

Thousands dead as a result of Thailand's “war on drugs”

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Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra last week announced “victory” in a vicious, anti-drug campaign, in which police were given a licence to use “extreme measures” to stamp out the selling of methamphetamines, known locally as “yaba” or “crazy medicine”.

This three-month reign of police terror left at least 2,274 people dead. The government and police implausibly ascribed the deaths to gangland feuding, insisting that only 42 drug suspects were shot by police officers—most of those in “self-defence”. In fact, the government openly encouraged the police to carry out extra-judicial killings so that the arbitrary goals of its “war on drugs” could be met on time.

The Narcotics Control Board provided the indices: 1,765 people arrested as major drug dealers and another 15,244 as minor dealers. More than 280,000 “drug pushers” and “addicts” gave themselves up to authorities and were sent for rehabilitation. In all, some 15.5 million pills were confiscated and the street price for the drug doubled or trebled over the course of the three months from February 1 to April 30.

All 75 of Thailand's provinces reported that they had more than fulfilled their quota of reducing the number of drug dealers by 50 percent. In some cases, officials boasted of a 100 percent “success rate”—that is, all drug dealers in their province either dead or detained. Interior Minister Wan Muhammad Nor Matha claimed that 440 local officials and politicians, including two police colonels, had been dismissed because of links to drug trafficking.

The government used a system of bribes and threats to ensure that regional governors and police chiefs carried out the campaign. Three lists were compiled: one by police; the second by local administrative organisations and village heads; and the last by the Narcotics Control Board. Officials who failed to meet their quotas faced dismissal. Those who brought in a “major drug dealer”—dead or alive—received a bounty of one million baht (\$US23,600).

But just who has been arrested or gunned down is unclear, as the allegations against those on the blacklists have not

been tested in a court of law. Those whose names appeared had no way of finding out the nature of the accusations against them. Terrified of being framed up or shot dead, thousands opted to hand themselves in and submit to a course of boot-camp style rehabilitation.

Among those killed was a nine-year-old boy who was shot dead in late February. While undercover police were arresting his father, allegedly in a sting operation, his panic-stricken mother sped off in the family vehicle with the child on board. When police caught up with the car, the woman fled. Before opening the vehicle, the police fired into it at point-blank range killing the boy.

Thaksin has been able to exploit public hostility to illicit drugs to boost his popularity and deflect attention from the failure of his government to address unemployment, poverty and other social problems that lie at the root of drug abuse. However, the cold-blooded killing of the nine-year old boy sparked public outrage. Since then there has been growing criticism.

A survey conducted by the Assumption University found that 84.2 percent of Bangkok residents surveyed supported the campaign. But of those same people, 65.3 percent expressed their fear that corrupt police could frame-up innocent people. The very nature of the campaign left the door wide open for those compiling the blacklists to use them to settle personal grudges or deal with business or political opponents.

The Human Rights Commission was contacted by a number of people who said they had been wrongly included on the blacklists. Government officials called for such complaints to be directed to drug suppression officials. But as Sunai Phasuk from Forum Asia, a human rights organisation, pointed out: “Most of them [the victims] got killed on the way back from the police office. People found their name on a blacklist, went to the police, then end up dead.”

The Thai media and civil rights activists have been critical of the government's flagrant disregard for democratic rights and its threadbare justifications for the killings. “If the

police weren't involved, why hasn't one murderer been arrested?" asked human rights lawyer Somchai Homlaor. "The only sensible conclusion is the police are sending out death squads."

Thepchai Yong, editor of the *Nation*, told the Australian TV program *Dateline*: "Nobody's buying that [the government's] line because we believe that the authorities, the police in particular, were involved in many of the killings. So if what the Interior Minister claims is true, that the killings were the result of a double crossing, or killings among drug dealers themselves, it means drug dealers are in control of the country."

Forum Asia said that the government was encouraging police to "simply execute alleged offenders... This makes it increasingly easy for the police and other authorities to simply do away with anyone they don't like." The group issued a statement in late February calling for "immediate investigations into the shootings, in which some [victims] were handcuffed when killed or shot in a group. There were at least three cases which experts were able to examine and they found that the suspects had had drugs planted on them after death, and that bullets had been removed before coroners examined the bodies."

Others have pointed out that the round-up or killing of large numbers of drug addicts or petty pushers will do nothing to halt drug trafficking as those who control the trade have connections in the highest quarters, including the police and military.

Former national police chief Pol Gen Sawat Amornwiwat declared in January that "senior state officials and politicians" were "in cahoots with drug traffickers" and that a list prepared by the Drugs Enforcement Agency in 1992 included the name of a senior Thai politician. "The main obstacle is that influential people provide support for drug traffickers and make fantastic amounts of money," he said.

Attempts were made to silence the critics. In early March, Dr Pradit Chareonthaitawee, Thailand's National Human Rights Commissioner, received anonymous death threats, warning him to stop taking his concerns to the United Nations. Shortly afterwards, Suranand Vejjajiva, a spokesman for the ruling Thai Rak Thai Party, threatened to impeach the commissioner for speaking to the UN about the government's blacklists, extra-judicial killings and failure to prosecute cases involving drug-related murders.

Opposition politicians warned that the "war on drugs" could lead to international censure over human rights violations and frighten off foreign investors. The prime minister, however, arrogantly dismissed such concerns. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was forced to cancel a proposed visit by a special envoy, when the government refused to cooperate.

Responding to a Senate proposal to hold an inquiry into police practices, Thaksin advised the body to ignore "the thinking of foreigners," adding: "It is not necessary for Thailand to make any explanation to the UN. We are a sovereign country. If any country wants to cut aid because of what we are doing, frankly speaking, I don't really care."

Following criticisms in the US Congress, the government reacted similarly this week to suggestions that the US might cut off financial aid and technical assistance to the Thai armed forces. Confident that he enjoys the support of Washington, Thaksin declared: "We have explained this [war on drugs] to the US ambassador and the US administration understands it very well."

Thaksin, one of the country's wealthiest businessmen, has close connections to the country's security forces. He made much of his vast fortune through monopoly rights and state contracts granted by former military regimes.

Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party won the 2001 election campaign by exploiting the widespread public hostility to the impact of the IMF restructuring agenda being implemented by his predecessor Chuan Leekpai. He campaigned on a populist program that offered handouts to rural villages and debt relief to farmers while at the same time pledging to bail out failing Thai businesses.

But the government has no solutions to the huge social problems that afflict the lives of the majority of Thais. Through its "war on drugs," the government is preparing for further attacks on democratic rights, which will, in the future, be directed against its political opponents.

The government has already foreshadowed a crackdown on drug-related finances. A new law retrospective to February 1 is to be introduced to reward governors with 30 percent of the value of any drug-related assets that are seized. Another 15 percent will be set aside for successful detectives and for anyone providing tip-offs.

The Office of Narcotics Control Board, National Police Office and Interior Ministry plan to establish a nationwide database of dealers and addicts. Provincial government will be asked to establish special investigative offices and the Anti-Money Laundering Office will be given increased powers to tap phone lines.



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