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Thailand: Substantial human rights progress made

Thailand has made substantial progress towards protecting human rights during the last six years, but further changes are still urgently needed, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

"We congratulate the Thai government on its 1997 decision to accede to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), one of the world's most comprehensive treaties for protecting human rights," Amnesty International said.

"At the same time, Thailand adopted a new Constitution which also embraces several fundamental rights. These are positive steps to protect human rights in the face of an ongoing economic crisis."

"But this is no time for the Thai government to rest on its laurels. Action must be taken immediately to ensure that all the human rights enshrined in the ICCPR are respected in Thailand."

"The people of Thailand are now guaranteed the right to freedom of expression, religion, movement and association," Amnesty International continued. "Yet their new Constitution still allows for people to be sentenced to death."

"It is ironic that a country which has significantly improved its human rights record has at the same time taken a big step backwards by resuming executions."

The death penalty is regularly handed down in Thailand, usually for murder, rape, and heroin trafficking. Since 1996, after a nine year hiatus, at least four people have been executed, most recently in October 1998. Executions take place in secrecy and without prior warning.

"We urge the Royal Thai government to demonstrate its continued commitment to human rights by commuting all death sentences, as well as abolishing the death penalty by amending the new Constitution," Amnesty International said.

Other fundamental rights guaranteed in the new Thai constitution, such as the right not to be tortured or ill-treated, are now protected by law but still often not respected in practice. Police sometimes torture untried criminal suspects and use excessive force to subdue public demonstrations.

Prison conditions often constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, characterized by prolonged shackling in heavy chains, extended solitary confinement, and beatings for minor breaches of prison rules. Overcrowding and medical neglect are also ongoing problems.

Refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from neighbouring Myanmar, are arbitrarily arrested and detained for "illegal immigration". They are routinely sentenced to up to 40 days'

imprisonment, if not longer. The Royal Thai Government has yet to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and its 1967 Protocol.

Yet the human rights climate in Thailand has changed considerably since the violent military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in 1992. The military now plays a much less active role in Thai politics, and has become more accountable to the civilian administration.

Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's government recently also proposed a new policy whereby member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could comment on each others' human rights records.

Although ASEAN did not adopt this policy, Amnesty International welcomes this new direction in Thai foreign policy and hopes it will lead Thailand to play a positive leadership role on human rights issues, both in the region and internationally.

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To receive a copy of the report, or to arrange an interview, please call Amnesty International's Press Office in London, UK, on: +44 (0) 171 413 5566.