agencies, and in this world of cooperation, we are slow to tackle the causes of poverty, preferring to cure the symptoms. To put a bandage over a sore, rather than to treat the disease. Avoiding the problem instead of solving it.

A silence follows my speech. The spoken words spread like water and cannot be taken back. If it sometimes seems to drizzle as on a too arid land, I have hope that it soaks the minds of even the most refractory. My eyes are on the assembly. Most participants pretend to read one of the documents distributed at the beginning of the meeting. Others look at me reprovingly. Then there are those, few in number, for whom my intervention arouses some nods. The subject, scarcely touched, is already closed.

Nobody is unaware of the problem of land evictions aggravated by corruption, but too few dare to bring it up. The imbalance of power is perpetuated at all levels, from the rice field destroyed by a bulldozer to the meeting room where silence prevails.

Silence is never neutral. By keeping silent, you make yourself complicit. By shutting up, you become part of the problem. Silence is taking sides. And to not speak out is to play the game of those who impose silence.

Those who show courage by speaking up to power often end up paying the price of the silence of the majority.

Chapter Seven

Exposed

- **You were never afraid?**
- **I was...**
- **You've never wanted to take a step back?**
- **I don't ask myself that question.**
- **How do you do it?**
- **I think of the people who are engaging and taking even greater risks. I think of those men and women who don't have the choice of taking a step back.**

My office in Vientiane, March, 2011

- *Foreign Affairs have called. You are urgently summoned*, she says to me with a questioning air.
- *Mmmmh. Because of our letter campaign?*
- *I don't know.*
- *Well. We have never taken a stand for or against this Sayaboury dam. We only requested that the information on this project be made public and that consultations be held. We cannot be blamed for that.*
- *We gave, in this letter, descriptions of the possible impacts of this dam...*

I stuff a copy of the letter into my bag, and while looking for the car keys, go down the stairs, inhaling deeply. Security is reinforced right now throughout the city, with the convening of the Party Congress. I had already been informally warned that I should stop drawing attention on this dam project. *"Your name has gone up to the Party Politburo! You must be careful!"* Stop making the Laotian population aware of their right to be informed and consulted...

I arrive in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building. I walk along the hallway that leads to the Department of International Organizations. I am taken to a small meeting room. The Director is there, accompanied by a person who is probably from public security.

The interrogation begins:

- *We have received worrying reports about some of your activities. We want to verify the truth of these allegations.*

This is certainly about the Sayaboury dam. I begin speaking:

- *First of all, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to explain this issue and to dispel any misunderstanding.*

I set the scene, legitimize the interest of our organization in the issue, clarify our position. It is not a matter of opposing anything, but just of ensuring that decisions are made under the best possible conditions. With respect for everyone's rights.

- *Yes, we are aware of this petition to the National Assembly... he replies.*
- *Again, it is primarily a question of requesting that the information concerning this important hydropower dam project be made public.*
- *We understand, and the use of the petition is recognized as a legal right in Laos.*

But even if it is a legal right, I am questioned as to who wrote the text. I will not answer. The public security official takes scrupulous notes, while looking at me

severely through his dark glasses. The interrogation continues:

- *The accusations against you are of a different nature. You are suspected of wanting to organize a demonstration!*

I am aware of the seriousness of this accusation. The last people in Laos who tried, a few years ago, to demonstrate for more democracy are at best still imprisoned -- or have disappeared. I react:

- *These accusations seem to me to be unfounded. May I ask you on what it is that you base your allegations?*

My interlocutor takes out a sheet of paper. It is an excerpt from our internal discussions on World Water Day. The security representative looks triumphant. The message in question is dated March 11th, 2011, and is addressed to my collaborators:

Dear all,

Here is a proposal for action for the 22nd of March, International Day of Water: (...). Idea is for individuals to sign up asking more information on the Sayaboury dam and having consultations about it, as foreseen in the Mekong Agreement. (...) Letter could then be handed over to the National Assembly on the 22nd of March by a group of people wearing nice T-shirts...

Please let me know quickly what you think about it.

Thanks for your continued interest and support!

Anne-Sophie

Further down, the reply of a Laotian colleague:

Dear all,

I think it is legal to do it. For some considerations:

a) Refer to the National Constitution and also to the Law on the National Assembly.

b) Avoid any demonstration alike. The government could overreact if you gather people wearing the same T-shirt to hand over the letter. Keep it simple, like a couple of senior Lao persons with a camera to shoot when handing over the letter.

The next day, the author of these lines will also be subjected to an interrogation, much more robust and conducted under the close supervision of two representatives of public order forces. Although he had warned us against any event that might resemble a demonstration, he was accused of being “*a leader financed by foreigners to use social networks, with the goal of mobilizing the masses in opposition to the Party Congress.*” During his interrogation, reference was made to Egypt and a parallel drawn between our two messages and the Arab Spring!

I never tried to find out who on my team had provided a copy of these internal messages to the authorities. Nor why. Laos is a country that encourages denunciations, and reporting to the Government is a way to ensure one's own

protection. I nevertheless take this opportunity to explain to my collaborators the difference between internal and external communication, and the necessity to be able to create internal spaces for debate where everyone must be free from any threat. A space to share the wildest ideas and the most beautiful dreams...

For having called for increased transparency and consultation around the construction of a hydropower dam on the Mekong, my name landed on a blacklist.

Vientiane, December, 2011

Nine months later, while important “*preliminary work*” on the construction of the famous Sayaboury dam is underway, the Laotian Government proves that it has fulfilled all of the requirements of the Mekong Agreement by invoking the compliance report drafted by the Swiss-based Pöyry company, mandated by the Government of Laos. Pöyry certifies that consultation procedures took place in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

But in the report, the response forms containing the main recommendations from these consultations were published by the company only for the first three countries cited. Interestingly, Pöyry, after giving the go-ahead for the building of the dam, will be entrusted by the Laotian government with the responsibility of supervising all the construction work of the Sayaboury dam. A juicy contract. Suspicious minds will hint at a conflict of interests.

In the month of December 2011, while the matter seems to be settled (the Pöyry report, undisclosed by the Laotian authorities, will be leaked), I post on the internet some reflections, which will certainly be carefully recorded in the dossier already opened under my name at the public security level: “*We should certainly be grateful for all the efforts put into exploring technical solutions in order to address various concerns raised around this important project. Experts are involved and there is no way normal citizens can be credible debaters on that level! However, what normal citizens can understand is that there are many more studies still needed: Pöyry compliance report mentions about 40 studies still to be conducted, including on transboundary and cumulative impacts assessment, and on Mekong’s ecosystem - one of the richest and most complex in the world -, before adequate technical answers can be provided. And this is certainly why the Mekong River Commission¹³ recommends a 10-year deferral on any Mekong Mainstream Dam decision. (...)*”

On legal issues, obviously, the requirements as to disclosure of information and

¹³ The Mekong River Commission is a regional institution set up by Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos to ensure the implementation of the Mekong Agreement.

consultations were not met in Laos. Rather to ^{compromise} on democratic principles, and considering that adequate technical answers are not yet available, wouldn't it be wiser to postpone construction work in order to allow for complementary studies to be conducted, and to hold a consultation process with concerned communities here in Laos?

A political decision made by a government together with powerful investors should never justify breaches of national regulations and regional commitments on basic democratic principles such as access to information, consultation and participation in decision-making processes."

Vientiane, January, 2012

The news fell like a cleaver: banned from broadcasting. The radio program was simply deleted. Without negotiations, without possibility of appeal.

Here, journalists mostly have obligations before they have rights. The media must above all maintain social harmony. Talking about problems can be seen as an incitement to conflict. The media are mainly a channel for disseminating official communiqués. Giving voice to certain people or relaying their concerns is perceived as a lack of objectivity. I quickly draft a letter. Sober and courteous. Without condemning, without complaining. Just one request: that the Ministry in charge reconsiders its decision. That's all. This should make it easier for more people to join this call.

We try to obtain support from international non-governmental organizations. But the answers are rather disappointing:

- *A common approach? Yes, but I must first seek the approval of my headquarters. That is going to take time.*
- *Freedom of speech? No, that is not really part of our organization priorities.*
- *Sign a letter? Yes, but it would be better to sign globally on behalf of the organizations' network, instead of putting the names of organizations individually.*
- *Freedom of speech? We are not a human rights organization. Our mandate is development.*
- *No, we cannot join this initiative, because we prefer not to jeopardize our good relations with the Government.*
- *No, this concerns the country's internal affairs. We cannot interfere. It must be settled between Laotians.*
- *We could consider signing only if a large number of organizations have already signed.*
- *No, we cannot sign. We prioritize our projects, not political actions.*
- *We have no legitimacy to undertake such a move.*
- *Our Laotian colleagues are recommending that we do not intervene in this affair.*

When dealing with sensitive issues, it is not wise to hide behind “our Laotian colleagues”: to ask them such questions can already expose them! It puzzles me...

Vientiane, April 2012

Three months later, I inquire about the situation with a collaborator:

- *So, this letter concerning the closure of the radio program?*
- *We still have not been able to collect signatures...*
- *Including from the organizations who are members of our network on land issues?*
- *Our members ask that other partners also commit to sign it: ambassadors, heads of cooperation agencies...*
- *I am willing to give it a try, but it is not going to be easy.*
- *In a few days, it will be May 3rd, World Press Freedom Day. Could we take advantage of that opportunity to propose a joint letter to the development partners?*
- *We can always try...*

Initially, some European ambassadors, the European Commission, and few cooperation agencies are supporting this initiative. This encourages NGOs to be more receptive. But when the letter circulates, no one is willing to sign it.

After consultations, the European partners agree that they cannot sign this letter, and “*that a more appropriate approach will be favored.*” No longer having the support of their ambassadors, the cooperation agencies also withdraw. Finally, not a single signature.

*Representation Office of the United Nations in Vientiane,
May, 2012*

To celebrate World Press Freedom Day, the United Nations (UN) has organized an event to which the Laotian Government, embassies, and civil society are invited. Speeches to recall the importance of a free, independent, and diversified press. Sustained applause. In his presentation, the President of the Laotian Journalists' Association merely read excerpts from the Media Act, stressing the obligations of journalists. Section 15 of the Act provides that Laotians may express their concerns about unresolved cases through the media. But this must be done in a “*constructive*” manner. And who is to judge the constructive nature of such a report? It probably also has to do with the sovereignty of a government. So, no interference. In the last rows of guests, furtive glances are exchanged. Someone sighs. Another shakes his head as he looks at the ground. Smirks.

Then a Laotian journalist gets up and asks THE question. Why did you shut

down this radio show? Discomfort. Short-lived. A representative of the Government hastened to proffer official reasons in a peremptory tone. The National Radio Director adds: the radio host did not pay his airtime. Silence in the room. Senior United Nations officials who traveled from the Bangkok regional office will not react. Not even one single courageous word that would have justified the cost of a business-class airline ticket.

Meanwhile, the famous letter, inviting the Ministry of Information to reconsider its decision to close the radio program, ended up being sent with my lone signature.

In my office in Vientiane, August, 2012

- *The governor reacted! He sent a letter to the central authorities. We received a copy...*

My colleague breaks into my office, waving an envelope. This is about the village in the Xieng Khouang province in northern Laos, where a mining company is extracting gold ore.

- *Did he decide to cooperate to solve the problem of the cyanide-contaminated river?*

My colleague goes through the two sheets written in Laotian. He pouts.

- *What, what is it? I ask.*

- *Frankly, it's not really that...*

- *What is he saying?*

- *Basically, he states that the allegations about the situation in this village are unfounded, he says, tilting his head.*

- *But, laboratory tests were carried out on samples of water taken from the river. The results show a cyanide content five times higher than the maximum allowed by Laotian standards!*

- *Wait, wait... He says that it's not possible that 134 people got sick in May alone, because he received no report about it.*

- *We made copies of the records kept by the head of the dispensary... And, just because something has not been "reported" does that mean that it does not exist?! I cannot understand the logic.*

- *The fish that have disappeared, that's also an invention?*

- *He says that the disappearance of the fish is not due to mining, but was caused by excessive fishing. That the villagers are solely to be blamed for not being able to conserve their fish resources.*

- *Unbelievable... And the lab tests? It was not cyanide, perhaps?*

- *He says it doesn't come from the company. It could be due to a natural phenomenon, or maybe someone else put cyanide in the river...*

- *That's all?*

- *He concludes by saying: "all the issues raised by Mrs. Anne-Sophie Gindroz are false."*

In my office in Vientiane, September 2012

- *Allooooo? The connection is poor here in the North... Can you hear me?*

It is a call from our branch office in Xieng Khouang. From the sound of my colleague's voice, I can tell that something has happened.

- *Yes, I hear you! What's happening?*

- *We were summoned to see the District Governor this morning: he closed our project!*

- *How?*

- *He told us he didn't want our project in his district anymore. We no longer have the right to work in the villages. Even our office is closed!*

- *Hold on. Calm down. Did you receive anything in writing?*

- *No, he gave us the order to leave the area. He was raging mad!*

- *Well. You're going to gather your team and tell them that I will be in charge of communicating directly with the Governor. Sure, this mining story has him hot, but in my opinion, he's overstepped his jurisdiction.*

- *Everyone is in shock here, and...*

- *Cancel the field visits for today and ask the teams in the villages to return.*

- *What do we do?*

- *Give me a moment and I'll call you back.*

I put the handset back on the phone.

- *Can you get me the District Governor's number?*

- *He's on the line!*

I take a deep breath:

- *Sabaidee! This is a call from Vientiane. We were informed of your decision. I would be grateful if you could give us a written notice providing the reasons for the closure of our project.*

- *Nothing can be communicated in writing. You must comply with orders!*

The tone is dry. The message, without appeal.

