

LAOS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Note: This report was updated 8/17/17; see Appendix H: Errata for more information

Executive Summary

The constitution provides citizens with “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religion.” The prime minister in August issued Decree 315, with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice, extending registration requirements to Buddhism, the most widely practiced religion, and defining the government’s role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. By the end of the year, the government was still preparing implementing instructions to explain how it will enforce the decree. The government officially recognizes four religious umbrella groups (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith), and generally requires other religions to register within one of these groups. According to religious leaders, freedom of religion in Laos tends to decline in the hinterlands; international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said restrictions on registered or unregistered minority religious groups, particularly Protestant groups, remained disproportionately high in certain remote regions. There were continued reports of authorities, especially in isolated villages, arresting, detaining, and exiling followers of minority religions, particularly Christians. For example, there were reports of detentions of Christians for discussing their religion, as well as detention or withholding necessary documentation from Christians to force them to renounce their faith. Christian groups also reported longstanding issues registering and constructing churches in some areas. Reportedly, Christians who congregated in homes and other unregistered facilities for religious purposes were in some cases subjected to persecution. Several Christian groups, some with longstanding requests for registration, reported the government will not register new religions until Decree 315’s implementing instructions are complete.

Tension continued, mostly in the countryside, between followers of traditional animist beliefs and growing Christian communities. There were reports that animists in some cases interfered with Christian burials, and that the conversion of young people to Christianity or the refusal of Protestants to participate in local non-Christian religious ceremonies sometimes resulted in friction.

The U.S. President visited the country in September and reiterated the U.S. commitment to promoting respect for human rights and religious freedom. In February officers from the Department of State’s Office of International Religious

Freedom visited the country and encouraged government officials to abide by their international commitments and ensure local authorities enforce the law as well as met with religious communities. U.S. embassy officials regularly raised specific religious freedom cases with the government in an effort to continue an open dialogue and encourage resolution of conflicts, including on implementation of the new prime ministerial decree. The embassy maintained regular contact with officials in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), responsible for aspects of administering religious organizations. Embassy officials were also in regular contact with religious leaders from a wide variety of denominations and faiths to learn of any issues they faced limiting abilities to practice their respective religions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.0 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2015 national census, 64.7 percent of the population is Buddhist, 1.7 percent is Christian, 31.4 percent has no religion, and the remaining 2.1 percent identify as other or a nonlisted religion. Theravada Buddhism is the religion of the majority of ethnic or “lowland” Lao, who constitute 53.2 percent of the overall population. According to the LFNC and MOHA, the remainder of the population comprises at least 48 ethnic minority groups, most of which practice animism and ancestor worship. Animism is predominant among Sino-Thai groups, such as the Thai Dam and Thai Daeng, as well as among Mon-Khmer and Burmo-Tibetan groups. Among lowland Lao, many pre-Buddhist animist beliefs are incorporated into Theravada Buddhist practice, particularly in rural areas. Roman Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Bahais, Mahayana Buddhists, and followers of Confucianism in total constitute less than 3 percent of the population. The government defines atheists and animists as “nonbelievers.”

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right and freedom to believe or not believe in any religion and states citizens are equal before the law regardless of their beliefs or ethnic group. The constitution also says the state respects and protects all lawful activities of Buddhists and followers of other religions, and “mobilizes and encourages” Buddhist monks and novices as well as priests of other religions to participate in activities that are “beneficial to the country and people.” It prohibits all acts that create division between religious groups and classes of people.

Prime Ministerial Decree 92, issued in 2002, set forth regulations for religious practice. In August the prime minister issued Decree 315 on religious practice to replace Decree 92. The new decree, however, has not been implemented fully, does not have approved implementation instructions, and is not in official circulation as of the end of the year beyond reported distribution to a few senior religious officials.

The constitution, as well as Decrees 92 and 315, state that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and by instructing believers to be good citizens.

