

# Who watches the watchmen? Human Rights Watch and Thailand

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There seems to be something broken when it comes to the international human rights groups and Thailand.

Of course Amnesty's record on intervening in Thai human rights abuses is nothing short of scandalous. Not only were senior members of the Thai branch of Amnesty International openly sympathetic to the extreme rightwing PAD movement there is also strong evidence that Amnesty's International Secretariat's researcher, Ben Zawacki, seemingly colluded with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Despite repeated attempts to draw an explanation as to Zawacki's behaviour, Amnesty remain silent and unaccountable.

For their part, Human Rights Watch, have taken a more nuanced stance. Yet, they too have made repeated and highly dubious statements, not least regarding the burning down of the Central World department store in Bangkok in May 2010.

In short, HRW have asserted, despite offering no credible or independent evidence whatsoever, that the Red Shirts burnt down Central World. This is completely in line with the Thai regime's official version of events. What is most surprising is that HRW haven't even bothered to wait for any investigation to conclude, instead they persist in making bold and unsubstantiated statements like Brad Adams, HRW's Asia Director, does in this video clip (from 1min 35sec)

For the record, I am not stating that the Red Shirts didn't burn down Central World. They may well have done. But there again so might have other unknown parties or even elements attached to the Thai military. No credible evidence has been established either way. Notable authorities on Thailand, such as Reuters' Andrew Marshall, certainly agree with the view that the entire cause of the Central World fire is shrouded in murk.

So why do Brad Adams and HRW persist with their unsubstantiated and dubious claims? I asked HRW's press office and they declined to comment. What is also interesting is HRW's strong statement regarding Libyan use of cluster munitions (HRW's statement offered plenty of moral ammunition for the USA and NATO's military intervention in Libya) while HRW had only complete and abject silence on Thailand's use of the same against Cambodian villages.

One could hypothesise that Mr. Adams is so overcome with Thaksin-hatred his judgement has become clouded. Or that his organisation doesn't have to be accountable to anyone regarding Thailand, least of all provide proper citable evidence for its claims. There is also still much to be revealed about HRW's ongoing silence regarding lese majeste cases in Thailand - would their position in Thailand be threatened if they did campaign on the continued imprisonment and ill-treatment of Da Torpedo or other lese majeste prisoners? Don't they owe it to their 1000s of members, supporters and donors to say so if that is the case?

One other worry could be that when organisations such as HRW and Amnesty get caught up in a regime's misinformation they too have a vested interest in continuing and circulating such

misinformation. At present these organisations refuse any notion of transparency or accountability where Thailand is concerned. The question that must be asked of both HRW and Amnesty is who is watching the watchmen?

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