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Public Statement

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Thailand: Angkhana Neelapaijit must be given immediate protection

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of human rights defender Angkhana Neelapaijit and her family, and calls on the Royal Thai Government to immediately provide them with adequate protection. Khun Angkhana is the wife of Somchai Neelaipaijit, a Muslim lawyer and human rights defender whose fate and whereabouts remain unknown since his enforced disappearance in March 2004. He had been defending Muslims in southern Thailand, several of whom had reportedly been tortured while in police custody.

The Thai press reported today that General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, Chairman of the Council for National Security (CNS, comprised of some leaders of the 19 September 2006 coup, who have a leading role in the interim government) said that he was informed that a close aide of the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was allegedly involved in Somchai's disappearance.

In light of the fact that Khun Angkhana and her family have received several death threats in the past whenever there have been any advances in Somchai's case, Amnesty International is now again concerned for their safety. Since her husband's enforced disappearance, Khun Angkhana has been active in helping victims of the violence in the Muslim-majority South and in other parts of the country obtain access to justice. Moreover, she has taken a lead role in calling on the government to resolve Khun Somchai's case and bring those found responsible to account. Amnesty International's fears for her and her family's safety are heightened by the lack of an effective witness protection program in Thailand.

Five police officers were arrested and tried in relation to Somchai's disappearance and in January 2006 one was found guilty of coercing Somchai into his car and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. He was released on bail and has reportedly returned to work.

The police investigation failed to uncover any information about what happened to Somchai after his disappearance on 12 March 2004. Subsequent investigation by the Justice Ministry's Department of Special Investigation (DSI) has also failed to make any progress, in spite of the fact that after the January 2006 verdict, then Prime Minister Thaksin stated publicly that he knew Somchai was dead and that he expected further arrests and the results of the DSI investigation to be completed within a month. However to date the DSI investigation has not clarified the full facts of Somchai's enforced disappearance.