The government officially recognizes four umbrella religious groups: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith, and requires religious groups to register within one of these officially recognized umbrella groups. Recognized Christian groups are limited to the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church (LEC), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. All unregistered Christian groups wishing to be recognized must register as part of the LEC or the Seventh-day Adventist Church, instead of receiving separate recognition.

Under both Decrees 92 and 315, nearly all aspects of religious practice – such as congregating, holding religious services, building houses of worship, modifying existing structures, and establishing new congregations in villages where none existed – require permission from a local MOHA branch office, regardless of whether a group is recognized or registered nationally. Some cases require approval from the central-level MOHA. Under the new decree, Buddhism will operate under the same regulations as other registered religions, where previously many of these requirements were not applied to them.

Decree 92 allowed citizens to proselytize, print, and import religious materials, own and build houses of worship, and maintain contact with overseas religious groups. These rights were contingent upon receiving permission through an approval process.

The stated purpose of Decree 315 is to set the principles, regulations, and laws concerning the governance and protection of religious activities for clergy, teachers of religion, members of religions, and religious groups in order to preserve and promote national culture, increase solidarity among members of various religious groups, and “preserve and develop the nation.”

Decree 315 has not yet been implemented, so it is not known how it will be interpreted by authorities. The decree empowers MOHA to order the cessation of any religious activities or beliefs that are not in agreement with policies, traditional customs, laws, or regulations within its jurisdiction. According to the decree, MOHA may stop any religious activity threatening to national stability, peace, and social order, causing serious damage to the environment, or affecting national solidarity or unity between tribes and religions, including the threats to the lives, properties, health, or reputations of others. The decree requires MOHA to collect information and statistics on religious operations, cooperate with foreign countries and international organizations regarding religious activities, and report religious activities to the government.

The new decree prohibits individuals, organizations with a legal personality, and social establishments from causing division among different ethnic groups and religions.

The new decree stipulates that elected or appointed office bearers in committees of responsibility in religious establishments must be presented to national, provincial, as well as district and village level MOHA offices to be reviewed, considered, and certified. MOHA and the related lower-level offices also have authority to issue certificates for religious establishments.

Under the new decree, religious groups operating in multiple provinces are required to obtain national MOHA approval; groups operating in multiple districts are required to obtain provincial level approval; and groups operating in multiple villages are required to obtain district level approval. If a religious group wishes to operate beyond its local congregation, approvals at the corresponding level are required. If a religious activity takes place outside of a religious group's property, it requires village authority approval. Activities in another village require approval from district authorities, from provincial authorities for activities in another district, and from national authorities for activities in another province. Religious groups must submit annual plans of all activities other than routine events in advance to be reviewed, investigated, and approved by the local authorities within their jurisdictions.

Under Decree 315, all houses of worship must be correctly registered under the law and applicable regulations. Any maintenance, restoration, and construction activities at religious facilities must receive MOHA approval from all levels. Local authorities may provide opinions regarding building, care, and maintenance of religious facilities, present their findings to their respective provincial governors

and city mayors for consideration, and subsequently ask the minister of home affairs to investigate, consider, and approve activities conducted in religious facilities.

According to the new decree, those entering the religious clergy for more than three months require approval from district and village authorities, agreement from the receiving religious establishment, and agreement from a guardian or spouse, if applicable. For a period less than three months, the village authority, as well as a guardian or spouse, must approve. The shorter time period stipulations generally apply to Buddhists, as every Buddhist male is expected to enter the monkhood at least once in their lives, often for a duration of less than three months.

Clergy and religious teachers traveling abroad for specialist studies must be approved by both the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) and MOHA. Generally, any students going abroad for study requires approval from the MOES. Religious organizations conducting religious activities overseas must receive approval from the appropriate geographical MOHA level in Laos.

Under Decree 315, the LFNC may educate and meet with religious leaders, clergy, teachers, and members to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, aim to reduce ethnic and religious tensions, and “contribute to the development of the nation.” They are able to listen to opinions and concerns of religious communities in order to work with the respective police or other authorities to investigate and resolve issues.

