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US officials must raise concerns about systematic repression of human rights in meetings with Thai Prime Minister

Amnesty International urges US officials to press Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha to roll back restrictions on human rights during his visit to Washington DC. As Prayut's government extends repressive measures in the lead up to elections planned for next year, it is essential that the US government is firm in its support for human rights in Thailand.

The White House has stated that President Donald Trump was looking forward to "affirming the relationship" between the United States and Thailand, and listed bilateral relations and regional cooperation as issues to be discussed during the meeting. Prime Minister Prayut's trip to Washington follows a visit to Thailand by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in August, the first such visit by a high-level US official since Prayut came to power in a May 2014 military coup.

Since the coup, General Prayut's government has ruled by decree and systematically violated human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Thai authorities have also been responsible for torture and other ill-treatment, arbitrary detention and unfair trials. After more than three years in power, the military government continues to pass repressive laws and decrees and to prosecute real or perceived opponents peacefully engaging in political activities or defending human rights. A ban on political gatherings of five or more persons, imposed unilaterally by the military government, has stifled activities by civil society and political parties. Military officers continue to exercise law enforcement powers under an executive order allowing for the detention of individuals without court approval for a broad range of activities.

Authorities have initiated criminal proceedings against numerous human rights defenders, student activists, journalists, academics and political figures for participating in public protests, documenting human rights violations, denouncing corruption, defending the environment, advocating for the rights of workers and indigenous people, expressing political opinions, or otherwise peacefully exercising their rights. Some have already been convicted and imprisoned. Others are currently facing trial and could be sentenced to years or decades in prison under criminal law provisions relating to sedition, defamation, computer crimes and insults to the monarchy, as well as other laws and orders. Hundreds of civilians continue to face lengthy proceedings before military courts in trials that fall short of international standards of fairness.

The US government has repeatedly raised concerns about these issues and must now clarify to General Prayut in no uncertain terms that the current parlous situation is not an acceptable status quo. US officials should press Prime Minister Prayut to immediately lift repressive restrictions on the rights of freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly and take steps to end the use of the criminal justice system to harass and punish individuals for their peaceful exercise of human rights. Officials should further indicate that failure to do so, and to remedy other human rights violations, will negatively impact the two countries' relationship moving forward.