- *I understand. However, I would like to remind you that we have signed an agreement with the central authorities here in Vientiane for this project, and that we need to inform them of these latest developments. Moreover, as an international organization, we also have to communicate this to the Department of Foreign Affairs. Hence, the need for a written document to which we can refer.*

I perceive a slight flutter at the other end of the line. Our conversation will stop there. I phone back to my team in Xieng Khouang.

- *Well, it's Friday. All of you just start your weekend now. We'll stay in touch and see how things go.*

In the afternoon, the District Governor calls our local branch back and tells the project staff that they have the right to work in the office, but cannot go out into the field. Meanwhile, I inform our government partner in Vientiane of the situation. My interlocutor confirms that the Governor does not have the power to close a project. He promises to go himself to the North to settle this matter. Four days later, even before our government partner lands in Xieng Khouang, the Governor reverses his decision and authorizes the resumption of activities.

The following week, as the Prime Minister orders that an investigation be conducted by central authorities into this gold exploitation site, I will go and meet the Governor to thank him for having authorized the continuation of our project.

*In a district of Xieng Khouang Province,
September, 2012*

- *The Governor is ready to receive us*, she says, as she pulls up the collar of her jacket.

- *So, let's go.*

We walk up the only paved road that runs through the county town leading to the Vietnamese border. The air is fresh due to the altitude, and we cross paths with schoolchildren whose cheeks are reddened by the wind. We enter the building that houses the district authorities, perched on a hill towards the back of the city. A woman wrapped in a large multicolored shawl takes us into the Governor's office.

He does not get up, remains stuck in his chair, looking extremely annoyed. I smile at him and take a seat in front of him. After some common courtesies, it is he who addresses the subject of the contaminated river. He hardly listens to me. I venture to bring out a copy of the legal texts governing the rights of persons affected by investment projects.

A few months earlier, when the district became a special economic zone and mining projects began to multiply, I had already stressed the importance of implementing these provisions. But one of the officials then swung a copy of the decree in question on the table, saying:

- *That's applicable in Vientiane. It does not apply here.*

The governor seems to relax a little.

- *You know, it's true that we rushed a bit for this mining operation. But we don't have much time...*

- *What do you mean?*

- *We don't have much time before the area gets flooded. At least we have to retrieve the gold from the river.*

- *Flooded? But where? Why?*
- *The Vietnamese are building a hydroelectric dam just over the border. It will flood six villages in Laos along the river...*

A few days later, I am called by the Swiss Development Cooperation Office in Vientiane in connection with the issue of the contaminated river. While I hope to find in my Swiss compatriot an ally in this affair, I am quickly disillusioned.

- *The Vice Minister mentioned the other day that you wrote directly to the Prime Minister?*
- *What do you mean?*
- *Yes, it seems that you are sending letters to the Prime Minister about a problem in a village up in the North.*
- *I see. First of all, I never sent a letter to the Prime Minister. I reported to our government partner on a problem that affects a village in an area where we are working. My letter then was handed to the Minister, who in turn told the Prime Minister about it. The latter ordered an investigation and we are pretty much satisfied.*

While the actions of a Swiss national are closely monitored, the subject of the contaminated river is hardly touched during our conversation...

In a café in Vientiane, October 17th, 2012

The Asia-Europe People's Forum has opened: hotels are taken by storm. The cafés in the city center serve as improvised meeting rooms for the organizers, who finalize the details of the various sessions and events planned for the next three days.

- *We should have a large gathering of all the Forum participants in front of the Palace of Culture! It would be an opportunity for everyone to make their causes known, with banners and distribution of pamphlets!* says an enthusiastic European.

I sigh. These people have not yet understood in what country it is that they have landed. I am glad that the representatives of the Laotian government present in the lobby did not hear this suggestion, and, taking advantage of the fact that they are moving away a little, I slip to the small group:

- *My dear friends, let me remind you that we are in Laos and that mass rallies are hardly allowed.*
- *What?* asks a tall blonde with disheveled hair. *A People's Forum without a demonstration?*
- *Yes... Demonstrations are prohibited.*
- *We could try to change things,* suggests a young Asian, with a smirk.
- *We're working on it, I assure you! But I advise against carrying out any coup de force during the People's Forum. This would trigger reprisal against the*

Laotians involved in the organizing of this event.

- *So, no demonstrations,* concludes a tall fellow with a strong Germanic accent

In the afternoon, we have to debate a sensitive issue: land grabbing. Numerous participants to this session are already flocking in. The room is full and people begin to fill the side stairs, sitting on the floor. On the platform, the moderator announces the speakers: Thai activists, a Romanian woman, Laotian villagers who have lost their land, Cambodian women who have just been released after being incarcerated in their country for opposing their eviction from Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh. But the seats reserved for the Laotian villagers remain empty...

Security officials had told them not to speak to international organizations nor to foreign journalists. Two of the three scheduled speakers backed out. I still hope that one Laotian participant will take part in the panel. The day before the session, I inform him that the government will be in the room. He confirms his participation. I feel he is determined.

But the next day, just before the session begins, he comes to see me and whispers into my ear that he won't speak. He was summoned by the police and they threatened that he would be taken away *"if he did what isn't appropriate to do."* For having defended his rights and those of the other members of his group, he is already on file as a protest leader. Like the others, he will be present among the audience, keeping silent.

During the debate, government led orchestrated interventions are an affront to the truth: Laotians would speak *"on behalf of villagers,"* reading out printed statements favorable to the Government's policy and attempting to deny any problem, refute any shortcomings, or invalidate any criticism of the Laotian system. I will finally be alone on the stage to talk about the challenges faced by those who lose their land in Laos. The first challenge I mention is that of having Laotians to come and speak on the subject in this People's Forum. Without lowering either eyes or voice before this audience where government officials are mixing in.

Vientiane, October 18th, 2012

Today, at the People's Forum, we are talking again about land evictions and how to better organize to defend the rights of affected communities. Just before the beginning of the session, I am introduced to a young woman from a southern province. She expresses her interest in the subject and informs me that in her village, too, land evictions have taken place. I invite her to tell her story if she wants to, because there will be many similar experiences that will be shared this morning by people from various countries of the Mekong region and even beyond.

The debate is open. She asks for the floor. As she speaks, Government officials in the audience stand up and take her picture. Then, at the coffee break, the same people approach and reprimand her, reproaching her speech, making her understand that, as a Laotian, she should not speak in this way. The young woman bursts into tears in the cafeteria, in front of more than a hundred witnesses. The Cambodian women of Boeung Kak Lake soothe her, and although the Laotian lady does not understand a word of Khmer, it is the gestures of universal solidarity that comfort and that say: *“You did what you had to do. Don’t be afraid. We have known hardships in our own country, but we regret nothing. You are in the right.”*

I feel responsible, because I am on the Forum’s organizing committee and because I helped prepare this session. Revolted by these maneuvers meant to impose silence, I approach the women who are the source of intimidation and inquire as to what happened, pointing at the young Laotian in tears.

- *It's nothing, Anne-Sophie, you know Laotians are always a little shy to talk, they reply.*

- *I don’t think she seemed shy or uncomfortable when she spoke earlier. What did you say to her?*

- *Oh, you know between Laotians, the usual stuff. We asked which village she comes from...*

- *Yes, but this doesn’t explain why she is in such a state right now.*

Around us, a crowd has formed. With poise, my interlocutor tries another dodgy explanation. I cut her off:

- *Listen, I don’t know exactly what was said, but what is clear is that any form of intimidation against people speaking in this Forum is unacceptable. It is a People's Forum, not a Government meeting. Everyone must be able to feel comfortable talking.*

She gives me a dark look and changes her tone, throwing at me:

- *The problem with you, Anne-Sophie, is that you love the people too much!*

- *If you consider that to be a problem, then, yes, I am a problem.*

Unfortunately, the intimidation, far from ceasing, turns into threats. The young woman receives text messages accusing her of treason: *“Lao people who commit treason do not deserve to live in this country.”*

Meeting room in Vientiane, October 20th, 2012

The People's Forum ended yesterday. Today, a final meeting between the organizers is taking place. Quite a few of us want to use this opportunity to come back to the many incidents that have tarnished this event: speeches orchestrated by the government; intimidation of participants; threats against certain speakers; biased

media coverage; and the missing pages in the copies of Sombath Somphone's speech intended for distribution to the participants.

The meeting kicks off and time is for congratulations: this People's Forum has broken attendance records. Everyone's comments are generally positive. Sombath Somphone, who co-chairs the meeting, remains silent. I sense he is torn between a determination to raise more sensitive issues and a caution that prevents him doing so in front of this audience, which includes both government officials and international representatives. It is soon 11 o'clock and no one has yet touched on the upsetting subjects. I glance at my closest allies, and I feel that no one is going to take any initiative. I stand up and take the floor:

- *I haven't said anything until now, because I share the positive comments that were made by others. However, we must also discuss the incidents that have occurred. As organizers of this Forum, we share a responsibility for success, but also for shortcomings and failures.*

I start talking about the more problematic points. Government officials around the table receive calls on their mobile phones. I will later learn that a microphone had been installed in the room and that our discussions were being listened to outside.

- *The most serious incident involves threats that are still ongoing. As we are lucky to have on our Organizing Committee government representatives, we are counting on your cooperation to ensure that such actions cease.*

A man sitting beside me intervenes, outraged by my words.

- *You have no proof of what you are saying!*

- *We can provide you with a picture of three text messages received, as well as the phone number used to send them.*

- *It might be... from another participant or from someone from civil society who is not happy with what this young lady has said!*

- *Yes, and that is why we are asking for your assistance in identifying the holder of this phone number and conducting an investigation.*

An investigation will be conducted, but against the person who has been threatened. Her parents, the people in her village, the organization she works for, all will be questioned, and the focus will be put on finding flaws in her testimony to discredit her. On the other hand, nothing will be done to identify the perpetrator of the threats.

October 22nd, 2012

Message:

The young lady continues to be harassed.

Sombath

*In my office in Vientiane,
October 25th, 2012*

An article is published in the *Vientiane Times*:

“The work has begun on a new six-lane highway that will cut through Vientiane (...). Namtha Road-Bridge Construction Company Director said the whole project is expected to cost more than US\$70 million and construction will take three years (...) Vientiane authorities are providing compensation to households along both sides of the road who will lose their land, which will be sold to commercial operations upon completion of the road so the construction company can recoup its costs. Compensation for villagers affected by the road link itself is more than 80 percent complete, enabling the developer to start clearing land prior to construction, while negotiations will continue with landowners whose properties are slated for later development. (...) Vientiane Mayor Mr. Soukanh Mahalath spoke to the local press recently about the project.”

I begin to write a comment:

“Two information that you will not find in this article:

1) The contract signed between Namtha Road-Bridge Construction Company and Vientiane authorities provides for compensation rate at 100 mio kip per hectare to be contributed to for 40% by the government and 60% by the company. Once the road will be completed, the land on the sideway will be sold again at a much higher price and benefit will be shared between the government (40%) and the company (60%). However in reality, affected people receive much less, sometimes only 5 mio kip per hectare. This means 500 kip per m² which is about 100 times less than current market price (currently estimated at 47'000 kip per m² for this area).

2) Namtha Road-Bridge Construction Company's owner has a son who is married to the daughter of Vientiane Mayor, Soukanh Mahalath. The two families jointly found Complex Land Development Company which will be involved in developing the same area.

In such arrangements, affected people are put in a very weak position to negotiate due to collusion of interests between the company and the government (...)

I am thinking of the farmer who took the risk of showing me the contract between the Mayor of Vientiane and this construction company. I am thinking of the other one who took the risk of making a copy of this contract to bring it to the village. I am thinking of this friend who explained to me the undertones of the affair and the kinship ties that unite the two families. I am thinking of the peasant organization leader who wanted to negotiate and who was detained at the police station until he signed a document of which he was not even allowed to have a copy. I am thinking of all these families, finally, who find themselves despoiled of their lands and who have no other recourse but to accept ridiculous compensation... All of them deserve to be supported. All of them deserve better than silence.

I bring my hand to my computer keyboard. I am on an on-line discussion site read by many development partners, Laotians and internationals, and also by Government people... My index finger lightly touches, but does not push down, the *send* key. I know it's explosive, because there are numbers and names. But how can we hope to counter corruption and the collusion of interests if these practices are not first made public? I put slight pressure on the *send* key. It's sent! My message is posted in the on-line forum.

It will not arouse any reaction from readers, and the only allusions that will be made will come from some diplomats, apparently more concerned with my security than with the resolution of the villagers' problems...

Alas!

In my office in Vientiane, November 1st, 2012

As we seek to obtain news on the results of the investigation carried out in connection with the threats against the young woman during the People's Forum, my colleague and I receive the following message from a person attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs : (...) *I personally very appreciate your performance. You are real actresses who well organized a stage. I just want to remind you that to justice without evidence is against the Law. (...) As I know government and mass organizations who participated in the workshop you organized on that day were not many and they are not good at IT and no one to take picture of the young lady. (...). Anne-Sophie, you should not blame only government or mass organizations people did negative thing. (...).*

Signed: K.

While we are asking for governmental assistance to investigate, we are accused of having fabricated evidence and having broken the law. I feel increasingly under pressure and share my concerns with Sombath, telling him that it is becoming more and more difficult for me to pursue this matter.

Vientiane, November 13th, 2012

A Laotian working for a local organization shares with me a message sent by K: *"Why did they investigate the young lady? It is because she spoke in the meeting (AEPF) (...). The result of investigation that was not true as she spoke. (...) I also would like to know who paid for her to participate and encourage to speak. (...) I think you should warn NPA (local associations) people not to report any things of domestic issue to NGOs (international). Otherwise, small thing will become BIG thing..."*

Signed K.