Under Decree 315, the government continues to control written materials for mass consumption, including for religious use. It regulates the importation and printing of religious materials and production of books, documents, icons, and symbols of various religions. MOHA may require the relevant religious group to certify the imported materials are truly representative of their religion, to address issues of authenticity, and to ensure imported materials comport with values and practices in the country. Under the new decree, the import or export of unapproved printed or electronic religious materials is prohibited.

Buddhist clergy are required by the new decree to have identification cards and clergy from other religions are required to have certificates to prove they have received legitimate religious training.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with a declaration made that Article 18 on freedom of religion shall not be

construed as authorizing or encouraging any activities to directly or indirectly coerce or compel an individual to believe or not to believe in a religion or to convert his or her religion or belief, and that all acts that create division and discrimination among ethnic groups and religious groups are incompatible with the article.

Government Practices

There were reports of religious minority members who were subjected to attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, arrest, and detention. In some cases local officials reportedly threatened Protestants with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply with certain orders. NGOs stated the relatively decentralized nature of the government structure contributed to abuses on the part of local officials, some of whom were reportedly unaware of laws and policies protecting religious freedom or unwilling to implement them. Religious groups said most, if not all, instances of abuse occurred in remote villages. According to religious leaders and government officials, the further one was from the capital city, the more likely abuses would occur.

There were multiple reports of arrests and detentions of Christian villagers who had reportedly discussed their religion with those of other religious groups. All were eventually released. Some were fined, but none reportedly paid.

There were reports from religious groups that Protestants in some villages were arrested for holding Christian services in their homes without permission. This particularly affected Protestants who had not been given approval to build church structures in their villages because of the moratorium on permits. Persons arrested for such alleged religion-related offenses, as with all criminal offenses, had little protection under the law and could be held for lengthy periods without trial and then released, according to reports.

In October in Huaphou Village, Xiengkhor District, Houaphan Province, local religious groups reported that village officers detained a couple, tied their hands and feet for an entire day, and told them to stop practicing Christianity. The couple was eventually released.

According to religious groups, in April in Khamkeut District, Bolikhamxay Province, a village forced 10 Christian families to leave for allegedly creating conflict and disrupting village harmony by dividing the village into followers of

more than one religion. The 10 families were reportedly left homeless and unable to work or send their children to school.

Also in April at another village in Houaphan Province, religious groups reported police demanded five Christian families turn over their Bibles, renounce their faith, provide the names of all family members, and report who was responsible for converting them to Christianity. Authorities also denied the five families their family registration books, documentation required for all citizens to reside legally where they live, access schools, and maintain most aspects of life that require government interaction. Police questioned them about collecting tithes, why they did not cry for or offer food to the dead, and why they reportedly distributed religious literature illegally. Police also said the families degraded the village and district by practicing of their religion.

Religious groups reported multiple cases of Christian families being denied their house registration books, reportedly because of their religion. MOHA said they were aware of issues families that moved from one location to another faced due to errors in the application process or missing documentation. Religious groups reported that families had lived for generations in remote villages but still lacked family registration books and that when a village did begin to receive books, only Buddhist or animist residents had received them, but not Christians. These Christians were reportedly told that they would have to renounce Christianity or leave the village. MOHA said it had not received complaints related to – nor was it aware of – this issue.

Religious groups reported that in April, in Namtha District, Luang Namtha Province, authorities threatened 15 Hmong Christian families so the families would abandon their belief in Christianity.

In Sam Neua District, Houaphan Province, public school authorities reportedly told five Christian families to remove copies of their family registration books from school records, which left their children unable to take exams. Authorities reportedly told the families to either renounce Christianity or leave the village to get their registration books back.

Religious organizations reported that while Decree 92 was in effect, government policy continued effectively to preclude the registration of new religious groups, and registration procedures and timelines outlined in Decree 92 remained unclear. For example, religious organizations reported that according to the decree they were required to “provide a comprehensive set of documents” to the Central

Committee of the LFNC “through the concerned local administrative authorities.” The decree did not identify the required documents or the length of the administrative process. Religious organizations reported LFNC authorities asked unregistered religious organizations to register as a subgroup of existing recognized churches, without regard to differences in religious beliefs.

