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Thailand: Six months on, fate of human rights activist remains unknown

Six months after activist Pholachi Rakchongcharoen, also known as “Billy”, is believed to have been the victim of enforced disappearance in Kaengkrachan National Park, western Thailand, Amnesty International renews calls on authorities to establish the truth about his fate and whereabouts as a matter of urgency. The organization also urges authorities to ensure all necessary measures are taken to ensure anyone suspected of responsibility for his suspected enforced disappearance is brought to justice.

It is feared that Billy, 30, a Karen community and environmental rights activist with five young children, may have been forcibly disappeared in connection with his attempts to hold authorities to account for human rights violations against ethnic Karen residing in Kaengkrachan National Park, Thailand’s largest national park.

Enforced disappearance is a multifaceted human rights violation and a crime under international law, victimising both the person who is forcibly disappeared and his or her family, who are left agonising over their loved one’s fate. Enforced disappearance cannot be justified under any circumstances.

Billy was last seen on 17 April 2014 when he was detained by the chief of Kaengkrachan National Park and three park officials. At the time of his suspected enforced disappearance, Billy was travelling from his village to meet with ethnic Karen villagers about their forced eviction and burning of their properties, in preparation for a lawsuit which named the national park chief as a defendant. He was carrying documents related to the case, about which he had been planning to submit a petition to King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thailand’s monarch.

In October, police officials announced the discovery of as yet unidentified bloodstains, which initial tests have shown to be male, in a car belonging to national park officials.

The national park chief alleged Billy had been arrested and was released on the same day after being questioned for possession of wild bee honey, but there are no official records of his arrest or detention.

Billy’s case highlights the vulnerability of community rights activists to human rights violations in an attempt to undermine their peaceful activities to protect their communities. Amnesty International further urges authorities in Thailand to fulfil their obligation to break the cycle of impunity in Thailand for attacks on human rights defenders, and to protect

environmental rights and those who defend them.

Background

Thailand signed the International Covenant for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in January 2012, and has signalled that it will move to ratify the Convention. Scores of people are suspected to have been forcibly disappeared since the early 1990s.

Ethnic Karen living in the Kaengkrachan National Park, which lies in forested and mountainous terrain in Petchaburi Province, bordering on Myanmar, have been subjected to forced evictions and property destruction by park authorities. Among those who have been affected is Billy's 103-year old grandfather. Tatkamol Ob-om, a former electoral candidate and environmentalist who had championed the group's rights, was murdered when driving at night in September 2011. The head of the national park, with whom Billy was last seen, has been charged with organising his murder. Ob-om, who was a member of Billy's network, had been helping Karen villagers report alleged abuse violence, illegal logging and poaching by park officials. The Petchaburi Court is due to deliver its verdict on the case later this month.

Community-based human rights defenders and environmentalists in Thailand often operate under extremely dangerous and difficult conditions. Many are members of rural or semi-rural communities faced with large-scale development projects or natural resource exploitation and toxic waste contamination. Community members as well as leaders are often the target of intimidation and violent attacks. Scores of community-based human rights defenders have been killed in Thailand since 1993; and the organizers of their killings have frequently enjoyed impunity. Many others have been victim to other forms of violent attacks and intimidation over that time.