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Thailand: Threats against human rights defenders

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Amnesty International is concerned by anonymous death threats received by several human rights defenders, including academics and two National Human Rights Commissioners, in the wake of ongoing violence in Thailand's far south. The organization is also calling on the Thai Government to initiate independent investigations into recent serious human rights violations, including "disappearances", possible extrajudicial killings and torture, allegedly committed by the security forces in the context of the violence.

"A number of people who are investigating and publicly reporting on the violence in the South have received threats via telephone, email and the post. In order to protect them the Thai Government should clearly state that threats against people who are carrying out legitimate human rights work will not be tolerated." Amnesty International said today.

Violence in the four Muslim-dominated southern provinces escalated on 28 April when groups of men armed with machetes and some guns attacked 10 police bases and checkpoints, killing five members of the Thai security forces. Over 100 of the suspected assailants were reportedly killed by the security forces and several people were arrested during the violence.

Prior to the 28 April attack, there were reliable reports of "disappearances" and torture of Muslims during the 2004 upsurge of violence in the far south. Human rights defenders have raised concerns about such allegations, as well as possible disproportionate lethal force used by security forces to quell the 28 April attacks.

Vasant Phanich, a prominent human rights lawyer and National Human Rights Commissioner, received a written death threat on 8 May from an anonymous source at his private residence. Several days earlier, he had returned from southern Thailand, where he was conducting an investigation into the recent violence there in his capacity as Human Rights Commissioner. He had also expressed concerns publicly about human rights violations in the context of the violence.

Jaran Dittha-apichai, another National Human Rights Commissioner investigating and reporting on the situation, has received hundreds of emails, some of which threatened him with abduction and death. He also received threatening telephone calls at his home. In a similar pattern, academics in the far south have received threatening letters.

On 30 April Amnesty International's Secretary General wrote to Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, expressing concern that the security forces' response to the 28 April violence may have been disproportionate to the threat posed by the attackers. She also urged the Thai Government to initiate an independent investigation and to ensure that those arrested in the context of the violence had immediate access to legal counsel, their families, and proper medical care.

The authorities have initiated a fact-finding investigation into one of the incidents, the security forces' storming of Krue Se Mosque when over 30 suspects were killed on 28 April. However, as other serious human rights violations reportedly occurred in other locations on that day, it is incumbent on the government to initiate an independent investigation into all of the allegations.

Background

In January 2004 violence escalated in four predominantly Muslim provinces in southern Thailand, when armed groups attacked government facilities, including police stations, schools, and army bases. The government enforced martial law and scores of people have been arrested. Some have reportedly been tortured and "disappeared".

A Muslim human rights lawyer, Somchai Neelapaijit, was apparently abducted on 12 March 2004 by people suspected of being members of the police. He had received anonymous death threats prior to his "disappearance" and had been providing legal assistance to Muslims who were arrested for alleged involvement in Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Islamist group in Southeast Asia. He is still missing. At the time Amnesty International appealed to the Thai Government to initiate an independent, impartial, prompt, and effective investigation into Somchai Neelapaijit's "disappearance".

"Amnesty International's concern about threats against human rights defenders in Thailand is heightened by the 12 March "disappearance" of a prominent Muslim human rights lawyer. In spite of widespread appeals, he is still missing and feared dead," the organization said today.

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