Christian groups reported they were often denied approval to build churches because they had no registered members in the village. Church members, however, could not register unless there was a church, creating an unresolvable issue. As an attempted solution, church members built temporary structures to serve as unofficial churches. They said that as the Christian population grew, they tried to apply for a church permit, prompting government officials’ reported concerns that the structures were unstable, and could not be approved.

Religious groups said denied registrations were largely due to local village leaders belonging to the majority ethnic-religious group in a village, often Buddhist or animist, leading to reported biases against Christians, who were usually the minority.

Government officials said the country was open to all religions, although only four are currently recognized. The LEC continued to serve as an umbrella group for all registered Christian denominations other than Catholic or Seventh-day Adventist, as religious leaders reported applications for new Christian groups has been too difficult. Government officials reported in September one unrecognized Christian group that wished to register with the government separately from the LEC approached an official for advice who told the group to register with MOHA, but to wait until the new decree was being applied. Shortly thereafter, the official said two of the recognized Christian subgroups contacted him to ask he not allow the requesting religious group to register and receive recognition. Religious leaders stated one of the biggest difficulties that currently unrecognized and therefore unregistered groups faced is that, although registration of any religious group is permitted, in practice disparate groups have been forced under one of the recognized subgroups.

One Christian group has continued to seek independent recognition under the Christian banner since 2012 when their request was denied and has operated without legal status. The group’s attempt to purchase property was unsuccessful because they were unrecognized. On October 1, their only church in the country was closed.

Religious leaders indicated Christians appear to be the fastest growing religious community and Christians reported facing the most difficulties with local authorities and the general population. At a national government meeting in October during which an official gave statistics on religious populations, a National Assembly member reportedly asked why the number of Christians in the country had been allowed to increase so much and questioned what the government would do about it. The meeting chair did not allow the question to be answered and ended the session.

Some Christian leaders continued to say the central government has attempted to repress Christianity because it continued to see Christianity as a foreign and subversive religious practice. Many religious leaders said that although MOHA contended that conflicts originated at the local level, local officials had approval for their actions from either the central government or senior officials within the central government. In dealing with local conflicts regarding religious issues, officials at MOHA reported they first waited for the provinces to resolve the issue before getting involved. Government officials from MOHA and the LFNC reported some local officials were on occasion incorrectly applying regulations or in fact, creating their own regulations contrary to national law. MOHA said, because of financial limitations, there are many remote areas where it has yet to reach to disseminate the previous decree and will take some time to do so with the new decree.

Non-Buddhist religious group leaders stated a broad range of their activities such as congregating, building churches, modifying existing structures, and establishing new congregations were limited by requirements to obtain prior permission, sometimes from several different offices. Buddhists received many de facto exemptions from such requirements and were generally permitted to conduct activities without requesting permission.

Both local and central government officials referred to the constitution, the former and current prime ministerial decrees, and social harmony as reasons for restricting and overseeing religious activity, especially the activities of new or small Christian groups among minority ethnic groups.

Although groups not registered with MOHA or the LFNC were not legally allowed to practice their faith, several reportedly did so quietly without interference. Christian groups seeking official recognition as separate from the LEC continued to be the targets of restrictions, and authorities in several provinces insisted

independent congregations join the LEC. In many areas, however, unauthorized churches were allowed to conduct services without hindrance by local authorities.

According to Muslim community leaders, Muslims were able to practice openly at the two active mosques in Vientiane, the only mosques in the country. According to the Muslim Association, its leaders met regularly with LFNC officials and maintained an effective working relationship with the government. Daily prayers and the weekly Friday prayer proceeded unobstructed, and all Islamic celebrations were allowed. Muslims were permitted to go on the Hajj. The government permitted groups from Thailand to conduct Tabligh teachings.

