

Paper presented by Mr. Phouangkeo Langsy, Head of the Lao delegation to the sixteenth annual International Law and Religion Symposium on "Connecting Communities of Discourse: How the Judiciary, Academia, Government and International Institutions Further the work of Religion Freedom".

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Mr. Chairman,
Honorable members of Executive Committee of the Center,
Distinguished Religious Leaders *and law experts*,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me firstly on behalf of the Lao delegation express our sincere thanks to all honorable members of the Organizing Committee of such very important symposium for their kind invitation and warmest hospitality especially to our brothers from Deseret International Charities Organization (DIC) in Laos for their excellent coordination with the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University. ~~in terms of our travel arrangement.~~ I should like also to extend our greetings to all participants coming from different parts of the world, who have brought the spirit of fraternity for this conference.

Dear friends,

I would like to start my statement by introducing in brief our key institution which plays a fundamental role in handling with the ethnic and religious affairs in the Lao People's Democratic Republic as the coordinating center for all mass, social and religious organizations. In this case, I wish to refer to the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) or Neo Lao Sang Xat in Lao Language, which was founded on August 13, 1950. Since then, the Lao Front for National Construction has made a great contribution to the struggle for national independence during the wartime and after the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (2 December 1975) to the preservation of peace, stability, unity, harmony, national concord and social security in our country. Moreover, as an integral part in the political system of the people's democratic regime and a broad political alliance, the Front has closely collaborated with the Lao Buddhist fellowship Organization and the other religions in order to promote the sense of solidarity and unity within the national community, implement the right of belief or non-belief of the Lao citizens. All levels of the Lao Front have taken the lead to coordinate with the religion organizations and groupings in order to preserve and expand their positive utilities in the enhancement of national unity. At the meantime, the LFNC at each level has increased the coordination with religions organizations in order to advise them to respect the right of belief or non-belief of the citizens, to advise the citizens to nurture and to support religious ceremonies as well as the implementation of ecclesiastical principles and religious rites. On the other hand, the LFNC has tried to use ecclesiastical principles and religions teachings to contribute to revamp the staff, government officials and citizens including the comprehensive dissemination of guideline policy of the government to the

citizens. The preservation of national culture of all ethnic groups, the restoration of valuable archaeological sites, ruins, monasteries, temples, antiques and ancient objects found in stupas, lodges and praying halls still constitute one of the cardinal tasks of the LFNC.

Dear friends,

As you are aware that Laos is a nation which is composed by 49 ethnic groups with diversity of traditions and dialects, however they have always lived together in harmony, unity, mutual respect and assistance like a big family. The almost 6 million multi ethnical Lao people have the right to belief or not to belief any kind of religions and their religion freedom has been clearly guaranteed in the constitution of the Lao PDR. Its article 9 stipulated that the State respects and protects all lawful activities and encourages the Buddhists and of followers of other religions, mobilizes and encourages the Buddhist monks, novices and priests of the other faith to participate in those activities which are beneficial to the country and its people. All acts of fomenting division among religions and among the people are totally prohibited. Besides, the Prime Minister of the Lao PDR has signed a Decree on Management and Protection of Religious Activities in the Lao PDR since July 5, 2002. with a view to ensuring the freedom of religion for all citizens without any discrimination. All Lao citizens have the equal right before the law in the belief or the non belief of religion as stated in the juridical framework.

The articles 2, 3, 4 and 5 of such Decree strongly stated that various religions existing in the Lao PDR have been established with the consent of believers without any concern or bribing from any political institutions or individuals from outside or inside the country. The goal of activities of whatever small or big religions in the Lao PDR is based and aimed at serving the development of the country and educating the population of various social strata to follow the progressive teaching of their religion such as: avoiding badness, doing good and having a pure heart, teaching humans in the spirit of solidarity, mutual assistance and love, assisting humans in the spirit of equality, justice and peace. In this context, the State respects and protects legitimate activities of believers. All Lao citizens are equal before the law in believing or not believing religions as provided by the constitution and law of the Lao PDR. Also, Lao citizens, aliens, stateless persons and foreign residents in the Lao PDR have the right to carry out undertakings or organize religions ceremonies where their monasteries or churches are located.

The most important thing is that the believers of all religions in the Lao PDR shall observe and implement the constitution and law of the Lao PDR and preserve and expand historic, traditional, cultural heritage and Lao national Unity. Now, if you don't mind, may I touch upon some facts in terms of religious situation in Laos. According to the statistics of the year 2008, I can say that the different religions in the Lao PDR have been developed in quantity and quality, up to now in the whole country, the number of the Buddhist followers has reached 66, 8% of the Lao total population with 20.608 monks and novices, 4.860 pagodas and 465 clergymen in white clothes and nuns. I can emphasize that the Buddhism has influenced a lot on and has closely linked to the way of thinking and lifestyle as well as custom and tradition of the Lao people. Talking about the Buddhism of big vehicle sect (Mahaganan), most followers are the Vietnamese and Chinese residents in Laos with 8 pagodas across the country.

In addition to the Buddhism, the Lao people enjoy practicing the animism (about 30,9% of the population).

In connection with the Christianity (Catholic sect) there are 43.721 followers with 293 priests and 98 churches. We also have 57.721 followers of Protestantism with 294 missionaries and 91 churches. Saturday sect followers are 1.694 with 17 missionaries and 3 churches, 2.449 followers of Bahaim with 48 teachers and 5 temples. The Islamism has 400 followers with 12 priests and 2 mosques.

Dear friends,

Over the past years, our government has always recognized respect and guaranteed the religious freedom of worship, of belief or non belief of citizens as an individual right. All kinds of religions in Laos have played an important role in disseminating the fine traditions, taking part in HIV/AIDS prevention and control, working on campaigning AIDS and drug fighting, strengthening solidarity between social strata, morally improving the people's quality of life, and contributing in the promotion of social harmony, peace and development. Taking this opportunity, I wish to express on the name of the Lao people our deep gratitude and Sincere thanks to the Deseret International Charities Organization (DIC) and the others Religious NGOs for their support and assistance in community development in Lao PDR over the past years.

Our government has been satisfied with the religious activities carried out in the framework of the Law and Constitution that we consider as an important contribution to the process of development of the country under the policy of Renovation forwards the construction of a just, prosperous, caring and morally cohesive society where the people love each other as brothers and sisters. We have always shared the view that all religions have the common ethical aspiration and value in which the people can live in harmony and mutual assistance without any discrimination. The use of force, violence in any forms should be never accepted by any religious institutions including the manipulation of religious issues for political interests. I think all conflicts should be resolved by peaceful means and dialogue on the basis of common and reasonable compromise and that is why we are here to discuss and exchange our opinions in order to promote peace, friendship, mutual understanding, solidarity for the long running interests of our societies.

Finally, on behalf of the Lao participants, I would like to appreciate the efforts made by all members of Executive Committee of the ICLRS for holding such very fruitful symposium in Provo. Thank you once again. May God bless everybody in this Symposium.
Good Health and Greater Success to everybody here.