

PUBLIC

AI Index: ASA 39/010/2006

4 July 2006

UA 185/06 Fear for safety

THAILAND Wasant Panich (m), lawyer and human rights defender

On 28 June leading human rights lawyer and National Human Rights Commissioner Wasant Panich managed to avoid a possible abduction attempt. It is believed that the possible abduction attempt was designed to intimidate him from his human rights work, potentially including the investigation of mass graves discovered earlier this year in southern Thailand. Wasant Panich remains in danger

On the morning of 27 June, when Wasant Panich was on his way to a meeting at the Bangkok City Hall, he received several calls on the mobile phone he uses for work. There was no reply when he answered the phone and no caller number was displayed. Later that day, his personal mobile phone, the number of which is known only to a few people, rang but was again met with silence when answered.

The following morning, as Wasant Panich was preparing to leave for his office, his wife's mobile phone and their home phone received more anonymous calls. Wasant Panich sent his driver out while he stayed at home, to check if his car was being followed. The driver confirmed Wasant Panich's suspicion. Wasant Panich and his wife then decided to hail a taxi from outside their house to take them to the office, but became suspicious of the driver's behaviour. They got into another taxi but had to get out again when they realised they were being followed by a minivan with tinted windows. They finally arrived at Wasant Panich's office in a third taxi, only to find that the suspicious minivan was already parked outside.

Most recently Wasant Panich has been calling for hundreds of unidentified bodies found in mass graves in the south of Thailand to be exhumed and the deaths investigated. The mass graves may be linked to the escalating conflict between suspected separatist insurgents and state security forces in the region.

The attempted abduction of Wasant Panich bears some similarities to the case of prominent human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit, who "disappeared" after being forced into a car in Bangkok on 12 March 2004. His whereabouts and fate are still not known.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Human rights defenders are operating at great risk in Thailand. Nearly 20 people engaged in peaceful advocacy for human rights have been killed in the last five years. Phra Supoj Suwagano, a Buddhist monk, was stabbed to death in June 2005 after he exposed illegal logging near his monastery in northern Thailand. Charoen Wataksorn, a fisherman and long-time environmental campaigner, was shot dead in June 2004 after reporting illegal land transfers to the authorities. There have been complaints about the effectiveness of investigations into their and other killings, as well as the investigation into the "disappearance" of lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit, a prominent critic of the declaration of martial law in Thailand's southern provinces. He "disappeared" while acting on behalf of five individuals detained in connection with violence in the south, who had been tortured by police.

Human rights defenders have also faced intimidation and harassment. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has previously been targeted as a result of its work. In 2004, Wasant Panich and fellow Commissioner Jaran Dittha-apichai received anonymous death threats following their investigations of human rights violations in the context of the violence in the south of the country.

The authorities have generated a climate of impunity by taking insufficient effective action to investigate and bring all suspected perpetrators to justice.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern about the reported intimidation and possible attempted abduction of National Human Rights Commissioner Wasant Panich on 28 June;
- calling on the authorities to conduct a full, independent and impartial investigation into the incidents, with a view of bringing those found guilty to justice;
- urging the authorities to take immediate steps to ensure the safety of Wasant Panich;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that all human rights defenders in Thailand are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of abduction or other violent acts, harassment, intimidation or arbitrary detention, in line with constitutional guarantees on the protection of human rights and international human rights standards;
- urging the authorities to conduct a full, independent and impartial investigation into any serious human rights violations that may be connected to the hundreds of unidentified bodies in mass graves in the south of Thailand.

APPEALS TO:

Thaksin Shinawatra
Prime Minister
Government House
Pitsanulok Road, Dusit District, Bangkok 10300, Thailand

Fax: + 66 2 282 8631

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Kongsak Wantana
Minister of Interior
Ministry of Interior
Atsadang Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

Fax: + 66 2 226 4371

Salutation: Dear Minister

Chidchai Wanasatidya
Minister of Justice
Office of the Ministry of Justice
Ministry of Justice Building
22nd Floor Software Park Building,
Chaeng Wattana Road, Pakkred, Nonthaburi, Bangkok 11120, Thailand

Fax: +66 2 502 6699/ 6734 / 6884

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Prof. Saneh Chamarik
Chairperson
National Human Rights Commission of Thailand
422 Phya Thai Road, Pathum Wan District, Bangkok 10300, Thailand

Fax: +66 2 219 2940

and to diplomatic representatives of Thailand accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 August 2006.