While animists generally reported little governmental interference, the government actively discouraged animist practices it deemed outdated, dangerous, or illegal, such as the practice in some tribes of killing children born with defects or burying the bodies of deceased relatives beneath homes.

Representatives of Bahai communities in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang reported they generally practiced without interference, and Bahai groups faced few restrictions from local authorities. Local Bahai communities and the Bahai National Spiritual Assembly routinely held Bahai Nineteen-Day Feasts and celebrated all holy days without interference. The Bahai National Spiritual Assembly in Vientiane met regularly.

Religious leaders said they were effectively banned from proselytizing in public, although they were seemingly able to do so on a small scale, such as in private settings and among friends. Programs or activities conducted outside houses of worship that could therefore be seen by the public required prior approval from local or higher officials.

The government promoted the teaching of Buddhist practices in public schools as part of national culture. Mandatory cultural sessions included lessons taught in Buddhist temples and, in several provinces, the lessons were required to pass to the next grade level. MOES allowed parents to take their children out if they were dissatisfied with the program. According to the ministry, there was no Buddhist curriculum taught in any public schools; however, several provinces did teach Buddhist curriculum in public schools. Christian students reported discomfort with being forced to pray in Buddhist temples as part of the requirement to pass to the next grade level. A number of private schools affiliated with various religious groups existed throughout the country and accepted students from any religious denomination.

MOHA officials said they were concerned that imported religious materials and texts might have included religious content different from domestic practices, and as such required approval from the religious authority related to that imported material, to avoid misunderstandings.

Provincial, district, and local officials, as well as MOHA's Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (DERA) and LFNC representatives participated in town hall meetings with local Protestant leaders and community leaders to discuss conflicts involving the confiscations of churches in prior years.

As many as three-fourths of the LEC's congregations throughout the country did not have permanent church structures and conducted worship services in homes. The LFNC's Religious Affairs Department continued to urge that house churches be replaced with designated church structures whenever possible; local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal. Protestant groups reported they sometimes could not obtain permission to build new churches. According to MOHA, a moratorium on permits to build new churches continued, pending implementation of the new prime ministerial decree. Religious group representatives said the building permit process began at the local level and then required district, provincial, and ultimately central-level LFNC and MOHA permission. They said local officials used the process to block construction of new churches.

Many religious leaders complained of lengthy delays in getting permits approved for church construction, and generally received no response to requests. According to the LFNC, many of the delays were related to legal matters on construction, or in some cases, a small cluster of Christian families in one village wished to build two or three churches in the same village resulting in more churches than local authorities think the number of Christians justify. The LFNC said this led to conflicts with other religions predominant in the village that often held an equal number of temples, and therefore local authorities did not permit additional churches to be built. The LFNC cited other examples in which a Catholic church, a Protestant church, and several Buddhist temples existed in harmony. The LFNC also said it was not aware there might have been cases where two different LEC subgroups, with quite different doctrines, might have tried to build separate churches in the same village and that might account for the number of churches.

In Savannakhet and Champasak Provinces, Catholics said the government restricted them from obtaining government jobs or being promoted. Other

religious groups stated that in general, there were no non-Buddhist or non-animist government officials in higher-level posts at provincial or national levels.

During the year, the government promoted ethnic Lao culture, with a focus on Buddhist practices. Government officials attended some Buddhist religious festivals as well as Christmas and religious New Year celebrations in their official capacity. Under the new Decree 315, the government may continue to sponsor Buddhist facilities, incorporate Buddhist rituals and ceremonies in state functions, and promote Buddhism as an element of the country's cultural and spiritual identity and as the predominant religion of the country.

In cases where it came to officials' attention, the government strictly enforced a prohibition on proselytizing by foreigners, which reportedly continued to be widespread although conducted mainly in small, private settings. Christian leaders from foreign countries reported local congregations often requested they not preach from the pulpit to avoid the perception that foreigners were proselytizing to citizens.

