Mandates of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Ref.: AL LAO 3/2025
(Please use this reference in your reply)

8 September 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 55/5, 53/4, 52/9 and 52/4.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning **intimidation, ongoing harassment, and possible instances of transnational repression suffered by the exiled Lao human rights defender Mr. Joseph Akaravong. He was reportedly attacked in Pau, France, by an unidentified individual, under circumstances that raise concern regarding possible links to Lao PDR State agents or individuals acting with the acquiescence or support of Lao PDR State authorities. Such attack seems to have taken place in direct connection ot his work as a human rights defender and his exercise of freedom of expression, including criticism of the Lao PDR State authorities.**

According to information received:

Mr. Joseph Akaravong is an environmental and human rights defender, working alongside other Asian regional non-governmental organizations promoting community empowerment to advance human rights, social justice and peace.

Due to his activity, he started facing harassment already back in 2014, when he was asked to resign from the Champasak Buddhist University in connection with his advocacy work against the eviction of more than 400 households in Champasak Province, who were allegedly pressured into giving up their lands for the construction of the Attapeu dam.

Since 2017-2018, he has been extremely active on social media, his reports spanning from human rights to social and environmental issues, including political matters as well, publishing posts calling out specific members of the Government. One of his reports went viral after the collapse of the Attapeu dam in July 2018 that led to widespread flooding, deaths and destruction of villages in neighboring countries.

As a result, Lao reportedly authorities intensified their harassment. An arrest warrant was eventually issued by the Ministry of Public Security, prompting Mr. Akaravong to flee Lao PDR and seek refuge abroad, where he continued his

activism in hiding while running his social media accounts.

In March 2019, Mr. Akaravong met with the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Mr. Philip Alston, in Bangkok, further increasing his visibility. By mid-2019, a climate of fear grew within the Lao refugee community in Thailand due to reported increased surveillance and the enforced disappearances of activists.

In 2022, Mr. Akaravong received asylum in France, where he continued running his social media accounts, including expressing critical views about the human rights situation in the Lao PDR, which reportedly led to sustained interest of State institutions in his activities abroad.

In October 2024, Mr. Akaravong was among the Lao human rights defenders that came to Geneva ahead of the CEDAW review of Lao PDR, where the Government has been criticized for undue restrictions on the work of NGOs.[1] He provided information to the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights ahead of her visit to Lao PDR in November 2024.

The Attack

On 14 June 2025, Mr. Joseph Akaravong was attacked by an unknown man while walking in the streets of Pau, a town in southwestern France. The man stabbed him at least three times in his chest and throat, before fleeing the scene.

Mr. Akaravong was urgently hospitalized and underwent surgery. In the evening of the same day his condition stabilized. The French police opened an investigation.

On 17 June 2025, four people were arrested and placed in custody in connection with the assassination attempt. The main suspect, who fled the scene, was apprehended in Nîmes and detained.

On 18 June 2025, Pau's public prosecutor, through an official announcement, confirmed the arrests and added that that two of the suspects were released from custody, one was released on bail, and one had been put in pre-trial detention in connection with the stabbing.

On 25 June 2025, Meta (Facebook) suspended the account of Mr. Akaravong, shutting an important way with which he could advocate to the public. The account was reinstated after one week. Meta had already suspended Mr. Akaravong's private account on 9 August 2022, for 29 days, and again on 25 October 2022, for 15 days. On both occasions, Mr. Akaravong had shared information about political developments in Lao PDR. These suspensions could have taken place as a result of requests made by authorities of Lao PDR.

Without wishing to prejudice the accuracy of the above-mentioned allegations, we express great concern about what appears to be a case of transnational repression

[1] CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/10 (CEDAW 2024)

against Mr. Joseph Akaravong in retaliation for his work as a human rights defender, including his exercise of his right to freedom of expression. We also express our deep concern that these acts may constitute acts of intimidation or reprisal for his cooperation with the UN and its mechanisms in the field of human rights.

We are further concerned at the information that the Lao PDR is engaged in a systematic pattern of transnational repression against individuals and groups critical of the authorities, particularly those affiliated with the Lao diaspora, ethnic minorities, and civil society. This pattern appears to involve acts such as enforced disappearances, surveillance, intimidation, and coerced repatriations, in violation of several provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, in particular articles 9 and 12, relating to the right to liberty and security of person, and the right to freedom of movement, including the right to leave any country, respectively.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.

2. Please provide information on the status and results of any investigation into the alleged attack against Mr. Akaravong.