November 15th, 2012

Message:

My key objective to meet with K. is to search for ways to work this out peacefully and also find ways to heal the pain and fear of the young lady who was threatened.
Sombath

November 17th, 2012

Message:

I went yesterday to meet K. I was the only representative of civil society. K. had brought three other people from the Government. I went there alone with the intention of talking to K. one-on-one, in order to treat this case in a friendly way and to avoid any confrontation. (...).

Sombath

Sombath will tell me that during this interview, he felt like an accused under interrogation. I share with him my fears, telling him that, personally, I have reached the limit of what I can do without putting myself in danger. But Sombath is determined, because the young woman's situation remains alarming, and he continues to be confident in the possibility of engaging the Government in a constructive way.

November 23rd, 2012

Message :

I will take a cautious approach, starting with the need for civil society organizations to better understand this case. I will justify my process by the fact of my having been assigned as co-chair of this People's Forum, and in this capacity, I feel accountable for what is happening. So, I'll simply ask questions, and I will share the answers given with the other members of Laotian civil society. If all this has resulted from an order coming from the highest level, I would also like to know...

Sombath

November 21st, 2012

In a few days, the big annual meeting of the development partners will be held: the famous Round Table Meeting. While this year local associations have been invited, as to international organizations, the number of participants in the Round Table Meeting continues to decline year after year. For 2012, only five seats will be filled -- either with directors newly arrived in the country or with organizations newly created or people known to "behave themselves." Although having been very

involved in the political dialogue in several sectors and having provided the acting spokesperson of international NGOs in the past, our organization is not invited to the party. I decide to send a personal letter to five aid agencies in order to draw their attention to the increasingly less credible nature of this Round Table Meeting. I urge them to not underestimate certain realities, enjoining them to cooperate with the most progressive elements in a system that is seeking to impose silence.

Thus begins my letter:

*“Dear Partners in Development,
We are working in a challenging environment: this is a country governed by a single Party regime, where there is little space for meaningful democratic debate, and when taking advantage of that limited space, repercussions often follow (...).”*

I could not imagine how the sequence of events that would follow would tragically prove me right.

Chapter Eight

Expelled

- *Mom, why are the people crying?*
- *Because I have to leave.*
- *But you often leave and the people don't cry?!*
- *Safira Sweetie, the people are crying because I'm not coming back.*

December 9th, 2012

“These last forty-eight hours should probably have been dark days. Thanks to all of you, they will remain engraved in my heart as a luminous memory.”

I feel privileged to have received, heard, felt so much. So many words, gestures, tears...

My office in Vientiane, December 7th, 2012

I have just arrived at our organization's office. It is still early. Most of my co-workers are not yet here. I exchange a few words with the young lady in charge of the maintenance of our premises. She begins her day before the others, sweeps the rooms, washes the floors, dusts the furniture. This morning, she tried once again to bring a bit of order to my desk, gathering the loose sheets of paper into a pretty stack, which I hurry to undo, all the while thanking her. I take a quick look at my agenda while opening my messages. Again, this story of peasants threatened with losing their lands. Negotiations are still ongoing, but the fix is in, the cards are marked: a juicy deal between the Governor of Vientiane and the in-laws' company, against a handful of villagers who are demanding fair compensation. The game's outcome is predictable. There's also this river in the North, contaminated by mining operations: the Government has ordered an investigation, but the "investigators" were content to speak to the local authorities without questioning the villagers themselves. I have to go there accompanied by Vientiane officials who really want to know what is going on.

Also on top of the stack on my desk: this agreement we cannot reach with the government to start a new project to strengthen peasant organizations. In addition to governmental partnership, we want to partner with a local organization. In this case, we want to cooperate with Sombath Somphone's organization, PADETC. We are already working together on other initiatives, and the Government often asks questions. The Ministry of Agriculture agrees, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is causing problems. I have spent the last few days on letters and phone calls, trying to convince them. My main contact is not helpful, and has been watching our organization very closely for some time. I'm trying to get an appointment with his boss, but I get the feeling that he is blocking my efforts.

- *Sabaidee!* the secretary yells to me from my doorway.

- *Sabaidee, my dear!*
 - *Foreign Affairs have called. You have an appointment this morning.*
 - *Good! I think it's about our agreement with PADETC. Is Ni here? We could go together.*
 - *Yes, she's here.*
 - *So, let's go.*
- I go down the stairs. Passing the large supply cabinet, I remember that we should send another batch of information leaflets to our project in the South. Other villagers need to know about their rights.
- *Sabaidee, Ni!*
 - *Sabaidee! We're going to meet with Foreign Affairs?*
 - *Yes, we're going right away. It shouldn't be long.*

We get into my small car and we leave. Ni is a young Laotian woman who joined us nearly three years ago. She is motivated, seems to understand the stakes, and is not afraid to discover new things: although she had barely ever left her native Laos, she had the opportunity to participate in an exchange within our organization and she flew alone to... Burkina Faso! She returned from there delighted.

- *I hope we'll get good news, she says.*
- *We'll see. In any case, I don't see what else could still be argued! I finally suggested that if we could not reach this partnership agreement with PADETC, we will drop the project.*

She looks at me with round eyes from behind the lenses of her glasses.

- *Ni, I said that, but it doesn't mean that we will give up our activities on the ground! If they put up roadblocks, we need to look for other paths...*

She sighs, then murmurs:

- *It's so frustrating. We want to bring assistance and we need to expend so much energy to get the official approvals...*
- *Ni, you know this country better than I do.*

We reach the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I drive around the building in search of a parking space. In vain. We find ourselves at the exit gate. On the right, a space is reserved on the wide sidewalk for motorcycle parking. I lower my window and ask the guard if I can just park my car there. He answers in a dry tone: "*Bo day!*" Not authorized! After a smile and a few words in Lao, he nevertheless graciously moves a couple of motorcycles to allow me to park two steps from the entrance.

Once inside the building, we climb the steps leading to the first floor. In the narrow hallway, I stop in front of the Secretariat's door, gently give three discreet knocks, and enter. I greet the known faces. I am answered hastily and shown to the meeting room. One of the staff, with whom I had sympathized during a recent joint field visit, quickly drops his head. Pretending to be absorbed by a document, he avoids my gaze. I am used to these changes of mood, ranging from connivance to

exasperation. Depending on the issues raised and the support given at a higher level, our relationships run hot and cold.

- *Madame is waiting for you.*

We are led to the office of the Director, who beckons us to sit in the meeting room. She appears soon afterwards, her features drawn and her face tired. She greets us, then announces that she wants to start with the issue of the tripartite agreement, giving us to understand that there is more than one item on today's agenda. We therefore begin a discussion that seems to lead nowhere. To summarize, international organizations are under the purview of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; local organizations are subject to the oversight of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs. It is therefore not possible for an international organization such as ours to sign a project agreement with a local organization such as PADETC. We have no choice: the official partner is the Government.

- *I certainly understand that this is the situation today. However, I think it would be good for this regulation to be loosened in order to allow for multiple partnerships. Laotian organizations could more easily take over projects of international organizations that are coming to term; this would work in favor of a greater sustainability of development actions.*

She seems to already want to address the next topic. Nervously, she begins by praising our organization, stressing the quality of the work we deliver, hoping to see our projects extend to other provinces of the country. I'm nodding my head, a smile on my lips. I'm waiting for what's next:

- *I have been informed of this letter sent last November 21st, just before our Round Table meeting.*

She looks at me and her voice hardens, as if she were trying to give herself a certain composure.

- *I myself was disappointed by the contents of this letter. You have campaigned against the Government's interests. You have violated the laws and the Constitution of Laos.*

I anticipate the outcome of her speech, because I am aware of the gravity of the accusations against me. To my side, Ni, whom I dare not look at, is falling apart. She continues:

- *As a result, the Government has determined that your presence in Laos is no longer justified. You have forty-eight hours to leave the country.*

She looks at me. I have not moved, still sitting straight, hands together at my knees. Not a single gesture that betrays any emotion whatsoever. I have not lowered my eyes and I still affect the same smile. She adds:

- *The organization is not affected by this decision and is invited to pursue its activities in Laos.*

She pauses for a moment and awaits my reaction.

- *It's an unfortunate decision, I say in a composed voice. For two reasons, at least. First of all, this decision regrettably validates the contents of my letter. Then, too, I think that this decision will be far more damaging to the image of your*

Government than all that I could have said or written.

Her hands tighten on the large envelope containing the decision she is supposed to hand over to me. I continue:

- *The Laotian Constitution and your laws are good. I believe I have promoted them, working for the respect of these legal texts, rather than infringing on them.*

Her gaze softens. She tells me:

- *Anne-Sophie, you were given twenty-four hours to leave Laos. I insisted, saying that you have a large family and that deadline is too short. They gave you forty-eight hours. That's all I could negotiate.*

She indirectly confirms what I suspect: the decision comes from elsewhere. It is the Party, probably the Politburo. I conclude:

- *You know, I assume full responsibility for what I did and what I said. So, I will not seek to oppose this decision and I will leave Laos within the time limit imposed.*

She seems to relax, then makes me understand that she slept very little the previous night. She's the one who had to sign the expulsion letter. I ask her about my family.

- *This decision affects only Anne-Sophie.*

She turns to the two other officials who are attending the meeting, as if to seek confirmation of what she has just said. I take advantage of it:

- *I would really appreciate some clarification on that point. Could you tell me whom I can contact to discuss it?*

Embarrassed silence. I ask:

- *It's at the Public Security level, isn't it? Can you give me the name of the person in charge?*

- *No... That's not possible. But your husband and your children can stay. We will take care of them; they will be safe.*

I don't know if I should be reassured by these words. She places her hand on my knee:

- *Anne-Sophie, with respect to this decision, I hope you will not hold it against me personally.*

- *I understand your position. And I am sincerely sorry, because it will not be easy for you. You are the interface between the Government and the outside. It is you who will have to manage the possible reactions...*

- *You think there will be reactions? From whom?* she asks me anxiously.

- *I don't know. Maybe there will be reactions, maybe there won't be.*

Then the discussion takes a surreal turn.

- *Maybe Anne-Sophie can give us some advice on the answers to be given in case of a reaction...*

I smile.

- *Sorry, but for this, I cannot help you!*

Already, my thoughts are elsewhere. I must communicate this decision from the Laotian authorities to my husband. I have to let my children know that I have to

leave quickly. I have to tell them: "Your mother is expelled." I need to walk out of this place.

She gets up and slides towards me:

- *I hope we'll stay in touch.*

Then she hugs me and walks with me back into the hallway.

- *I know your secret, she says.*

I look at her, stunned.

- *I know you speak good Laotian. Better than you let on. You made a speech in Laotian in a northern province, in front of the district authorities. You're a bit Laotian.*

She smiles at me.

- *Good luck!*

- *Good luck as well.*

She gives me a little wave and disappears into the side hallway. I finally turn to Ni. She looks defeated and seems to be on the verge of tears.

- *Ni, I know it's not easy. Thank you for being there.*

- *What are we going to do?*

- *We'll go back to the office and I'll let everyone know.*

Back in the office, I call the entire team into our meeting room.

- *Everybody?*

- *Yes, everybody: the drivers, the guards, the cleaning ladies... all those who are here.*

We regularly gather the whole team, but it's usually for a happy event, a birthday... I take my place at the head of the table and stare at each of my co-workers, while telling myself that this is the last day I will spend with them. It's as if suddenly the hands of time had begun to turn more slowly, giving me the latitude to fully appreciate every minute that passes. I must not miss any of these privileged moments. Little by little, the chairs are filled. My colleagues cast me questioning glances -- half-curious, half-amused. I understand that Ni has said nothing. Perhaps a way to maintain the illusion of normalcy for a few minutes more.

Everyone is here and there is silence. I have to tell them. I take a deep breath and smile at them.

- *My dear colleagues, my dear friends. I have brought you together, because I have something to announce to you. And what I have to tell you is not easy. As you know, I have been working on sensitive issues to defend fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and also land rights. In doing so, I took risks.*

The faces are serious. Anxious looks are exchanged. I must not crack. I continue in a serene voice.

- *I must now accept the consequences. This morning, I was called to Foreign Affairs. I am subject to an expulsion order. I have forty-eight hours to leave Laos.*
A shockwave passes through the room. Most remain speechless.

- *This decision does not concern the organization. The projects will continue. It is only I who must leave.*

Some think they have misunderstood and ask for a translation in Laotian. Eyes red, someone asks:

- *What is the official reason?*

- *I violated the country's Constitution. They based their accusations on a letter I had sent to some development partners here in Vientiane.*

The first tears roll. The first movements of revolt are manifested:

- *Can't we negotiate?*

- *I think you know the system better than I do. Those who have made this decision are not used to negotiating.*

- *Yes, but the other international partners and the embassies will react! We must alert them! We're not going to let you leave just like that!*

- *It's Friday, and I think it's not by chance that this measure was communicated to me today. Embassies are closed on Friday afternoons. And I cannot wait until Monday, since I have only forty-eight hours...*

- *If you leave, I quit!*

- *Don't do that. The best response is to pursue our work. These kinds of measures should not affect our commitment. Those whom we support don't deserve that...*

Emotions become stronger and stronger. I also feel my cheeks becoming damp. Far from pitying myself regarding my fate, it is my co-workers' tears that move me. In a country where one does not easily express one's feelings, these demonstrations say much, all at once!

- *What are we going to do?*

- *Continue your work as best you can. This will be for me the most beautiful of responses you can give.*

A woman gets up and comes to kiss me. Another bursts into tears and hugs me.

- *No one will be able to replace you!*

- *No one is irreplaceable.*

- *But it won't be the same...*

- *It will be different, for each of us has his strengths and his weaknesses.*

- *And what do they say at our head office in Switzerland?*

- *They don't know yet. I'll call them in a few hours. It's still too early now.*

We put the tissues out. I keep smiling as best I can.

- *My dear ones, I must leave you for a moment. I have to go let my husband and children know. This expulsion has important consequences for the whole family.* I get up.

