

Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: Ravina Shamdasani

Location: Geneva

Subject: 1) Thailand
2) Maldives

1) Thailand

We are seriously concerned about the prosecution and harsh sentencing of individuals in Thailand under the country's lèse majesté law. Such measures are adding to the larger pattern of increasing restrictions on freedom of expression in Thailand. Since the 22 May coup, at least 13 new lèse majesté cases have been opened for investigation while other cases where charges had previously not been laid, have been revived.

Last week, on 14 and 15 August, two university students were arrested for participating in a play in October 2013 that depicted a fictional monarch who was manipulated by his advisor. The arrests followed a number of convictions and harsh sentences in lèse majesté cases, including that of Plutnarin Thanaboriboonsuk who was also charged under the Computer Crime Act in relation to messages he posted on Facebook. He was sentenced on 31 July to 15 years in prison, reduced from a sentence of 30 years because of his guilty plea. The sentence came less than two months after charges were laid on 16 June, even though the investigation had remained pending for more than two years. In another case, on 14 August, Yuthasak Kangwanwongsakul, a taxi driver, was sentenced to two years and six months in jail under the lèse majesté laws for a conversation he had with a passenger. We are concerned that more charges may be filed and that more harsh sentences may be issued in the coming weeks.

In 2013, the High Commissioner indicated her support for amendments to the lèse majesté law under section 112 of the Criminal Code to address concerns related to the implementation of the law. In 2011, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression and opinion also urged the amendment of Thailand's lèse majesté law, stating that section 112 was too vague and prescribes long maximum sentences that are contrary to permissible restrictions on freedom of expression under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Thailand has ratified.

We reiterate our call to the military administration to ensure its compliance with Thailand's obligations under international human rights law, especially the ICCPR. The threat of the use of the lèse majesté laws adds to the chilling effects on freedom of expression observed in Thailand after the coup, and risks curbing critical debate on issues of public interest.

2) Maldives

We are concerned about the disappearance of Ahmad Rilwan Abdullah, a journalist with Minivan News, a web-based news outlet in the Maldives. Rilwan has not been seen or heard from since 8 August 2014.

Rilwan's disappearance is of particular concern given that 15 journalists have reported receiving death threats through anonymous text messages just in the first week of August. All 15 journalists had published articles related to a sudden surge of gang-related violence and crime in Male. Rilwan had also covered these issues as well as the reports of death threats to journalists in recent articles. The Government has launched an investigation into Rilwan's case, which we hope will be resolved promptly.

We call upon all parties to refrain from threatening media activists for performing their professional duties. We also urge the relevant authorities to address any threats and intimidation directed at journalists and other civil society activists and to do their utmost to ensure that they are able to operate without fear for their safety.

ENDS

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