

PUBLIC

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UA 54/08 **Fear for safety**

THAILAND **Angkhana Neelaphaijit (f)**

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of Angkhana Neelaphaijit, a leading human rights defender in Southern Thailand and wife of disappeared human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit. She is currently under a witness protection programme, but fears she may be in greater danger as her protection will next month be transferred to the police authorities.

Angkhana Neelaphaijit was placed under the government's witness protection programme following the instigation in 2004 of a legal case into the disappearance on 12 March 2004 of her husband Somchai Neelaphaijit. He has not been seen since and is presumed dead. The legal case that implicates five police officers in the disappearance of her husband is ongoing, though the Thai government continues to delay its responsibility to investigate the case and hold the perpetrators accountable.

Under current government policy, if a case involves the police, the Witness Protection Act stipulates that they should not be involved in the protection of witnesses. Rather, the Department of Special Investigations (DSI) should assign civilian officers under the Ministry of Justice. However, Amnesty International has learned that starting on 1 March 2008, the DSI will assign only police officers to protect witnesses. In a further development, following a reported meeting between Angkhana Neelaphaijit and the former head of the DSI, in which she expressed her concerns for her own personal safety and the safety of her family, Police Colonel Thawee Sodsong, the deputy secretary-general of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, was assigned as the new head of the DSI. The Police Colonel in question was the superior of the five officers currently accused in connection with Somchai Neelaphaijit's disappearance, and is alleged to have given the order.

Angkhana Neelaphaijit is a leading human rights defender in Southern Thailand and has been recognized through numerous awards for her courage and commitment. She is highly vocal and persistent in her criticism of the Thai government, and as a result has received many threats to her own safety. Her continued placement under the witness protection programme is of utmost urgency not only to ensure her safety, but to enable her to continue doing valuable work. Yet she, along with other victims of alleged police violence, does not feel safe if police officers take on the responsibility for her safety—so much so that she is considering withdrawing from the witness protection programme, fearing participation in it could place her in greater danger.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The conflict in Southern Thailand has escalated in violence between government forces and insurgents in recent years, resulting in the loss of over 2,800 lives since January 2004. Insurgent attacks have been met by government reprisals in the form of human rights abuses, including extra-judicial executions, disappearances, arbitrary detention, and torture and ill-treatment. Those who speak out against government authorities face threats and intimidation, and restrictions on movement and access that compromise their personal safety and the work. At least 26 people in Thailand, most from the south, are unaccounted for since 2001, likely the victims of enforced disappearances. Few of these cases have come before a court, and none has been conclusively solved.

In January 2008 the People's Power Party unveiled a coalition government led by Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, following elections held on 23 December 2007. The new cabinet features supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was replaced by military officials following a bloodless coup in September 2006 and is now facing charges of corruption. Under the Thaksin regime there were concerns at

the level of political interference with the judicial process and at a sharp rise in extrajudicial killings. The recent transfer of the DSI chief and reports that more senior officials will be moved to make way for Thaksin supporters has led to concerns that the supposedly new government is a façade for the old.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or own language or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of Angkhana Neelaphajit;
- expressing concern that placing her under police protection will actually increase the risk to her personal safety;
- calling on the government to provide immediate protection for her that is independent of police authorities.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

Mr. Samak Sundaravej
The Secretariat of the Prime Minister, Office of the Prime Minister
Government House
Pitsanulok Road
Dusit, Bangkok 10300
Thailand

Fax: +66 2 280 0858

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Minister of Justice

Mr. Sompong Amornwiwat
Office of the Minister
Ministry of Justice
Chaeng Wattana Road
Pak Kred, Nonthaburi 11120
Thailand

Fax: +66 2 502 6734

Salutation: Dear Minister

Chief of the Royal Thai Police

Pol Gen Seripisuth Temiyavej
Office of Royal Thai Police
Rama I Road
Pathumwan, Bangkok 10330
Thailand

Fax: +66 2 250 1533

Salutation: Dear Police General

Director-General of the Department of Special Investigation (DSI)

499 Sukprapreut Building
Prachachuen Road
Bangsue District, Bangkok 10800

Fax: +66 2913 7777

Salutation: Dear Director- General

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Thailand accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 9 April 2008.