- *But you're coming back, aren't you?*

- *Give me time to settle some business and I'll come back as soon as possible.*

I leave the room, and already I feel a new strength invade me. This is not the time to give up. I must now announce this to the one who shares my life. I want to be

strong, for I need him to be strong. For our children.

I call him. He is at the French school.

- *Hello, Soso? I called you this morning, but I was told you were at Foreign Affairs. Are you done already?*

- *Yes, I have to talk to you. I'm on my way. See you in the café next to the school.*

I park the car, and as if I were walking in an unreal world, I push open the door to the café. My husband is at a table chatting with some friends. He looks at me. A single glance was enough for him to understand that something serious was happening. Before I had spoken a word, before I had even covered the few meters between us, he rose, took leave of his friends, and walked towards me.

- *Come on, let's go outside.*

He drags me outside the café.

- *Tikno, I begin, I have to go.*

- *When?*

I realize he has already understood. From the tone of my voice on the phone, he had guessed.

- *I have forty-eight hours.*

He takes me in his arms.

- *And the children?* he asks me.

- *You can stay here with them. You're not expelled from Laos. It's only me.*

He's been worried about my situation for quite some time now. I share everything with him, and he knows that my name has been on a blacklist for two years already. If he has always supported me in whatever actions I take, he also reminds me of the presence of the family.

He has behind him the experience of his own country, Indonesia, which lived under thirty years of military dictatorship with President Suharto. He knows that those who combine power and money always have the upper hand, and that others, even when they have the law on their side, don't obtain justice. For my part, conscious of taking risks and exposing myself to expulsion, I may have found myself deeply convinced that such a measure was now part of the past and would no longer be pronounced; I was certainly too confident in the ability of the Laotian regime to gradually make a shift towards greater tolerance. But for my husband, recent events, my involvement in the Asia-Europe People's Forum, and my growing commitment to land issues were a cause for concern.

- *Have you already alerted your organization?*

- *Here, yes. But for Switzerland, I'll wait another half-hour before calling.*

- *We must think of the children first. Come on, we'll talk to the school principal.*

The school principal is a friend. He welcomes us with pleasure. Tikno tells him

what's going on. He hesitates, not knowing if he should believe what he has just heard. It's true that in our circle of friends, my situation is the subject of jokes. Having a Laotian Government file with one's name on it, and continuing to push the boundaries ever further, isn't common. The possibility of an expulsion is sometimes invoked between two jokesters. But this time, it's serious. The headmaster collapses and slumps into his chair. He wants to comfort us, but the sentence has fallen and there is no remedy. There is no longer any hope for change. It's all about managing the situation.

- *Are the children aware?*
- *Not yet.*
- *You are all going leave? But where?*
- *In the immediate future, Tikno will stay here with the children.*
- *I can help you find another French school in the region... But it's not going to be easy.*
- *In any case, for the time being there are no alternatives: the children will continue school in Vientiane.*
- *Well, friends, we'll find solutions. Shall we have lunch together?*
- *Okay, but I have to call Switzerland first.*

I go outside, take a few steps along Thadeua Avenue and look for a shady and less noisy place. As I cross the entrance gate, I realize that I will not be returning to this school anymore. Even if my children continue to attend, I will not accompany them in the morning anymore. I turn into a narrow alley off at a perpendicular, while dialing the phone number. I walk mechanically and reach the end of the alley, which opens onto the Don Chan construction site: the shovels are at work -- and of the vegetable gardens, there remains only the memory.

At the other end of the line, no one answers. I dial the number again. After a few beeps, it's picked up. I explain the situation to him in two words. The connection isn't good and he is still on the bus. I perceive by his voice that he is dismayed by the Laotian authorities' decision and that he supports me. The next day, he writes to me: *"My thoughts are with you. Before being professionals, committed, we are mothers, fathers, individuals, unique in the face of life."*

During the lunch break with the headmaster and his wife, we discuss the children's situation. To impose a change of school on them during this academic year risks creating too many problems.

- *It is especially so for Amina, who has to take her French Baccalaureate exam in a few months. That's the most complicated. Changing schools now could have repercussions for her.*
- *Yes, and Fanny, who has her end-of-middle-school examination this year...*
- *And then Namori, with his developmental delay, who has a whole program in place to support him, including therapy sessions.*

So we're looking at a six-month separation, time for the children to finish the school year.

- *I'll settle just on the other side of the Mekong. We'll see each other on weekends...*

Early in the afternoon, I return to the office. There is great agitation: the ground-floor furniture has been taken out, mats laid on the ground, tables set up outside. A *baci* is being prepared, this Buddhist ceremony that marks important life events and allows everyone to offer blessings.

I remember one of my first *bacis*. It was in the context of one of our projects. Already aware of the challenges this country was facing, I had approached the Minister of Agriculture, and while knotting a cotton thread around his wrist, I made him this wish: "*Dear Minister, I wish that in your important position, you always have the wisdom to make the right decisions and the courage to change the others.*" He had looked at me with a smile and had answered, "*It's a good wish.*" The *baci* is celebrated for births, marriages, deaths, an illness, a moving, a return... Today, it will be for a departure.

I quickly inform the recipients of my notorious personal letter, of my imminent expulsion. But here are the representatives of a large aid agency with whom I had previously set a meeting, arriving at my office to inquire about the land-grabbing problems. I receive them, while warning them that time is of the essence. They are visibly shocked by the extreme nature of the measure pronounced against me, and promise to do something. In the afternoon, I receive a few calls from foreign delegations who say they are ready to intervene: "*A letter is about to be sent out!*" It seems, however, that the discussions around a possible joint intervention, first by the Europeans, then expanded to include other diplomatic delegations, has finally tempered certain fervors.

A meeting of international delegations will take place a few days later with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Most of foreign diplomats will leave frustrated by the Lao government's explanations. But in the end? No joint letter nor common position taken in reaction to my expulsion.

The *baci* ceremony begins. The master of ceremonies is already there, dressed in white, his woven white-and-black checked stole knotted around his torso. It is he who had officiated at the ceremony held a few months earlier when we moved into these new office. It was then a beautiful ritual in which, accompanied by Buddhist monks, I had climbed the steps, going to the first floor, one by one, progressing to the rhythm of the prayers between the lighted candles that formed a garland of light. I am drawn from my reverie by a hug, then arms stretch out, hands clench, and I finally realize: they have come, spontaneously, without invitation, just

because they have heard the news. They are numerous: friends, colleagues, members of our network, partners. Men, women; Laotians and foreigners. Even people I don't know. They come to show me their solidarity.

An immense rush of happiness invades me! There are no shouts, no cries to accompany these gestures of compassion. Just a dignified silence.

It is at this moment that Amina arrives. She has just finished school and does not yet know what has happened in the last few hours. I excuse myself from those around me, and I move forward to greet my daughter. I take her in my arms and whisper the news to her, while squeezing her hard. I feel her falter. I hold her, then I pull her inside gently. She looks at me gravely, but without reproach. Everyone takes a place on the mats, sitting on the ground. Amina takes a place beside me, and I keep her hand in mine. In the center of the room stands the traditional assemblage of banana leaves and flowers, stitched with sticks to which are tied the cotton threads that will serve for the blessings. The offerings have been arranged all around the central plateau. A long string of cotton is unrolled in the assembly, and each one grabs a portion, a symbol of communion. I feel Amina shudder. I take her by the shoulders; she stifles a sob. I must remain strong and not give in: for her and my family who must face this reality; for my co-workers who must pursue our engagement; and for all those who will continue the work we have begun. I don't want to show signs of weakness, because my message is clear: *"I have no regrets, and if I had it to do over again, I would do the same. I will continue to use my freedom to defend the freedom of others."*

We listen to the prayers marking the end of the ceremony, and the sticks circulate, each person taking a few threads. Then friends, colleagues, partners, acquaintances, and also those whom I barely know, come closer. One after another, they utter words of gratitude, encouragement, as they tie the cotton threads around my wrists. Kneeling, facing each other, we exchange looks, embraces, promises. We will never forget one another; we will stay in touch; the distance will not change anything. Words that come from the heart; wishes stifled in sobs, and silences full of emotions. My female co-workers are the most affected. They surround me in a group and give free rein to their tears. Moved, I console, try to find the words that comfort, clasp hands. Wet cheeks stick against my face; we hug while mixing our tears and our prayers. These are moments of extreme intensity, when time and space seem suddenly to be erased so as to leave room for the present moment. Then everyone winds up on the terrace. Overwhelmed by such a wave of support, I take the floor in my turn to talk about the privilege of having received so much, the feeling of such solidarity, the fact that I am taking full responsibility for my actions, my determination that remains intact, and my confidence that the story will continue. I thank all those who make these last hours in Laos a luminous memory.

Atias, my son, then appears at the entrance to the garden. Surprised by the presence of this crowd, he pauses. I go to meet him and Amina joins me in welcoming her brother. Affected, he weeps in silence and holds me in his arms. Adrian, the eldest, arrives a little later. Amina had asked him to stop by. He is in shock and remains mute for several hours. The night envelops us. Little by little, as new people arrive, others begin to take leave. We swear we'll meet again.

Much later, we are on our way to the house. A part of the family is not yet aware of what is happening. At this late hour of the night, the twins are already asleep. My youngest daughter, Fanny, is waiting for us on the bench at the entrance. She seems to guess.

- *Fanny, I have something to tell you.*

She stares at me gravely, then asks:

- *We're expelled?*

- *No my darling, not "we," only me...*

- *You have to leave?*

- *Yes.*

- *When?*

- *Tomorrow.*

She falls into my arms.

- *I love you.*

- *I love you, too, Sweetie.*

I call my eldest daughter, Ili, who is studying in France. Despite the distance, I feel her emotion. She very well knows the fight I am leading here. When she was still in Vientiane, she chose to write an article on the rubber plantations for the school newspaper. She had treated the subject broadly, touching as well upon the risks taken by those who question this path for sustainable development, referring to the disappearance of a man – a promoter of ecotourism -- who had dared to consider the extension of industrial plantations as being incompatible with other ways of generating revenues by valuing this beautiful environment. There, on the other end of the line, I feel her helplessness. At this moment, the distance between us is cruel.

We spend the rest of the night talking on the terrace with friends, remembering the good times spent together and inventing ways to write the next chapters of our friendship. It is my last night in Vientiane.

Vientiane, December 8th, 2012

This morning, Amina posts on her Facebook page: *"Mummy, I'm so proud of you!"*

Saturday, December 8th, is the Christmas Market. Children enliven it with games, and so we go early to the Simuang field. Tents are set up under the trees, tables are placed in front of food stands, loudspeakers broadcast festive music. Families stroll around; kids chase each other; young people flirt a little on the side. There is a good-natured atmosphere and the majority of the francophone community seems to have come to this place. The news of my expulsion has spread rapidly since the day before, and I receive many expressions of sympathy. I am offered a drink, a few gifts, signs of attention, small souvenirs. Laotian men and women come to talk to me. Some tell me of their indignation, others their incomprehension about this measure, which suddenly reveals a very dark side of the regime in power. I hear harsh words, which I had never heard before, and I see tears of revolt flowing, not of resignation. Friends of my children approach me to hug me, to tell me of their admiration. I hear one little girl say to my son: *"It must be so cool to have a mother like yours!"* I feel overwhelmed with sharp emotion: these words from children, what I read in their eyes, moves me. I am so grateful to them, for it is they who will now accompany my children in this new daily life without me.

But the hour is advancing and I must soon leave the territory. I am told that people are waiting for me at the organization's office, to say good-bye. I return home to pack a few things. I go to our neighbors' home to take leave; inform our landlord that I must go; explain to the dog that I will not see him again. I bring a suitcase, not too big, as if I should be away for only a few days. Besides, as far as my youngest children -- who are only six years old -- know, we are leaving together for a weekend in Thailand. The events happened one after the other, and until the following Sunday, this version will hold good. I will tell the six-year-olds the rest of the story in a few hours, when we find ourselves on the other side of the border. Before leaving our dwelling, I go around one last time: our bedroom, so familiar, where nothing betrays this hasty departure; the view of the rice fields all around, which suggests continuity; the dishes from the previous day in the kitchen sink, that I no longer have time to wash. A last caress to the cats; a look at the garden greens that I will not taste; a last pleasurable appreciation of the orchids that bloom in the garden. I want to fix everything in my memory, since I will not return. As we are about to leave, our housekeeper rushes towards the end of the road. I get out of the car. She holds me in her arms as she sobs.

There are vehicles parked along the street leading to our organization's office. I am welcomed, surrounded, embraced. We take a few last pictures. The moment of separation is near and the tears flow again.

- *Why are the people crying?* asks Safira, the youngest of my children.
- *Because I have to leave.*
- *But you often leave and the people don't cry!*
- *Safira, Sweetie, the people are crying because I'm not coming back.*

I would have liked to tell her in another way. I feel suddenly helpless. There is no good way to deliver bad news to a six-year-old girl. I suddenly feel the need to put an end to so many intense emotions. I announce that I'm going to have to leave. Saying good-bye is an ultimate challenge. A convoy is organized, some wishing to accompany me to the bridge. I quickly go upstairs, glance at my desk. Everything has remained as it was: the files to be followed-up on, the notes to be finalized, the documents to be read. Unable to determine what I should bring, I just pick up two wooden statuettes brought back from my previous assignment in Mali, and an old photo that had been pinned to the wall. I go back downstairs while gazing around the premises one last time, and I finally leave the building. Through the car window, arms are stretched out for a final handshake, then move over heads to wave hands until we turn the corner.

We drive along Thadeua Avenue and I scrutinize every detail. Between the buildings on my right, I seize furtive glances at the Mekong, which is dyed orange in the brightness of this end of day. We reach the border post and gather again with those who have come. A considerate colleague takes care of my passport, sparing me the last formalities at Immigration. Another takes a photo of the exit stamp, using his cell phone, proving that I left the territory within the time limit. Final embraces. We are on the bridge that spans the Mekong. The first shreds of twilight in the sky. I realize that I will never cross this bridge again...

