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Thailand: New fear of illegal killings coincides with Thaksin's return

As former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra returns from exile to face corruption charges in Thailand, Amnesty International calls on the Thai government to end another aspect of his legacy: illegal killings in the 'war on drugs'.

At least 2,500 people were killed between February and May 2003 as part of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's campaign against drug trafficking. Yet according to recent public findings by a special committee set up by the military government in 2007, more than 1,000 of the victims had little or no connection to the drugs trade. Despite these findings, as well as evidence of written instructions by senior government officials to use heavy-handed tactics during the campaign, not a single government or police official has been brought to account for the killings in 2003.

"It is almost inconceivable that such a large number of killings could go on without a single prosecution, especially when a government committee found that at least 1,000 were utterly innocent," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Programme Director. "Impunity on that scale indicates that the Thai government places very little value on the rule of law or on the lives of its citizens."

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that five years after the first 'war on drugs,' Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej is preparing a new campaign against drug trafficking, which may facilitate further extrajudicial killings of drug trafficking suspects by state security forces. In February 2008 Prime Minister Sundaravej publicly stated that "When the crackdown [on drugs] is underway, killings will take place ... extrajudicial killings do occur".

This statement not only recalls the Thaksin government's 'licence to kill'-style of drugs enforcement, when black lists and monthly targets were used as official policies for cutting the number of drug dealers, it is also an indication that the Prime Minister is preparing Thai citizens for a new wave of unlawful killings. It appears a cynical attempt to pre-empt both domestic and international criticism. It also represents a disturbing acceptance of unlawful behaviour and excessive use of force by state authorities and a lack of political will to prevent further illegal killings.

"The Prime Minister is now preparing another war on drugs, adding insult to injury to a situation in which crimes against humanity may have occurred," stated Baber. "The Prime Minister went on to say that police officers responsible for illegal killings would face legal consequences, yet these assurances ring hollow in view of the record to date," added Baber.

For several years, Amnesty International has expressed concern about the killings of drug trafficking suspects by the security forces in Thailand. The organisation calls on the Thai government to immediately send a

message to all law enforcement officials that deadly force can only be used when strictly unavoidable to protect life. Thai authorities should also initiate independent, impartial, effective and immediate investigations into all extra-judicial killings in 2003, and ensure that any renewed effort against the drugs trade is conducted in a way that respects human rights and the rule of law.