

Thailand : AI demands independent and impartial investigation

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Amnesty International has been justly criticized for its poor record on the impartial protection of human rights in Thailand, not least by PPT. In recent months, there seems to have been a vigorous debate within AI, with AI USA taking a more assertive position than the international office.

On 11 June 2010, the international office of AI posted an open letter to Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, welcoming his “assurances on 21 May that ‘an independent investigation of all the events that have taken place during the protests’ would be carried out ‘in a transparent manner’.” It adds: “Independence is of paramount importance to any investigation’s credibility; whatever body undertakes the effort should be free from affiliation with either the government or the UDD,” and “The investigation must also be impartial, including alleged human rights abuses by both sides.” AI also observes that “Prosecutions should adhere to international fair trial standards, and trials should not be held in camera.”

PPT has serious reservations about any investigation initiated by the government. As AI says, “Thailand does not have a strong record on either investigations or accountability for human rights violations.” The example given relates to the Rohingya, under the Abhisit government, and they could easily mention other instances by previous governments, including those of Thaksin Shinawatra.

These are the incidents AI says should be impartially and fairly investigated by an independent body:

- * The events of the night of 10 April in the vicinity of Democracy Monument, including the possible excessive use of lethal force by security forces, and violence by protesters which may amount to human rights abuses.
- * The assassination of Major General Khattiya Sawatdiphon (known as “Seh Daeng”), a military advisor for the protesters, by a sniper on 13 May.
- * The unlawful killings of unarmed persons by security forces, through the reckless use of lethal force, on 14-17 May in the Rachaprarop Road, Soi Rangman, Bon Kai, Rama IV Road, Soi Nang Dupli, and Din Daeng Road areas. It appears that at least 35 unarmed people were killed, including two medics who were wearing white medical uniforms with a red cross, shot on 15 and 16 May; and a 17 year-old boy, shot on 15 May.
- * The obstruction of ambulances by both security forces and protesters in the Rachaprarop Road area on 15 May.
- * The use of lethal weapons by UDD protesters against unarmed persons, including Thai and foreign journalists, on 19 May in the Sarasin Road and Ratchadamri Road areas.

* The use of lethal force by unknown persons against unarmed people, including independent journalists, who were taking refuge in Wat Pathum Wanaram on the evening of 19 May. At least three unarmed persons were shot with live ammunition in that temple, two of whom, both medics, were killed. At least four other dead bodies were removed from the temple, all killed by bullets that struck them either just outside or inside the temple. Five eye-witnesses, four of whom were in the temple at the time of the shooting between 5:30 and 7:20 PM, told Amnesty International that live fire came on a downward trajectory from the south-western direction and into the temple grounds. Photographs clearly show armed men wearing military fatigues and standing between the elevated tracks of the BTS Skytrain, south-west of the temple.

* The extensive arson of 37 buildings, some of which had persons inside them, by UDD protesters on 19 May.

It is somewhat disturbing that AI claims to have “conducted first-hand research” but which appear, in all but one case – Wat Pathum Wanaram – appear as statements of fact rather than as allegations.

AI “urges the government to lift the Emergency Decree in Thailand immediately,” arguing that emergency rule seriously impedes an investigation of human rights abuses. This includes the massive censorship that the Abhisit regime implements: “Emergency measures must distinguish between information that could threaten national security and the legitimate expression of controversial ideas.”

We guess this is AI continuing to accept censorship under lese majeste laws.

AI “urges you to roll back censorship and other restrictions on freedom of expression so that the exchange of ideas and legitimate debate may take place among the public and within the Parliament in Thailand. Greater, and not less, protection for freedom of expression in Thailand is critical towards resolving the political crisis.”

PPT agrees but is far less sanguine regarding the lese majeste and computer crimes laws, which the government actively uses to repress opposition. We also have reservations regarding the investigating panel being put together by the government – see here – where Khanit na Nakhon, a former attorney-general, says the investigation will “not about pointing fingers or finding out who was right or wrong in the violence of April and May...”. He adds: “There will be no pointing of fingers in the work plan towards reconciliation. Too many opportunities have been lost. We may adopt a ‘truth commission’ model rather than a fact-finding panel...”. He added that “placing blame was less important than promoting forgiveness.” That should appeal to Abhisit.

The *Bangkok Post* says this of Khanit, he “has been seen as having close affiliations with the ruling Democrat Party and the Sept 19, 2006 coup makers who overthrew the Thaksin administration. He was appointed to head an inquiry into alleged extra-judicial killings of drug suspects during the Thaksin regime after the coup.”

P.S.

From Political Prisoners in Thailand

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