I was then far from suspecting that my expulsion would be the first act of a drama that would strike a friend and ally. Sombath's abduction a week later will reveal new repercussions to this matter, which will continue to be spoken about for many months...

April 30th, 2013

In an article about Sombath Somphone, the BBC is reporting again on my expulsion, which now seems to be one of the incidents that is referred to in relation to the repression in Laos. Or at least that has helped to unveil some part of what is really happening in this country”:

“The People’s Forum was a chance for Lao grassroots organizations to meet and speak with activists and campaigners from around the world. It was unprecedented by Lao standards. Mr Sombath was a key part of the organising committee and he helped run a regional discussion process that then contributed at the international meeting in Vientiane. ‘Never had citizens here been consulted in that way before’ a member of the Lao aid community said. Some excitedly hailed the meeting as a sign that the political space was beginning to open up. But for some members of the ruling elite in Laos, it was clearly a step too far. In December, the head of the Swiss

organization, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, was expelled for 'breaking the rules.' Ms Gindroz had just written an email to partners critical of the Lao government and the lack of freedom of speech. She had also been heavily involved in the People's Forum. 'They did what they know best,' another Lao aid worker said, on condition of anonymity. 'They expelled the head of an international NGO and in the process scared all the local ones.' Ms Gindroz was told to leave Laos on 7 December. Just over a week later, Mr. Sombath was stopped at the police checkpoint."

Meanwhile, in Vientiane, on the edge of the Simuang field, there where the Christmas Market took place, a wall is tagged: "Soso was here." Tribute from the street.

Chapter Nine

Exiled

Exile imposed a physical distance on me and threw me onto still-unexplored paths, sometimes triggering beautiful emotions of a rare intensity, sometimes trapping me in painful wanderings. Distance allows for retrospection and a different point of view regarding one's own existence.

Udon Thani, northern Thailand, December 8th, 2012

I have just crossed the Mekong. I have trouble realizing that the stamp affixed to my passport when I left Laos indicates finality. I will never again cross the river from the Thai side to the Laotian one. I had thought first of settling down on the Thai riverside, just opposite Vientiane, in order to facilitate contacts and shorten the distance that now separates me from my children. But I was advised to go farther. Because my being so close could be perceived as a provocation and trigger a sense of fear. A fear that could open the way to foolish reactions. I am not able to judge whether these recommendations are well-grounded. I don't know whether I have to give in to what seems to me to be paranoia. But I follow this advice. Because it was offered by more than one person. By people who know what they are talking about.

I feel a certain dismay as the vehicle turns toward the highway that will take us to the neighboring province, and anxiety is growing bit by bit as the kilometers click away. This wide ribbon of asphalt that the car is swallowing is the sudden and physical evidence of the distance that will separate me from my loved ones. This is a one-way trip. For me. I choose to stay in a small hotel in Udon Thani, a city in northern Thailand. Udon Thani is not unknown to me. That is where we have gone from Vientiane for shopping, to supplement our groceries. It is also where we come to deal with any health problem requiring serious care. These trips never took more than a few days. But now, I am going to stay here. For a few weeks or a few months. I am still not sure. Will I be able to go back to Vientiane, or will there be another, still-unknown destination? I am sure of nothing.

The only thing slowly making its way into my mind is that this room of a few square meters and this suitcase where I hastily packed a few clothes, a toothbrush, three books, a wooden Buddha, and the precious gifts that were hurriedly given to me by some friends who had been caught off-guard and by incredulous co-workers, this will become my everyday life.

***Hotel room in Udon Thani, northern Thailand,
December 9th, 2012***

My eldest daughter Ili sends me a message from France, where she is studying:
"I love you, Mum, and I am so proud to have a Mum like you, so proud that you commit yourself so much to defend a democratic ideal."

I woke up early, because I want to enjoy every moment before having to say good-bye to the children. The family spent the night with me in this small hotel room. In a few hours, their departure will seal our separation. Each of us tries to affect a certain air of nonchalance, as if we were an ordinary family spending an ordinary Sunday by the side of an ordinary swimming pool. Tomorrow is a school day, and the family must be on its way. I dread this moment, and I know that Namori, the youngest one, doesn't understand why I am not climbing into the car with them. We hide our tears as best we can, trying to convince ourselves that time will pass quickly and that we will soon be reunited.

For my work, I used to travel regularly for periods of longer than a week, leaving my children with my husband. But this forced separation is totally different. I smile to them from the hotel parking lot, but when I am back in my room, I burst into tears even before the door closes.

Hotel room in Udon Thani, December 10th, 2012

Monday morning. I wake up. Alone. I am starting my first week of exile.

I don't have the courage to go for breakfast. Mechanically, I switch on my computer. In an on-line discussion group, an expat who is working in Laos has just posted the following message:

"Anne-Sophie has so clearly stood up and in clear and diplomatic terms expressed her concerns about the rights of Lao citizens. Her example reminds us all that we should have been doing more. Beyond the immediate reactions of dismay and outrage, this example is a wake-up call to us all. I can recall too many occasions when it would have been appropriate for individuals and organizations to speak out, but nothing was said for fear of retribution. Maybe speaking up then would have provided a space for others to speak more openly, rather than almost all of us shamefacedly staying silent. We cannot speak up in retrospect, but we can reflect on how better we can speak up in the future. This would make Anne-Sophie's selfless contribution to the Lao people tangible and enduring."

I feel an intense emotion. It is not the praise for my action that moves me, but rather this call for action. If many people pick up the torch, all this will not have been in vain. My expulsion must not be seen as a threat, but as a catalyst. It demonstrates the relevance of the fight and the importance of pursuing it. To me, this is what is most essential.

Same hotel room, Udon Thani, December 11th, 2012

My expulsion likewise arouses reactions among Laotian men and women.

Sombath writes:

“Since Anne-Sophie’s letter is a personal one and addressed to the donor partners, I do not understand how did it reach the Government of Laos and gets its formal reaction. From this point of view, I feel that the donor partners should come together and decide how to react or how to respond. Doing nothing will not get us out of the transition and more significantly, it will be without lessons learned. Big donors should take the lead on this case. (...) This is my initial reaction.”

I was far from thinking that this message would be the last message that I would receive from my respected friend Sombath Somphone.

On the same day, the following article is published in the *Vientiane Times*:
“Progress is being made with human rights policy, following increased participation in international treaties and the inclusion of citizens in decision making, according to the Lao government. Lao and international officials made the statement at a meeting held in Vientiane recently to mark Human Rights Day under this year theme “Inclusion and the Right to Participate in Public Affairs.”

What irony! I seriously question the capacity and the will of these aid agencies to react as Sombath would wish. Three days after my expulsion, everybody is congratulating the Laotian government on its respect of fundamental rights. Laos is making progress in the right direction. Only four days before the abduction of Sombath...

I switch off my computer. I breathe in deeply and I close my eyes. As I stretch out on my bed, my thoughts are of my children. I pay them tribute by writing this poem:

They have separated us, such resonating misfortune
Time was counted out for me, barely forty-eight hours
To leave this country that was our home
A slice entire of our life together, three years and more

I paid the price quite dearly for all my commitment
A brutal fate, and without warning
But I accept it here with no regret, as a conscious choice
That forged in its efforts a fighting spirit

This determination, a resounding oath
This source of inspiration, I owe it to you
You are always trusting, following my steps
And nothing is more powerful than the love of one’s child

I drew from your faith, this strength to resist
I heard in your voice, the answers to give
I found in your hopes, this need to move forward
I saw in your eyes, that I was not wrong

Behind this border that I will never cross again
I know your dignity and pride, I haven't disappointed you
If it were to re-do, my will would hold firm
All repression confers a legitimacy

None of this could have been, without your moral support
Nothing would have been, without the strength of your minds
A tribute is for you, who never have doubted
You stand steadfast even cornered in adversity

They separated us, and yet in my heart
I am forced to depart, yet I am filled with this joy
Never have I felt my children so near
We grew up together, this exile keeps us close.

Mum

Same hotel room, December 12th, 2012

The Australian Radio ABC is broadcasting the news of my expulsion. In an interview, a director of the Human Rights Watch organization concludes:
"I really applaud her courage for raising this issue, because it is something that everybody knows about, but remains unspoken."

Same place, December 13th, 2012

I am floating in the ambiguity of the present moment, suspended between a past too close to be bygone and a future too uncertain to take on any definite substance.

I spend several hours every day reading the innumerable messages from colleagues, those who were not in Vientiane when I was expelled; from friends who are coming forward to challenge the reality of a separation; from family members who have found out what's going on and are inquiring about my situation. Then, rapidly, interview requests from journalists are pouring in. But I cannot agree to answer their questions: I have been accused of leading an anti-government campaign, and I don't want to give any grounds to the Laotian authorities to confirm their accusations. Besides, my family is still in Vientiane and I don't want to expose them to any risk.

Messages of support are coming from everywhere: national directors of my organization assigned on other continents are expressing their solidarity; movements of exiled Laotians are echoing a call for democratization of the country. But the words that move me most deeply are those of Laotians who, without knowing me, are thanking me simply for what I have accomplished. And I have the sense, reading between these lines, of perceiving their determination to continue what has been initiated. As a promise for better tomorrows.

Words from Laotian men and women:

“Personally as a Lao person, I sincerely thank you very much for all your efforts to fight for the rights of the Lao people. I believe, if not many, some more and more Lao people will build on what you have developed so far. I don’t think what you’ve done so far is failure, but is a big progress and success from my point of view.”

“Your convictions have somehow woken up our vigilance regarding our rights as citizens of Laos. Thank you again.”

“We are sure that your bravery and your generous commitment have already contributed to the birth of democracy in Laos and to its development. We think that all NGOs must refuse compromises and, consequently, request, from the powers that be, transparency for the benefit of the people as a whole.”

“When you spoke up, you were telling the truth about an oppressive authoritarian rule that has trampled on the basic freedoms and the fundamental human rights of the Laotians for almost four decades now. A truth to which the world community has not given any real voice.”

“Since our first encounter, I have admired the dedication and the courage you have shown as you confront the task – which seems to me a Titanic one -- of empowering the Laotian civil society. Moreover, it is thanks to you that I became so involved, because I could see that despite the obstacles standing in the way and the discouragement that was overwhelming us, we were progressing under your leadership.”

“What you have done in the past in helping Laos and what you are doing today are so significantly important for the oppressed and voiceless Laotians. You brought truth to light. You made the world aware of how people of Laos are suffering, not only of poverty, inadequate health care, and poor education; but also of deprivation of the very basic human rights and human dignity.”

Meanwhile, in Europe, the first articles related to my expulsion are appearing. Brief reports that mention my expulsion along with the official reasons put forward by the Laotian government. Without any additional details. In terms of communication, my organization wants to remain sober and low-profile, not making any waves. Although the presence of the organization in Laos is not jeopardized, they want to play it safe, avoiding any statement. While I can understand the desire for “damage control,” I am sorry that the truth is not told. Because not only is the

case reduced to a simple incident – “*she violated the laws of the host country and did not respect local culture*” could just as well refer to drug abuse or to insults being proffered publicly -- but credibility is given to the Laotian authorities by picking up the accusations made against me without questioning their validity, implying that I got just what I deserved, because I behaved badly. These articles trigger reactions from readers. I go through some Swiss-German newspapers’ blogs, and I am appalled by the comments posted. I am judged as being “incompetent” for the position I was assigned to; some say I am “stupid” for not having understood the rules of the game; another person accuses me of wasting public money “by jeopardizing aid resources.” I feel betrayed and I give up reading these blogs any further.

Same hotel, same city... December 14th, 2012

I have been staying in this hotel for five days. I make up my mind to have a stroll in the city of Udon Thani. I walk somewhat randomly in the streets and enter a traditional market. Passing in front of some stalls, I overhear bits of conversation. People comment on my wrists covered with cotton threads – souvenirs of my last *baci* in Vientiane. Apparently, here in Thailand, this custom is associated with weddings. Some hail me, to wish me much happiness. I smile and I thank them for these wishes, which are a balm to my heart.

A taxi driver asks me where I come from, and I answer without hesitation “from Laos.” Because my children and my husband are still living there. And maybe I will return there... I am told that negotiations are ongoing to obtain the right for me to visit my family. Everything still attaches me to Laos. The obligations in my datebook that keep popping up with an unflinching certainty. The messages that I receive every day concerning files for follow-up. The requests from journalists to speak with them about Laos. My life is still over there. My colleagues, my friends. So many things that were to be finished before leaving. So many projects barely begun. Appointments that I will miss. Letters that will remain drafts. Initiatives only just started... And, above all, I did not have the time to say good-bye. Not having offered a proper farewell means there was no real departure; and, moreover, this lack of a good-bye sustains the hope of a return. How to turn the page if the last sentence remains suspended in a middle of a word?

Back in my hotel, I write a poem that I dedicate to my friends.

It is not easy to turn this page
A feeling of so much left un-done
I had still so much to give
But I was told to take my leave

So many things still to be done
Friendships just being sketched
So many trails yet to explore
Dreams that will never come true

There are ups, there are downs
I want to be strong, but there you are
Sometimes sadness catches me up
Like a slap, a fist that strikes

And so I think of my friends
These brothers and sisters we choose
I feel the hearts and the smiles
That are feeding my happiness

We still had plans together
That we won't realize now
But I don't want to sound dramatic
Let's change the scenery, but still keep the script

The story has to continue further
Each of us can write a new chapter
We are free to live our emotions
Nobody can impose an oblivion

I left you without saying good-bye
Hence we have a reason to think
That this is not the end of our tale
This page is not turned yet...