3. Please provide information on any measures taken by your Government to ensure that Lao human rights defenders, including those residing abroad, are not subjected to surveillance, intimidation, or violence based on their exercise of human rights, including freedom of expression.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting website within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Alexandra Xanthaki
Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Morris Tidball-Binz
Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

Irene Khan
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Mary Lawlor
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to the relevant norms and standards under international law and customary international law, as reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966, ratified by your Excellency's Government on 25 September 2009.

Right to life

Customary law is well adamant in prohibiting extrajudicial killings, a *ius cogens* norm, binding on all States, codified in article 6 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person, applicable to all persons at all times and from which no derogation is permitted under any circumstances, together with article 4(2) of the ICCPR.

Additionally, attacks on individuals without due process amount to a violation of articles 9 and 14 of the ICCPR, namely the right to liberty and security of the person and the right to fair trial.

Furthermore, we would like to draw the attention of Your Excellency's Government to the fact that, under international law and international human rights law, State authorities have an obligation, to prevent violations of the right to life and to conduct impartial and effective investigations into any such violations. Allegations concerning an attack against civilians must be investigated, and where credible evidence exists, appropriate legal steps must be taken to ensure accountability, including through impartial and thorough investigations and, where applicable, prosecution of those responsible in accordance with international standards, including those set out in the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016): the revised version of the United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions.

Sanctioning a citizen for human rights advocacy manifestly violates article 19 of the ICCPR, concerning freedom of expression, and article 17 on the right to privacy, particularly in the case of harassment related to social media posts or external surveillance.

Furthermore, any act of Transnational Repression (TNR) whether confirmed, would violate articles 2(1) and 2(7) of the UN Charter, namely the principle of State Sovereignty and the non-intervention in domestic affairs, or article 2(4) of the UN Charter, namely State must refrain from using force or conducting unauthorised actions in another State's territory, breaching the host's state's sovereignty.

Freedom of expression

Article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right "to seek, receive and impart

information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media". This right applies online as well as offline and includes not only the exchange of information that is favourable, but also that which may criticize, shock, or offend. In its general comment No. 34, the Human Rights Committee stated that States parties to the ICCPR are required to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including "political discourse, commentary on one's own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse" (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 11).

The Committee further asserts that there is a duty of States to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression (para. 23). Recognizing how journalists and persons who engage in the gathering and analysis of information on the human rights situation and who publish human rights-related reports, including judges and lawyers, are frequently subjected to threats, intimidation and attacks because of their activities, the Committee stresses that "all such attacks should be vigorously investigated in a timely fashion, and the perpetrators prosecuted, and the victims, or, in the case of killings, their representatives, be in receipt of appropriate forms of redress" (para. 23).

Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be compatible with the requirements set out in article 19(3) ICCPR. Under these requirements, restrictions must (i) be provided by law; (ii) pursue one of the legitimate aims for restriction, which are the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals; and (iii) be necessary and proportionate for those objectives. The State has the burden of proof to demonstrate that any such restrictions are compatible with the Covenant and any restriction and between norm and exception must not be reversed. In this regard, the Human Rights Committee stated that the restrictions must be "the least intrusive instrument among those which might achieve their protective function" (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 34). Furthermore, the Human Rights Committee also describes how freedom of expression applies to both public and political issues. It states that "the free communication of information and ideas about public and political issues between citizens, candidates and elected representatives is essential. This implies a free press and other media able to comment on public issues without censorship or restraint and to inform public opinion." It also states that "all public figures, including those exercising the highest political authority such as heads of state and government, are legitimately subject to criticism and political opposition" and that "in circumstances of public debate concerning public figures in the political domain and public institutions, the value placed by the Covenant upon uninhibited expression is particularly high. Thus, the mere fact that forms of expression are considered to be insulting to a public figure is not sufficient to justify the imposition of penalties." (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 13 and 38).

Human Rights Defenders

We would like to refer your Excellency's Government to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the

Declaration which state that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms. We would also like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government article 12, paragraphs 2 and 3, which provide that the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration.

We would like to further recall resolution 58/23 of the Human Rights Council, which expressed grave concern about repressive activities conducted abroad by States outside their own jurisdiction to harm, silence and intimidate human rights defenders through digital, physical and other means, including through the misuse of spyware and other intrusive surveillance software (A/HRC/RES/58/23, pp 23).

We wish to also recall that the Lao People's Democratic Republic noted several recommendations during the 2nd and 3rd cycles of the Universal Periodic Review, which called on the government to fully implement its international obligations to ensure the protection of human rights defenders and other civil society actors, and to protect human rights defenders from intimidation, ill-treatment or violence.