The government typically did not acknowledge any religious freedom abuses by its officials. Government authorities often blamed the victims rather than those responsible. Even when central government officials acknowledged certain actions, they often said the actions taken by local officials were not based on religion, but on local officials' duty to maintain order. Religious groups stated that provincial government officials asked religious leaders not to report grievances to foreigners in exchange for greater religious freedom. Provincial government officials in turn reportedly did not inform the central authority about cases involving religious conflicts out of fear of losing funding and of losing recognition for being a model province. According to religious groups, the central government continued efforts to keep individuals who had been arrested, banished, punished, marginalized, or had otherwise been the victim of abuses due to their religious belief out of sight and mind of the international community.

The LFNC and MOHA continued to visit occasionally areas where abuses of religious freedom had taken place to instruct local officials on government policy and law. LFNC and MOHA officials frequently traveled to the provinces to encourage religious groups to practice in accordance with the country's laws and regulations. They also hosted training workshops for local officials to explain officials' obligations under the constitution and the right to believe or not to believe in religion. During these sessions, LFNC and MOHA officials were exposed to religious law and participated in education seminars that reviewed the

basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Bahai Faith, and Islam from religious leaders.

According to the government and religious leaders, in an effort to promote consultation among all stakeholders concerning the drafting of Decree 315, the LFNC and MOHA organized a meeting for recognized religious group representatives. Participants made suggestions that would clarify roles and responsibilities of responsible agencies. Members of religious communities reported concerns that the new decree was a major change of existing rules and a potentially more restrictive set of regulations than what they said was its already restrictive predecessor. In spite of the government's stated aim to take into account religious groups' concerns, the government's initial review of Decree 315 reportedly left some groups feeling that their concerns were not incorporated into the decree as expected. With the decree officially enacted, MOHA, in consultation with LFNC and other relevant ministries and organizations, continued to draft instructions for implementation as of the end of the year. The ministries said they would not include religious groups in the drafting process, but expected religious leaders to challenge the instructions by submitting complaints to MOHA and that revisions may be required after implementation commences. The government expected delays for any approvals required by the new decree would be the norm pending completion of the instructions, as was the case when awaiting amendments to Decree 92 to be finalized in the past.

In collaboration with the LFNC, an international NGO continued to conduct training for provincial and district officials and local religious leaders throughout the year to help both sides better understand each other and the law, and to address religious leaders' continuing concerns about the eviction of religious minority families and the subsequent confiscation of their property in various villages, as well as their frustration over the arduous registration process involving resistance from village leaders all the way up to MOHA.

According to government officials, some people who committed crimes unrelated to religion later said authorities pursued them because of their religion. The officials said that similar to their proportion of the general population, Buddhists make up the majority of prisoners, and said that no one has said that the government is cracking down on Buddhists. Officials also said there were cases where Buddhist or animist prisoners have converted to Christianity in prison, in the hope that their new religious group may press for their release or a reduced sentence.

The LFNC's new president entered office in June. Since his appointment, religious leaders said he has reached out to religious communities, including visits to religious leaders in Savannakhet Province. They said they felt cautiously optimistic that his approach to their concerns has been favorable in comparison to that of his predecessor. The LFNC said it is planning quarterly meetings with religious groups both in Vientiane and in the provinces, if requested.

In December a representative of the LFNC attended an event honoring the beatification of 17 Catholic martyrs that included 11 French priests, one Laotian priest, and five Laotian laypeople, 16 of whom were killed by the then insurgent and subsequently government forces between 1957 and just prior to 1975, and one by the former regime. Some 100 Catholic priests and approximately 1,000 laypeople from around the region were in attendance. During the event, the LFNC representative gave a speech discussing Decree 315.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christian sources reported interreligious tensions on some occasions among some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to the growth of Christian congregations or disagreements over access to village resources. The refusal by members of non-Buddhist groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in Buddhist or animist ceremonies continued to be a source of tensions in rural areas. In some cases, villagers threatened Christians with expulsion from the village should they not renounce their faith. Christian group leaders, however, encouraged their members to work out a compromise allowing them to support local Buddhist or animist ceremonies without participating in them. Members of some Christian groups said they could not make such compromises, which they said would violate their religious beliefs.