The infamous and tragic December 15th, 2012

It is the weekend and the children are coming back to see me in Udon Thani. To help out my husband, some friends have taken care of the twins for a week. Unfortunately, my youngest son Namori had an accident: he opened the microwave oven to take out a mug of milk and scalded himself by spilling the boiling liquid. As I remove his clothes in the hotel room, I discover with dismay an ugly burn that extends from his stomach across to his right thigh. A dressing has become embedded in the flesh. I take him to a neighboring hospital, where I manage to avoid having him admitted, in exchange for my promise to bring him back every day to clean the

wound and remove the dead skin. Namori will have to stay with me. I am again with the children in the hotel, and in this early evening, a sense of guilt grows within me: none of this would have happened if I had stayed in Vientiane!

At the same moment, on a busy avenue of the Laotian capital city, a jeep is halted at a police checkpoint. The officer orders the driver to exit his car. A few minutes later, the jeep is taken away by a man dressed in dark clothes, and the jeep's driver has been stowed in another vehicle. An abduction has just taken place.

Second week of exile

The tragic disappearance of Sombath, just one week after my expulsion, suddenly reveals a much more dramatic tint to this painting. I am utterly convinced that these two events, although of a different level of gravity, are linked: they are part of a single scenario, have certainly been organized by the same people and desired for similar reasons. From this day on, I read my messages feverishly, looking for a clue, part of an answer, the start of an explanation. Many of us share this feeling of powerlessness and live in an increasing anguish.

A friend working for the United Nations writes to me from Geneva: *"While I am really sorry that you have to leave so abruptly, and leave your kids behind, I am proud that you have stayed true to your calling, consequences notwithstanding. By your courage, Laos is gaining attention at last and at times these small acts of courage can go far."*

Together with my son Namori, I leave Udon Thani for Bangkok. In a few days, I will be joined by the rest of the family at Bangkok Airport and we will take a flight to Switzerland. This Christmas holiday has been long-planned. We had not known how much we would need this Swiss sojourn. A moment of happiness for the family.

Namori has fallen asleep beside me, exhausted by the frenetic rhythm of the Thai capital city. It's late, but I cannot sleep. Mechanically, I open a plastic folder in which documents have been stored higgledy-piggledy. My eyes fall on a large yellow envelope. I realize that since my expulsion, I have not taken the time to re-read the wording of this infamous notice of expulsion delivered by the Laotian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I take it out and slide between my fingers the three sheets of paper that so radically changed the trajectory of my life.

I browse through the grounds used to justify this expulsion measure. Among the reasons brandished to attack those who are defending human rights, there is the accusation of "interfering in the political sphere": when one is making every effort

to work towards an economic development that will benefit all, we come inevitably to the issue of fundamental rights. It is precisely there that the distinction between the political and the economic spheres becomes blurred: we cannot speak about economic justice, about benefits sharing, about protecting the interests of the most vulnerable, without advocating for the fundamental rights of all social classes. In a country like Laos, this quickly means going against the personal interests of the political elite.

Also featured is this classic accusation made against the human rights defenders, that of “violating the Constitution and the laws”: in Laos, abuses of power are often justified through the implementation of a Government project, and are perpetrated against those who are perceived as opposing the Government’s policy or the Party’s priorities. Even if this “opposition” is limited to the use of the legal system in order to protect basic rights, as is the case for those who are losing their land and ask for fair compensation. Finally, those who work toward improvements are accused of “rejecting the existing system.” Promoting freedom of speech, access to information, increased participation in the decision-making process -- all these are calls for changes. And all change implies that the existing system is not good enough.

All these accusations have been made against me in order to justify this order that I leave Laotian territory within forty-eight hours. Excerpts from the order of expulsion:

“Her letter demonstrated her explicit rejection of the Lao PDR’s Constitution and Law, particularly its political system (...). The prejudicial anti-Lao government campaign by this international organization’s Director in Laos (...). Therefore, she is required by law to leave the country within 48 hours. This measure has been taken against the individual who has improperly behaved in violation of the Lao PDR’s Constitution and Law.”

An article that will appear much later, in the *Vientiane Times* on January 19th, 2013, will strangely echo my reflections: *“Lao Minister of National Defense Lieutenant-General Duangchay Phichit, reminded the soldiers about the stratagems and underhand activities of enemies of the state, saying they are conducting destabilizing activities in comprehensive ways, and focus on the strategy of peaceful change.”*

***During our Christmas holiday in Switzerland,
night of December 23rd, 2012***

Here he is, standing in front of me. He appeared suddenly, out of nowhere. He has an air both serious and determined. He asks me gently but firmly to follow him. I go with him and we walk along silently.

I am in a windowless room. I am sitting in front of a large, totally empty desk. Not a single sheet of paper, not a pencil. He is there, sitting in front of me. I realize suddenly that we are not alone. There are other people seated beside me. And, above all, there are these individuals moving slowly around us. One woman is carrying a tray. She approaches us, but instead of putting the glasses in front of the guests, she pretends to leave, moves away just a bit, slows down, and then retraces her steps. There is also a man whose arms are filled with files, who wanders around strangely. I watch him. He stops in front of the wall, as if looking through an imaginary window. All of this dumb show makes me uncomfortable. Obviously, I am missing something. I turn my eyes back to him. He is sitting straight, and the high, tufted back of his armchair protects him a bit from the surreptitious glances thrown his way by the woman with the tray and the man with the files. His extreme pallor suddenly strikes me. His skin is transparent and his face quite pale, framed by translucent hair, white like snow, instead of his usual silver hair. He looks at me intensely, as if he is attempting to communicate while keeping silent. His feverish eyes glimmer with worry. I realize that the others around us are probably all there to monitor us. Which explains why he hasn't said a word. My eye catches his. He pivots slowly in his armchair, to the left, without dropping his gaze. I see then a large scar that extends from the bottom of his neck up to his right shoulder. It has the look of a deep cut under a freshly stitched wound. Then he bends his head slightly and a second wound appears, quite visible above the arch of his right eyebrow, also sutured but not yet healed. He looks at me fixedly, and then goes back imperceptibly to his initial position. In his eyes I read it like a question: "Did you understand my message?" I must find a way to respond to him in the affirmative, because the encounter is now ending. As if his mission were accomplished, he broke the spell and disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

I wake with a start. My heart is pounding. I am convinced that this is not a dream. It was too real and too intense to be reduced to a mere chimera. I even have the feeling that his presence is still floating around me. This encounter with Sombath did take place.

Then a terrible doubt grips me: what did he want to say? Is he still part of this world, injured but alive? Or was it a way to say good-bye, while at the same time unveiling the traces left by death?

A deep wave of despair washes over me, submerging me in infinite sadness. For the first time, I feel the flame of hope flickering. These are not rumors peddled by a few unreliable individuals. This is a message from Sombath himself. I am drowning in an abyss of doubts, hiding my tears in the pillow. Lying beside me in bed, the man who is my life partner wakes gently from his sleep, stretching himself. Suddenly, he raises himself onto his elbows, turns to me and asks:

- *Did you hear me shouting during the night?*
- *No... You shouted? Why?*
- *I saw you leaving with this old man. He had come to look for you. He was speaking kindly to you, so that you would follow him.*
- *...?!*
- *I had a bad feeling about it... So I shouted! But you went away with him. I saw him only from behind. He had snow-white hair.*

A month later, in Indonesia, at the house of a friend who put me up when I first arrived in Jakarta, I am alone with her roommate. He is a young guy who seems old for his years. He's an acupuncturist and maybe a little bit of a sorcerer. As we get to know each other over coffee, trust begins to build. With modesty and humility, he speaks to me about his encounters with "spirits." I tell him about my own encounter with Sombath. And I share with him my thoughts regarding its meaning.

- *Never doubt. Be confident. Confidence is key. You have to trust your first impression and not try to re-interpret messages.*
- *...*
- *If he is still alive, you have to support him and to give him strength. If it is already too late, you have to reassure him and let him leave.*

In the dusk of a moonless night, I spoke to him, telling him not get lost on the path between two worlds, and to reach for the light. And I prayed that I was mistaken...

***Christmas in Switzerland with the family,
December 24th, 2012***

On this Christmas Day, I receive a very special gift. It is an extraordinary gesture of solidarity, in the form of a letter co-signed by around fifty European and Asian organizations. A letter sent to the Laotian Prime Minister, regarding my expulsion:

"Regrettably, the expulsion of Ms. Gindroz only confirms the restrictions and the contradictions described in her letter - countering a more open and inclusive living and working environment in Laos. This raises critical questions about the legitimacy of what publically appears as progressive steps and sincere commitment towards a more open country (...). We strongly believe ensuring justice for Ms. Gindroz and other development workers, Lao civil society associations, and citizens alike will set an important precedent for the future and more importantly, the protection of human rights and a just and equitable development in Laos."

This letter gathered the support of more than thirty Asian organizations (from

Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Sri Lanka, The Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, East Timor, and India) and around fifteen European organizations (in Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Austria, Finland, Spain, Hungary, and Holland). Little by little, as I read through this long list of signatories, my heart is filled with an intense emotion: such a movement of solidarity confirms that I did the right thing choosing this path that has led me to press the denunciation of abuses -- to the point that I myself became a target of a discretionary power. On this Christmas Day, I feel deeply grateful to know this privilege.

Meanwhile in Laos, Sombath's disappearance has devastating effects: a climate of fear pushes those who are most at risk (due to their commitment to equitable development) to temporarily leave the country. And such was certainly the objective of those who ordered the abduction of Sombath. A very effective strategy: once more, silence has been imposed.

In Switzerland, beginning of January, 2013

My children take a flight back to Vientiane and I extend my stay in Switzerland to discuss my situation with the organization that employs me.

As steps are taken to replace me with a new director to take over in Laos, we discuss my professional future. I am being asked to make arrangements to take my children out of Laos. Sombath's abduction opens a dark chapter in the history of this country, and it is difficult to predict what can happen next. The power being concentrated in the hands of a small number of high ranking Party officials, who are using a puppet government as a tool to carry out their decisions, means that guarantees of security granted by the Laotian authorities to my family appear more and more uncertain. The initial idea that my children would be able to complete their school year in Vientiane must be put aside. The possibility of regrouping the whole family in Indonesia is brought up. I call my husband and children in Laos to discuss it:

- *Is there a French School in Jakarta?* asks Fanny.
- *Yes, but we have to check to see whether there are spots available for each of you.*
- *I plan to stay in Vientiane. I don't want to move to a new school just a few months before the Bac exams. The idea scares me stiff!* Amina declares.
- *I understand. You can stay in Laos with friends. They are prepared to put you up until the end of June.*
- *But it will be long six months without you! Especially because just after that I will have to leave Indonesia to continue my studies...*

- *I will also stay for now, says Adrian, who is working at a hotel in Vientiane. At least until I can find another job elsewhere...*
- *Is it far to Jakarta? asks Safira.*
- *It is in Daddy's country, in Indonesia. You already travelled in Indonesia, don't you remember?*
- *And you, Namori, what do you think about it?*
- *Will my schoolteacher also come to Jakarta?*
- *No, Namo. You will have another teacher in your new school.*
- *But when are we supposed to move? asks Atias.*
- *Maybe at the end of the month...*
- *So soon? But we don't have anything over there yet. And where will we live?*
- *We have friends in Jakarta, says Tikno, my husband. We lived for ten years in Indonesia, and we can always find solutions.*

I have the sense that Tikno is relieved, now that the family will be leaving Laos. The latest tragic events have awakened in him memories of the old military dictatorship in Indonesia. A time when enforced disappearances were a part of the methods used against opponents by an authoritarian regime.

Then, I call Ili, my eldest daughter, in France:

- *It will be even farther away for me to come and see you from France, she says, thoughtful.*
- *Yes, but once you're on the plane, it won't make such a big difference, my darling.*
- *That's true. And it will be a bit like going back to our roots!*

Ili was born in Indonesia and spent her childhood there.

My parents are also relieved to know that we are opting for an Indonesian solution.

A few days later...

I return to Thailand and spend a few days in Bangkok, where I meet up with some colleagues from Laos. To the raw emotion of seeing each other again is added the distress caused by Sombath's abduction. Everybody is tense, consumed by the lack of news on Sombath's fate. Sombath has many friends in Thailand, and a support movement is being organizing in an attempt to make something happen.

Some dare to ask the question that I don't want to think about: Is Sombath still alive? As long as we don't have any evidence to the contrary, we must continue to believe, to cling to this hope as to a life preserver, in order to keep our heads above the waterline.

- *If he is alive, we must spare no effort.*

- *And if he is no longer part of this world?*
- *All the more appropriate that we not give up on him. Because it would not only be an enforced disappearance, but an extra-judiciary execution.*

A representative of the European Union who was posted to the Delegation in Vientiane writes to me:

“Your departure will be a real loss for Lao civil society and their fight to uphold people’s rights. I was always impressed with the clarity with which you presented arguments for civil society and in support of the small farming communities who were suffering at the hands of land-grabbing companies. But I was also impressed with your courage to stand up against the impenetrable party line.”

Chapter Ten

Exterminated (the Dissent Voices)

- *Where his Sombath?*
- *Bor hu, bor hen, bor chak.*
- *What does it mean?*
- *Unknown, unseen, unrecognized.*
- *But, how can Sombath Somphone disappear?*
- *...unknown, unseen, unrecognized...*

This last chapter is the most painful. The one I would have preferred never to have written.

***An interview with Sombath, recorded in September, 2008,
by the TVE Channel, Asia Pacific***

“With the different crisis, globally people are questioning the pattern of development that we have been following. Everyone knows that it is not sustainable. But the decision needs to be collective. And this is where we are. How do we get to the point that the decision can be collective? It requires both collective and individual. People want some alternative. The only alternative I see is the Gross National Happiness philosophy and the self-sufficient economy. But every culture will have to find its own adjustment. There is a need for adjustment. The same traditional pattern of development is not sustainable. That is recognized even by top economists in the West. I think small and developing countries like Laos should lead in this area.

