



Thailand acts as agent of repression with Cambodian deportations

Thailand has confirmed that it is a safe haven for authoritarian regimes engaged in transnational repression with the deportation of five Cambodian opposition activists who have now been charged with treason.

The activists, Pen Chan Sangkream, Hong An, Mean Chanthon, Yin Chanthou and Soeung Khunthea, were deported on 24 November, together with two children. The five were all supporters of the peaceful opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which was dissolved by Cambodia's politically controlled supreme court in 2017.

The five are now in prison in Cambodia. Two of them, Pen Chansangkream and Hong An, were previously imprisoned in 2021 after protesting against social injustice under Cambodian dictator Hun Sen.

The deportations have been condemned by Bangkok-based Human Rights Watch veteran Phil Robertson. "This is a blatant case of refoulement, violating UN rights treaties and Thai law," Robertson wrote. "Under no circumstances should they have been sent back to Cambodia."

The deportees are reported to have been recognized as refugees by the UNHCR. Thailand has not ratified the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, so refugees lack protection even if the UNHCR recognizes them.

However, Thailand's own domestic legislation, in the form of the 2023 Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act, prohibits deportation where there are "substantial grounds for believing the person would be in danger of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or enforced disappearance."

Cambodia's massively overcrowded prisons and their deliberate use to break the will of dissidents clearly meet the threshold for inhuman and degrading treatment.[1]

The Thai government and the Hun Sen regime in Cambodia are established as willing partners in a swap mart of regional repression. Thai political dissident Wanchalearn Satsaksit, among activists who fled Thailand after the country's military coup of May 2014, was forcibly abducted in broad daylight on the streets of the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh on 4 June, 2020. Neither Cambodia nor Thailand has made a serious effort to investigate what happened to him. Human Rights Watch says there have at least eight Thai activist victims of enforced disappearance in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Thailand is also willing to send regime opponents back to China and Myanmar despite the obvious dangers of torture and death. In 2015, the Thai government deported at least 109 Uyghurs to China. In April 2023, three members of a Myanmar opposition group crossed into Thailand to seek medical treatment. The Thai authorities handed them over back to the Myanmar junta. These actions are stark breaches of the UN Convention on Torture which Thailand adopted in 2007.

The Khmer Movement for Democracy condemns the cowardly and self-serving actions of the Thai government. It calls on all partner governments to insist that the Thai government meets its domestic and international legal obligations, and ends its complicity with transnational repression.

[1] 'I thought I wouldn't live to see the next day' – Journalist Mech Dara, after prison nightmare