Some members of ethnic groups that were associated with the United States during the Vietnam War era, and related conflicts in Laos, said they felt abandoned by the United States at the time and rejected Christianity, which they viewed as an American religion. This sentiment reportedly led to issues in remote areas where these ethnic communities placed additional pressure on Christians, including within families and from neighbors.

Christians reported concerns among many animists regarding burial practices. Christian groups did not cremate their deceased, and buried them on church land or assigned plots of land near villages. During the year, religious groups reported two cases where a funeral procession was to cross over rice fields in order to reach

burial sites. In one case, a farmer requested 5 million Kip (\$612) in compensation, as he said the passing of the deceased over his fields would cause a failed crop. The farmer eventually dropped his request for compensation, but authorities only allowed direct family members, and no other church members, to attend the funeral. Some animists said they were alarmed at the Christian practice of burying their dead within the village boundary confines, believing that the deceased's spirit would bring disharmony to the village and conflict with the village spirits because the body was not cremated.

The LFNC said they have repeatedly seen cases in remote villages in which older family members, who were animists, reported that their Christian convert children or grandchildren damaged or destroyed animist relics. Elder animists said they opposed their younger family members adopting non-animist beliefs and threatened them via various means, including government intervention.

Several private preschools and English-language schools received support from religious groups of various denominations abroad. Many boys received instruction in religion and other subjects in Buddhist temples, which traditionally filled the role of schools and continued to play this role in smaller communities where formal education was limited or unavailable. Two Buddhist colleges and two Buddhist secondary schools provided religious training for children and adults. Christian denominations, particularly the LEC and Seventh-day Adventists, conducted religious education for children and youth. Bahai groups conducted religious training for children and adult members. The Catholic Church operated a seminary in Thakhek for students with high school degrees to study philosophy and theology for two to 10 years. The Muslim community offered limited educational training for its children.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. President visited the country in September and reiterated the U.S. commitment to promoting respect for human rights and religious freedom. In February officers from the Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country and met with the LFNC, MOHA, and local government officials in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Khammuan, and Xieng Khouang. They encouraged the government to abide by its international commitments on protecting religious freedom and ensure local authorities enforce the law. U.S. embassy officers regularly advocated for religious freedom and amendment of relevant laws and decrees with a range of government officials. In multiple exchanges with MOHA, the National Assembly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

and/or the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department, U.S. embassy officials advocated for the need for swift and appropriate resolution of specific cases of arrest, abuse or harassment; cumbersome registration procedures; trends in and abuses of religious freedom; and government management of religious practices in the provinces, such as forced or threatened detentions, removal from villages, evictions, and other problems for recent converts. The LFNC and MOHA sometimes used this information to intercede with local officials.

The embassy actively engaged with MOHA and the LFNC to learn how the newly issued decree will be implemented.

The embassy offered MOHA and the LFNC assistance in disseminating information on aspects of the law providing legal protections for religious freedom to more remote areas, where reportedly understanding of these aspects may be lacking and there are many religious freedom issues. Both MOHA and LFNC said they were appreciative of the offer and said they would consider how to best make use of the embassy's outreach. One religious leader suggested that the embassy include the Ministry of Public Security's local-level counterparts, and others involved in law enforcement in the outreach process, to ensure that those who are involved in many of the issues are properly aware of their responsibilities to protect religious freedom.

Office of International Religious Freedom officers also met with religious communities and NGOs, including Buddhists, Bahais, Seventh-day Adventists, and unrecognized Christians, to discuss the challenges religious groups faced in obtaining government approval for many of their activities.

The Ambassador and a senior embassy official met with religious leaders and advocacy groups to address religious freedom concerns. Embassy officers regularly consulted registered and unregistered religious groups regarding the reports of arrests of religious followers, cumbersome registration procedures, and abuses of freedoms, including during visits to Savannakhet, Khammuan, Bolikhamxay, and Xieng Khouang provinces conducted this year.