

# Thai cave rescue: stateless boys and coach granted citizenship

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## **The boys had applied for citizenship before they became trapped in the cave in northern Thailand last month**

Three of the young soccer players who were trapped in a cave in northern [Thailand](#) for almost three weeks were granted Thai citizenship on Wednesday.

Their coach, Ekapol Chanthawong, 25, who was [trapped in the cave with them throughout their ordeal](#) also gained citizenship.

The boys were stateless, despite having been born in Thailand and their lack of citizenship deprived them of some basic benefits and rights, including the ability to travel outside of Chiang Rai, the northern province where they live. The area is home to ethnic minorities with roots in neighbouring Myanmar.

The boys and coach were among 13 people who were trapped in the cave for several weeks, surviving by drinking water that dripped from the walls of the cave, until they were found by scuba divers after a round-the-clock international rescue effort.

"Today all of you get Thai citizenship," Mae Sai district chief Somsak Khanakham said in a ceremony on Wednesday at a local office, as they were handed national ID cards.

Somsak told AFP that the "Wild Boars incident" had nothing to do with the development and said they had merely qualified.

But the event was advertised proudly on the local government's Facebook page with the words: "Wild Boars revel! Got Thai citizenship."

The boys given citizenship Wednesday in their home district of Mae Sai had all applied for it before the cave incident, and all had the required documentation for the change in status, said Somsak.

"There are many people who are born in Thailand but haven't received citizenship yet," he said.

Nopparat Kanthawong, the head coach of the Wild Boars team, said they received official Thai ID cards along with another team member who had not been in the cave but also applied for citizenship.

"I'm happy," he said. "If they have Thai citizenship, in the future, if they don't want to play football they can take exams to become public officials or find good work that is related to their field of studies," he said.

There are 488,105 stateless people registered in Thailand, according to government statistics. The

actual number could be as high as 3.5 million, according to the International Observatory on Statelessness. The group says stateless people in Thailand are unable to vote, buy land, seek legal employment, work in certain occupations or travel freely.

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The Guardian

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