

Where in the world is Sombath?

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR / Bangkok

They were heading home for dinner in Vientiane on the evening of Dec. 15. Ng Shui-Meng, a former UNICEF staffer, was in the car ahead. Following behind was her husband, Sombath Somphone, in his battered old jeep.

But Sombath never made it home that night.

Ng's search for her husband began soon after, with an appeal by the native Singaporean to the Laotian government to help trace the man whose fame as a civil society leader had earned him praise at home and abroad. She wrote a letter to the ministry of public security and included a copy of the CCTV footage of Sombath being checked at a police post and then being led to another vehicle on the night he vanished.

Then on Jan 4, Yong Chanthalangsy, Laos'ambassador at the United Nations in Geneva, released a statement: "It may be possible Mr. Sombath has been kidnapped perhaps because

of a personal conflict or a conflict in business or some other reason," according to a version published in the Vientiane Times newspaper.

The Laotian government's attempt to distance itself from an event that unfolded within a police-controlled environment and was captured on video has raised questions about its credibility. It comes at a time when the country is seeking to open up after decades of socialist control since the end of the Indo-China war.

It is an attitude that has brought little comfort to Ng, who met Sombath when the two of them were students at the University of Hawaii in the 1970s and who then followed him, after marriage, to Laos in 1985. He came home to help the country's rural poor and she contributed in the fields of education, women and children's issues.

The following are excerpts of an interview Ng granted to ***The Edge Review***:

REVIEW: It is now over 100 days since your husband, Sombath Somphone, disappeared. When was the last time you heard from a Laos government official about the status of the investigation?

Ng Shui-Meng: I contacted the public security office again a week ago asking whether the investigation was still ongoing or (whether) they considered the case closed. The response is that they are still investigating. Before that was the public security's second official report on the results of their investigation issued on 2nd March.

REVIEW: How many times have you approached the government and what kind of responses have you received?

Ng: I wrote three appeals to the leaders of the Lao Government. I also contacted several officials in the Lao government who used to work with Sombath and representatives from the National Assembly the first week of the disappearance. All said they did not know anything.

REVIEW: How do you cope with the uncertainty about your husband's fate?

Ng: Desperately hoping and praying that Sombath is still alive and well. And still hoping that whoever has taken Sombath will not harm him.

REVIEW: Have you begun to despair?

Ng: Frankly, the thought of something terrible happening to him has begun to cross my mind, but I still try to suppress such thoughts and keep hoping and praying. I do not know how long I can do that. Not knowing is the most disturbing and dreadful thing I have to face.

REVIEW: Were there moments when you may have received what sounded like good news?

Ng: Nothing, except Sombath's family members have gone to every well-known temple and consulted with every well-known fortune-teller about his situation. I am reduced to taking small comfort from fortune-tellers who reassured Sombath's relatives that he is still alive. What choice do I have



Handout picture of Sombath Somphone taken in 2005. – AFP / SOMPHONE FAMILY

but to hang on to that hope?

REVIEW: How has his disappearance changed your life?

Ng: My life since that awful night has been kept on hold – every phone call, every sound of a car stopping outside makes me jump and hope that there is some news or that Sombath has come back. I try to meditate everyday in the hope of sending positive energies to Sombath, and keeping myself calm.

REVIEW: Many foreign governments – the U.S. and some in Europe – have issued strong statements, calling on the Laotian government to conduct a proper inquiry and find Sombath. How has such international pressure helped?

Ng: I can only hope that every expression of support and concern about Sombath's whereabouts and safety will help to keep him safe and also that whoever has done this needs to come clean – but I can never be sure as I really do not understand the minds and thinking of those who have done this.