The Education for Sustainable Development shows the inter dependency between education and sustainable development. If you have good education, only then you can get sustainable development. And sustainable development is also a showcase for education. So the two are building on each other. The young people are actually the potential agents of change.

There are a lot of good practices of sustainable development in the world. The problem is that we are not linking the dots of these best practices. Digital technologies can play a very important role, good practice in one place can be captured digitally and shown in other places, to set up a network of these best practices that the local people can actually record using DVDs for example. Except that the educators and the development people are not using these tools as well as the entertainers and the commercial people who are making lot of money through entertainment and business promotion. Educators and development workers should learn how to use these tools. At the moment we are being used by these tools!

Young people should be more involved in creating and disseminating the media. Right now, the media is a one-way communication tool. The young generation can take hold what contents to be disseminated out, to turn the media into something positive. Right now these tools are being used in a destructive way, because it

promotes greed and consumption to the point that our Mother Earth cannot support. This is why I am saying that media are a weapon of mass destruction. If we make the young people realize that what is left from this generation's consumption would be available for the next generation, then the new generation has to take greater participation in preventing the depletion of these resources.

Young people are the key, communication is the tool, and education is the channel these young people can be part of. I have tried it out, giving a video camera to illiterate young people in a very remote area. With proper guidance and coaching, they become camera literate very quickly. When they see the thing they captured is replayed, the pride and the happiness on their face is very rewarding. They get so motivated, and the whole community participated. Young people listen to their friends, share DVDs, instead of listening to songs and music from far abroad. So it becomes like a big festival.

Sustainable development starts by yourself, with a sustainable lifestyle. Be the change you want to see, like Gandhi has said. To get young people to come to that point of making the decision of changing their behavior requires kind of initiation. I do this initiation by taking the young people to the temple and let the monks talk to them. The monks need to be trained to communicate with young people and relate these issues to real life. This will make young people change their behavior, make them calmer. They become more themselves, more self-confident. Basically, before you want to change others, you have to start changing yourself first."

Vientiane, early evening, December 15th, 2012

Shui-Meng is the Singaporean wife of Sombath Somphone. She is driving her car on her way back home. Shui-Meng and Sombath have planned to have dinner together tonight. She is driving ahead of him, as he follows in his own car. They are on their way home. It is the end of the day. The sunlight is dimming. Traffic is fluid. Shui-Meng reaches a police checkpoint on Thadeua. Police officers in uniforms are posted at the roadside. She passes the police checkpoint, glances in the rearview mirror and catches sight of Sombath's jeep. She could not imagine that this would be the last impression she will ever have of her husband.

***Vientiane, Sombath's home,
a little later on December 15th, 2012***

It is 6:00 p.m. Shui-Meng is already at home. She expects her husband to arrive from one minute to the next. But the wait is stretching out. She tries to call Sombath's mobile phone: a message indicates that the phone is switched off. She

remembers having seen her husband's jeep for the last time at kilometer 3, where the Thadeua police checkpoint is located. Then, she lost sight of him. At around 1:30 in the morning, she goes out to look for her husband, driving back along Thadeua. She visits all the hospitals in the city, in case Sombath might have been involved in a traffic accident. In vain.

Vientiane, December 16th, 2012

The next day, a Sunday, Shui-Meng registers the disappearance of Sombath with the Laotian authorities.

*Hotel room in Udon Thani,
December 16th, 2012*

I am still in Udon Thani, this city in a northern province of Thailand, stranded in this hotel room, having floated between two worlds for a week, already. It is the weekend. The children have crossed the border to visit me.

Today, they will have to go back to Laos, as they have school the following day. And they should not leave too late: there is always a long queue at the immigration counter on Sunday evenings. I woke up early, so as to be able to enjoy fully this day with my family. But everybody is still asleep. Mechanically, I switch on my computer and look at my incoming messages. It has become my main occupation since my expulsion: sorting through my mail; an emotional reading of the messages of support; tactfully declining the requests for interviews; reassuring friends living here; informing others elsewhere; comforting colleagues who are still in shock.

This morning, a particular message draws my attention.
Subject: Sombath!

"I am informing you of shocking news: Sombath disappeared yesterday, gone since early evening. The family suspects that Sombath had an accident, or that he is being detained somewhere. His phone has been switched off, and no hospital has yet called. Thus, we fear it is the second hypothesis. How can we help him?"

I cannot bring myself to admit this possibility. It is not possible that Sombath has been arrested! Not Sombath! He is far too respected by everyone. Sombath is a well-known person. I have always been under the impression that he was protected by high-ranking people who understand the nature of his work and who support him. If he has, indeed, been arrested, it can only be for purposes of clearing something up. He will reappear in a trice. It will be only a matter of hours...

I try to reason with myself and to find an explanation for the inexplicable. But I feel a panic growing within me.

Something serious is happening. Sombath -- he is just too big a deal for this to be a random misstep. Sombath -- this is just too calculated to have happened by chance. Sombath disappears immediately after carrying out this crucial role of co-chair for the Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum.

This Sunday, on the net, a small group of friends are feverishly exchanging information. One tells the others that she met with Sombath on the day before his disappearance. During the course of their discussion, Sombath mentioned his intention to follow-up on the case of this young woman who had been harassed because she spoke out too openly during the Peoples' Forum. As one of the organizers of the Forum, Sombath considered that this was part of his responsibility. Together with him, I was also addressing the case of this young woman. But to promote freedom of expression is one thing. To request an investigation is another. And we had crossed this line.

Vientiane, December 17th, 2012

On Monday, December 17th, following a friend's advice, Shui-Meng goes to the Municipal Police of Vientiane. Because CCTV security cameras are installed along the city's main roads, she asks to see the footage. Did she benefit from providential circumstances -- the police chief being busy giving an interview? Or was it just naiveté or a sincere desire to help on the part of the junior officer who received her? Whatever the case, Sombath's wife is able to access the images from the security camera that had been located just above the police checkpoint at the junction of Thadeua Avenue and Lao-Thaï street. It was the location where Shui-Meng saw, in the rearview mirror of her own car, Sombath's jeep -- for the last time, on that infamous Saturday, the 15th of December.

On the screen, as the images unfold, she discovers the series of events preceding the disappearance of her husband:

The traffic is fluid. The street is brushed by an early evening light. Sombath's jeep appears clearly in the images. The time is 6:03 p.m. He slows down and stops at the level of the police checkpoint. An officer approaches the vehicle and talks to Sombath through the open side of the car. One minute later, Sombath steps out of his jeep and joins the officer on the dirt path that runs along the avenue, right there where the police station is located. Thirty seconds later, an officer takes up a position at the back of Sombath's vehicle. He seems to be keeping watch. Eight seconds later, a motorcyclist dressed in dark clothes arrives. He parks his motorcycle on the

shoulder of the road, in front of Sombath's vehicle, and rushes into the police post. It is less than two minutes before he reappears, climbs alone into the jeep, and leaves the scene at the wheel of Sombath's vehicle, abandoning his own motorcycle. A little more than two minutes later, a man wearing a light jacket comes out of the police post and takes up a position on the side of the road, facing into traffic, seeming to wait for something. Less than one minute after that, the man wearing the jacket walks a few steps onto the asphalt, as if he has spotted something: and the footage shows a vehicle arriving, a silver-colored pick-up truck, with big headlights switched on and hazard lights blinking in front of the side mirrors. The man wearing the jacket makes a sign to the pick-up, which parks a bit slantwise in front of the police post, exactly where Sombath's jeep had been. The man climbs into the pick-up, immediately followed by two other persons, including Sombath himself, who is escorted to the pick-up by several men. Police officers are speaking to individuals on a motorcycle that burst from behind the police post. The motorcycle leaves first, ahead of the pick-up truck, and the passenger riding at the back pulls out a gun and seems to fire a shot into the air. The pick-up truck, following the motorcycle, merges onto Thadeua Avenue, along the Mekong. A police officer remains on the roadside, then he approaches the motorcycle that was left behind by the man who drove away at the wheel of Sombath's jeep. Not long after this, the motorcycle is dragged aside, more or less towed towards the police post. Night has fallen.

Shui-Meng records on her mobile phone, as best she can, the images unfolding on the screen. Suspecting the importance of this discovery, she copies this footage and several duplicates are entrusted to other persons. Her suspicions are confirmed: the original footage of this CCTV recording will never again be available. None of the images taken by the five other security cameras installed along the Thadeua avenue will ever be shown, nor will they be used in any attempt to locate the silver-colored pick-up that took Sombath away in the early evening of December 15th, 2012.

This drama in six acts, which looks like a well-planned-out abduction scenario, lasted a little more than seven minutes. Everything had been anticipated. Except the CCTV camera. A mistake for which some others will pay. On the same day, Shui-Meng informs the Director of the Cabinet at the Ministry of Public Security that she has seen the CCTV-camera images and that she requires his assistance.

Vientiane, December 19th, 2012

An official statement by the spokesman of the Laotian Government is broadcast through the Laotian News Agency KPL:

“After having received a notice on the missing of Mr. Sombath Somphone and received the CCTV footage on the incidence from his wife, the authorities concerned

of the Lao PDR have checked the initial information obtained. The authorities concerned viewed that, it may be possible Mr. Sombath has been kidnapped perhaps because of a personal conflict or a conflict in business and at this stage the authorities are not in a position to say exactly what has actually happened, why Mr. Sombath has gone missing and who have been involved in the incidence. The authorities concerned are currently and seriously investigating.”

The only certainty on the Government side: security personnel are not involved in the incident. The recorded images of Sombath’s abduction become available on the internet.

***From a hotel room in Udon Thani,
the same day***

- *Allo? Yes, I have just read the official statement. It’s unbelievable! The police don’t seem to have any problem admitting that someone could have been abducted right under their noses! I am revolted.*
- *Can you imagine? To steal a car just in front of a police post and kidnap a person who is right there with them?!*
- *In any case, they have some nerve! They have the gall to deny the evidence: the images are there, accessible to everyone on YouTube!*
- *The police are boasting that they have been cooperative by granting the family access to the CCTV footage: it seems that the poor guy who gave access to the video has now gone missing himself...*

Geneva in Switzerland, January 4th, 2013

A special procedure has been launched under the auspices of the High Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, asking the Laotian authorities to provide explanations concerning the disappearance of Sombath Somphone. The Laotian Government reacts.

Excerpt of the official response of the Government of the People’s Democratic Republic of Laos, via the Laotian Ambassador in Switzerland:
“At 6pm the traffic police stopped Mr Sombath’s jeep in order to check his driving license and car documents as normal procedures. Being stopped, Mr Sombath walked out from his car to present his documents to the police. Contrary to the information the UN Special Procedures received, Mr Sombath was not taken by the police to the police post. After the police checked the documents they returned them to Mr Sombath and continued their duty of checking other vehicles [...] From the CCTV footage it cannot be confirmed that it was Mr Sombath who entered the

pickup truck. The two persons who got into the truck were not forced to do so. This fact is different from the information the UN Special Procedures received which alleged that Mr Sombath was forced to get into the pickup truck. [...] The authorities are not in a position to say exactly what has actually happened, why Mr Sombath has gone missing and who might have been involved in the incident."

***At another location in Switzerland,
around the same time***

- *I hope that nobody will settle for such a response! My fingers clasp the phone tightly.*
- *It is the official response of the Laotian Government. It has been registered as such,* she replies in a resigned tone.
- *Yes, and after?*
- *After, it will be integrated into the official report published by the High Commission on Human Rights.*
- *What will this change?*
- *...*
- *You see, that is where something is wrong in the system: all this special procedure, ultimately for what? A government can deny the obvious and the lies are registered, without a credible response even being required. It is too easy for repressive regimes to get away with it.*
- *At least, it allows for some cases to be made known...* she offers as her last argument.
- *But it does not protect those who are the victims.*

Vientiane, January 13th, 2013

A delegation of parliamentarians from Southeast Asian countries travels to Vientiane to express their deep concerns in relation to the disappearance of Sombath Somphone. Excerpt of an article from the *Vientiane Times*, published a few days later:

"The delegation of parliamentarians was informed about Lao policy to promote and protect human rights. (...) In addition, the Lao PDR is also a signatory to the Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. (...) Laos is a country that is full of political stability, security, safety and continued economic growth, which upholds human rights successfully."

Bangkok, January 16th, 2013

On their return from Laos, the Southeast Asian members of parliaments (MPs) make a stopover in Bangkok. A press conference is organized. I enter the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand and bump into Charles Santiago, the Malaysian MP who also participated in preparations for the Peoples' Forum in Vientiane. He hugs me and asks me to wait for him at the end of the media briefing. The other MPs have already taken their places on the stage:

- *We are far from satisfied with the answers we got from the Lao government. We were told that Sombath was kidnapped, but if this was done by criminal elements, the family would by now have received a demand for ransom.*
- *We told them that this was not credible and that if we accepted this as fact, we would ourselves lose credibility.*
- *Sombath disappearance reflects badly not only on Laos but on the whole ASEAN community.*
- *The police and the civil administration have absolutely no interest, no political will to resolve this issue. One month after Sombath disappeared, his wife, Shui-Meng, was asked to go talk to the police as part of the investigation process. And the questions they had for her, after one month of the investigation was, 'When did you get married to Sombath? How did you guys meet each other? Where do you guys stay and whether you have children?' ...and the questioning was done, the investigation was conducted by the lowest ranking officer at that particular police station.*
- *The disappearance of Sombath is an ASEAN concern because Sombath is an ASEAN figure.*
- *The immediate surfacing of Mr. Sombath is in the interest of all parties.*

Some journalists ask if my expulsion and the disappearance of Sombath are linked. I refrain from any comment. The MPs will answer.

