

Thailand: The "disappearance" of labour leader Tanong Pho-arn, 19 June 1991

"Ten years have passed since Tanong Pho-arn, the President of the Labour Congress of Thailand (LCT), went missing in the aftermath of the February 1991 coup d'etat, yet no progress has been made in discovering his fate or the circumstances of his 'disappearance'," Amnesty International and the International Confederation for Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) said today.

"The Royal Thai Government has had 10 years to clarify what happened to Tanong, Thailand's most prominent labour leader, yet they have done very little to account for his whereabouts."

"It is imperative that the government initiate an impartial and independent inquiry, bring those found responsible to justice, and provide compensation to his wife and three children, who have suffered enormously."

Tanong's "disappearance" has not been forgotten, in spite of government inaction. Tens of thousands of workers rallied in Bangkok on 1 May this year -- among their demands was a government investigation into his "disappearance". Labour Congress of Thailand members wore shirts printed with Tanong's photo.

On 19 June 1991 Tanong's empty car was found near his office in Rat Burana district, Bangkok. He went missing a few days before he was due to fly to Switzerland to speak about severe restrictions placed on free trade union activity in Thailand after the February coup at the

International Labour Organization's (ILO) annual conference. He had also been publicly critical of martial law established after the coup.

Before he "disappeared" he was followed everywhere and received numerous anonymous death threats. The military government also denied Tanong permission to attend the ILO conference. He told his family: "If for three days I don't contact you, that means I have been arrested; if it's more than seven days, that means I have already died".

After his "disappearance" his family feared for his health, as Tanong, age 55, was an insulin-dependent diabetic who did not have his medication with him when he was last seen. His wife said; "I sent letters to every government organization to ask for information on his disappearance, but received only silence from them."

"Only when those responsible for Tanong's "disappearance" are held to account can his family and the Thai labour movement find the justice they deserve," Amnesty International and the ICFTU said.

Background

The year before the 1991 coup, Tanong Pho-arn played a critical role in negotiating with Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan to secure one of the labour movement's greatest achievements: passage of a law creating a social security system. He had also been a Thai Senator and the Vice-President of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions-Asia Pacific Regional Organization.

The February 1991 coup leaders overthrew the civilian government of Chatchai Choonhavan and established the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC). Soon after the coup, the NPKC abolished labour unions in State Enterprises, which meant that over 270,000 union members

lost their trade union rights. They did not regain the right to organize until February 1998.

Two committees were established to investigate Tanong Pho-arn's whereabouts, one in the Ministry of the Interior in 1992 and the other in parliament. However reports of these investigations have never been made public.

Amnesty International and the ICFTU call on the Royal Thai Government to make these reports public and to initiate new investigations if necessary.

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