- *There was a denial from the Lao authorities that Sombath disappearance was connected to Anne-Sophie expulsion or the holding of the Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum. But both Anne-Sophie and Sombath were involved in the organization of the Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum, and both dared to address the intimidations that happened during the Forum. Sombath put forward the Lao vision Statement and Anne-Sophie was leading the Land Issues Working-Group.*
- *To target Sombath and Anne-Sophie is a way of sending a message to the civil society both foreign and local organizations, that the government will not support this kind of questioning.*

At the end of the press conference, the MPs inform me that they have also raised the issue of my expulsion with the Laotian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

- *They have reaffirmed that you had acted against the interests of Laos, and that, during your expulsion, you threatened them with continuation of your anti-government campaign.*
- *It is totally untrue! I have never said any such thing! I yelled.*

This is not a new tactic: to discredit someone through the propagation of slanderous information. Sombath is a victim of just such a campaign, with rumors being systematically spread in Vientiane, designed not only to disgrace his memory, but also to discourage any expression of concern for his case because of the risk of being associated with subversive activities.

Vientiane, February 4th, 2013

The Ministry of Public Security, through the voice of Colonel Phengsavanh Thippavongxay, is disclosing his preliminary investigation report on Sombath's disappearance. Excerpts:

"From the CCTV footage, it cannot be verified that the person who drove the Jeep and the person who later drove the Jeep away was Mr Sombath Somphone or not or who he was and the two persons who entered the pick-up truck cannot be identified. After having interrogated the traffic police who were working at the car checking area on that day, it was reported that there was a regular random check on cars on daily basis and they could not remember whose cars they have checked and which one belongs to whom as they have checked many cars each day. [...] They also confirmed that in the area under their responsibility during the time of reported incident, the situation was normal and there was no any incident.[...] A preliminary assessment [...]: the authority does not detain Mr. Sombath. The Police authority has lent its full cooperation [...] and the Ministry of Public Security demonstrated its sincerity on the case, contrary to the accusation made by some organisations and groups of bad elements. If the missing of Mr Sombath Somphone really happened, it might be due to personal conflict or business conflict or any other conflicts."

Jakarta, a little bit later

I have just finished reading this distressing report and I am appalled. I slump in the chair; I become dizzy and suddenly feel I am being crushed by an enormous weight. Exactly one month ago, the Laotian Ambassador to Switzerland, commenting on the footage from the CCTV camera, confirmed to the United Nations that it was indeed Sombath and his jeep. Today, the investigative report contradicts this version of events, even putting into doubt whether the images are of Sombath! All of this aims at erasing any link between the disappearance of Sombath and the police. And as this is coming from high-ranking public security officials in

Laos, I don't see how they could backtrack. It would mean losing face. Or does this indicate that the milk has already been spilled, the irreparable harm done, and that the truth will never see the light of day?

International pressure seems to have no effect whatsoever -- as evidenced by the fact that this report is made public on the very day that the official dialogue between the European Union and Laos on Human Rights is taking place in Vientiane...

Brussels in Belgium, February 6th, 2013

The European Parliament unanimously approves Resolution 2013/2535, expressing its deepest concerns about Sombath Somphone and asking, in particular, that a serious investigation be conducted, that the results be made public, that freedoms of expression and association be respected, and that an end be put to arbitrary arrests and illegal detention.

A month later, as another investigation report providing no new answers – and confirming the lack of serious investigation – has just been made public, a delegation led by the European Member of Parliament Tuur Elzinga (Holland, United European Left/GUE) pays an official visit to Vientiane to hand out the text of this resolution.

Comments between friends after this visit:

- *I can tell you that European Parliamentarian Elzinga has been very clear. In his discussion with Laotian officials, he has particularly expressed the strong feeling “that it was within the capacities of the Government of the Lao PDR to ensure Sombath safe return to his family.”*
- *There are too many contradictions in the declarations of the Government: in the police report, they state that the quality of video footage is not good enough to establish that it is indeed Sombath. But the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared to the Delegation that “Sombath got into the pick-up voluntarily.”*
- *None of this holds water.*

Meanwhile, in Vientiane...

The posters displayed in the Laotian capital asking for help in locating Sombath are torn down. Rumors are circulating in Vientiane that link Sombath to opposition movements based in the United States and that accuse him of fomenting a plot to overthrow the Laotian regime. This campaign designed to discredit Sombath gathers steam and reinforces the general fear among the population of bringing up Sombath's case. His wife, Shui-Meng, feels, moreover, a certain

distance between herself and some of her Laotian friends, as if a safe perimeter must be maintained.

His links to the United States go back to the period when Sombath, having received a scholarship, studied in Hawaii¹⁴. He was still there when the Communists took power in Laos in 1975. The Laotian monarchy was abolished. The political regime was toppled. It was then that Sombath decided to return to Laos in order to contribute to the development of his country. It was a courageous choice that was misunderstood by many: in the United States, he attracts criticism from Laotian refugees, as well as from students who have come from Laos. In Laos, he is first suspected of working for the CIA, but manages after a while to establish progressively better relations with people in the Government and in Laotian society.

In 1996, at a time when setting up local organizations is not yet permitted in Laos, the Ministry of Education allows the opening of private schools. Sombath seizes the opportunity and registers his association, PADETC, as a training center. PADETC will, for a long time, be the only local non-governmental organization recognized by the Laotian regime. Sombath becomes known for his approach to development, which is based on the Buddhist philosophy and on the rejection of modern materialism. He promotes endogenous development, and the use of the Happiness Index as opposed to the Index of Economic Growth. Perhaps in reaction to the Laotian bureaucracy and the rigidity of the system, Sombath engages with the youth, whom he places at the center of his activity. He believes in their potential to build better tomorrows. Sombath becomes a charismatic leader of youth; and today, his most fervent defenders are the young people.

Bangkok, in Thailand, March, 2013

A meeting of Sombath's friends takes place in Bangkok:

- *Anything new on Sombath?*
- *No, nothing. Always the same official statement, and the authorities deny any involvement.*
- *March 25 will mark 100 days since Sombath's disappearance.*
- *100 days too long.*
- *What I find absurd is that we cannot even ask for Sombath "to be released," because officially he is not being detained!*

¹⁴ This biography is taken from a presentation by Bruce Shoemaker, « Sombath Somphone and Recent Events in Laos », during the Fourth International Conference on Lao Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI (USA) in April 2013

- *Exactly, that is why we can only hope for “his safe return,” a wording used in the various campaigns run in support of Sombath.*
- *But, this investigation is going nowhere. It’s quite revealing, isn’t it?*
- *Yes, it shows above all that the Laotian Government has refused all offers of foreign technical assistance to analyze the footage of Sombath’s abduction. Even if the poor quality of the images recorded with the mobile phone makes it impossible to identify the car registration plate number, it would be easy to do it from the original CCTV footage!*
- *And they refused?*
- *Yes. They said it was an internal matter that needs to be dealt with by the Laotian authorities.*
- *That tells you all you need to know!*

Later, the issue of technical assistance to analyze the images from the CCTV cameras comes up again. Response from the authorities:

“This visibility of the CCTV footage technically will stay the same blurry when to be seen by any other persons [including foreign experts]. However, the investigating police officers will continue their technical work on the recorded CCTV footage. There are no other CCTV footages on the incident recorded at other areas. Therefore, we ourselves are capable to handle the inspection of the recorded CCTV footage concerning the case because it is our internal responsibility and thus it is unnecessary to seek assistance from outsiders.”

April 30th, 2013

More than four months have passed. We still have no news of Sombath. As to the investigation, the Laotian government has made no new elements public. The worst is feared. Shui-Meng launches an appeal on the BBC.

BBC journalist: *“Mr Sombath, 61, had been doing some early evening exercise while his Singapore-born wife had attended a meeting in town. With the day coming to a close, they met up at the small shop Ms Shui-Meng runs and decided to head home in convoy.” Shui-Meng: “Despite the absence of traffic, the cars lost contact with each other. When I got home, I waited for several hours (...). On the Monday at the Vientiane’s main police station, I was shocked when I saw that he was stopped by the police at Thadeua police post. (...) Less than seven minutes after he was first stopped, a pickup arrives, and Sombath is driven away. It is the last time he was seen alive. (...) I am now trying desperately to ensure my husband is not forgotten. I have been given no indication as to whether he is dead or alive. I keep waiting. I keep hoping for some news about his whereabouts. It’s been very stressful and very*

draining for everyone. So please. I appeal to the government, I appeal to anyone who might know Sombath's whereabouts to let us know where he is."

Dear Shui-Meng, you told me one day in January of 2013:

"I know that you have been so hurt by what's going on, knowing that you and Sombath have worked so hard to move things forward together in Laos. I am also so sorry about what you have to go through -- being separated from your family and all. (...) There is a very dark side of Laos (...). I believe that is the side of the story that needs to be told. But that story cannot be told here. I know you have the information, but have not shared it so far. It's time to spill the beans and if it does not change the situation for you or for Sombath, then at least the donors and the 'good investors' and of course the Lao people themselves need to know."

This book is dedicated to Shui-Meng, as well as to all those who experience the forcible disappearance of a husband, a father, a brother or a sister, a son or a daughter. Those who are going through this ordeal of not knowing where a relative or a close friend can be found. Those who are consumed by anguish and uncertainty. Those who, despite themselves, must reconnect with life and learn to coexist with absence.

Epilogue

Long months have passed since Sombath's disappearance. Youth movements and regional solidarity networks have mobilized and continue to demand answers. In Laos, the reactions of diplomatic delegations and aid agencies can be interpreted in various ways. On one hand, the mobilization is unprecedented. On the other hand, there has been no public condemnation, and development aid continues to increase for the benefit of the Laotian Government. Meaning one can choose how to look at things. It depends: Are you one of those who seek justification and face-saving behind the regulated pursuit of the business of development? Or do you count yourself among Sombath's relatives and friends?

For her part, Shui-Meng is bravely keeping alive the hope of seeing her husband again. After she spent some time in her native city with her family, she wrote to me that, instead of being a breath of fresh air, Singapore only revived the memory of Sombath, in every corner of the city-state where they had strolled together. *"It is difficult, but I am trying to block any negative thinking. In any case, I must continue to move forward and keep fighting to bring Sombath home."*

Meanwhile, every day, men and women are evicted from their land. In Laos, it is estimated that in 2012, 15% of the country is under land concessions, and that 18% of villages are affected by at least one land concession.

Land-grabbing affects people in the whole Mekong region and beyond.

Testimonies:

A Cambodian: *"We are an indigenous community and we have lost everything. We did not receive any compensation, because they said that our rice fields belong to the Government. Without land, we have lost even our hope."*

A Malaysian peasant: *"Land is our soul, land is our food, land is our work, land is our only asset. Without land, we cannot survive."*

A Laotian woman: *"The company has burnt my house and the neighbors' house."*

Life has no meaning anymore. Deprived of our rice fields, we can only wait for death."

Peasants in Mali: *"Money was created by the White man. If he gives you a lot of money for your land, this means that your land is even worth much more!"*

"One day, money will end. Land never ends."

Female farmers in Malaysia: *"We must think about the future of our children. There will be no more land for them, if we don't defend our land today. And we will fight using all means."*

"If they take away our land, where are we going to live? We cannot live in the air; we are not birds. We cannot live under water; we are not fishes. We cannot live in trees; we are not animals. We can live only on our land."

"A small stick breaks easily, but if we gather many sticks together to make a bundle, it cannot be broken. It is what we must do all together, women and men. If we form a strong group, we will not be defeated."

They are many, joining the ranks of people without voices and without rights. In Laos, the strategy of imposing silence continues, with new affronts launched against freedom of speech. Since the time I was expelled, a report on land concessions in Laos, resulting from in-depth research conducted in collaboration with Laotian authorities, has been banned from translation into Lao. Civil society organizations are facing increasing restrictions -- including criminalization of individuals and associations that defend fundamental rights. In this regard, several persons who appear in my story without being identified are still today on a blacklist, and other names have certainly been added to it since then.

There are places where accessing information, showing a critical mind, speaking out in public represent real challenges. But where information is one-way, alternative networks open sideways. Where rights are not recognized, local organizations are mobilizing to defend the interests of the weakest. Where citizens' participation in public affairs is reduced to support for one single party, civil society can correct for deficits in democracy.

As they partner with an authoritarian regime, aid agencies hesitate to engage on this field, dithering and asking themselves about the relevance of supporting local organizations:

- *Does this government respect human rights?*
- *Does this country offer sufficient guarantees, consistent with a functioning democratic system?*
- *Is there an enabling environment or a legal system that is favorable to local associations?*

It is precisely when the answer to these questions is "no" that development partners should commit to the side of change agents. A meaningful development cooperation

must support the democratic forces and work with the local civil society. Much more needs to be done by international aid agencies to establish strong partnerships with those who are the actors of their own development. It is not about considering these actors as passive “beneficiaries” of aid, but about bringing them into the conversation, making them true partners, so as to build relationships based on respect and equality, and to move away from paternalistic systems. This is how aid can help empower democratic actors and strengthen their capacity to shape an endogenous vision of their own development, better rooted in local realities and in the aspirations of the populations. And when such an actor becomes the victim of an act of violence perpetrated by an authoritarian regime, he deserves better than silence.

Dear Sombath, together we have shared some battles, and these common experiences have nurtured a unique friendship, where commitment is coupled with a solidarity that time cannot erase. You have disappeared, but many are the men and women who are pursuing your work in Laos, because you have generously shared your knowledge, your wisdom, and your passion with the younger generations.

A tree that falls down makes more noise than a forest that is growing. May the young shrubs become as robust as the large oaks that are being felled.

On the day this story ends, we are still without news of Sombath.

Vientiane, June 24th, 2013

“The wall of silence is growing thicker.”
Shui-Meng



Sombath Somphone, a passionate educator on sustainable development



Villagers evacuating their home to make way to development

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