Amnesty International documents torture by Thai junta

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Amnesty International published a report on September 28 documenting 74 cases of torture and other forms of abuse by the Thai military and police. The report, entitled "'Make Him Speak by Tomorrow:' Torture and other ill-treatment in Thailand," is based on interviews with victims in 2014 and 2015 as well as information gathered from lawyers, relatives, court documents and medical records.

The ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) came to power in a military coup in May 2014, which removed the elected Pheu Thai Party government of Yingluck Shinawatra. Since then the junta has maintained conditions of martial law: public gatherings and protests are banned, the media has been censored and elections have repeatedly been postponed.

Many cases of torture documented by Amnesty International occurred during a week-long period of detention by the military. The victims include "suspected insurgents, government critics, and migrant workers, suspected drug users, ethnic minorities and others from various walks of life."

The military granted itself sweeping powers to detain anyone at undisclosed locations and without charge for up to a week, and a further 30 days with court approval. Those arrested since the coup include politicians in the ousted government, student protesters, journalists and academics. About 1,800 people have faced military courts for alleged breaches of the military's interim constitution. More than 500 people have been arrested and 68 charged with lèse majesté, that is, insulting the monarchy.

The Amnesty report paints a chilling picture of the brutal methods that will be used more broadly as opposition develops to the junta's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

A press conference organised in a Bangkok hotel to launch the report was interrupted by police and officers from the Labour Ministry, who threatened to arrest Amnesty International spokespersons on the pretext that they did not have a work permit. In an attempt to intimidate anyone who exposes the regime's crimes, army spokesman Colonel Winthai Suvaree told the *Nation* newspaper: "If there is anything in the report that damages the reputation of anyone or any agency, they may be sued for defamation."

In July, three Amnesty International officials based in Thailand were charged for criminal defamation for releasing a report documenting 54 cases of alleged torture carried out by the army and police in southern Thailand. They face up to five years in jail if found guilty.

For the most recent report, the organisation spoke to several people who were tortured while detained "in relation to political activities or alleged involvement in acts of politically-motivated violence" prior to the coup. The most common form of torture was beatings. There were also cases involving "strangling, choking, waterboarding, electroshocks and burns, prolonged and painful handcuffing, humiliation (including through acts of a sexual nature), prolonged blindfolding, threats including death threats, and exposure to cold."

In one case a young man arrested in mid-2014 told Amnesty International: "They put a plastic bag on my head until I fainted, and then poured a bucket of cold water on me … They applied electro-shock to my penis and chest. I was restrained, my legs tied, and my face covered with tape and a plastic bag." During the ordeal he pleaded with the soldiers: "Please shoot me and send my corpse to my family."

Another victim described the horrific experience of being waterboarded: "They'd sit me on a chair, wet a towel and hold it to my face until I couldn't breathe, or

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they would put a towel on my face and tie it behind my head, then pour water on the towel until it went into my nose and I would choke. Then the soldier would remove it, and then do it again."

While the report states that cases of torture have increased following the coup, it also documents some cases that occurred before the coup, under the Pheu Thai government. Victims included men suspected of involvement in southern Thailand's Muslim separatist insurgency. Martial law has been in place since 2006 in parts of the south affected by the long-running and bloody conflict, enabling arbitrary detentions by the military for up to 37 days.

The report also details cases involving alleged drug users and migrant workers. It points to the longstanding practice of police officers using torture to extract bribes from these particularly vulnerable people.

Hardly anyone is ever held accountable for such human rights abuses. Amnesty's report notes that Thailand's Penal Code "does not specifically criminalise acts of torture." Nor is there any law against statements obtained through torture being presented as evidence in court.

Victims rarely come forward out of fear of reprisals and allegations of torture are almost never investigated. A senior member of the Thai judiciary admitted to Amnesty International: "We wouldn't initiate an investigation into torture even if we're convinced there was torture … we do have the power to investigate but we're quite passive."

The widespread abuse and torture by the army and police are an attempt to suppress any opposition to the regime, as it moves to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the population.

The army, led by General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, ousted the Pheu Thai government in order to carry out the assault on the working class and rural poor demanded by the ruling elite.

The monarchy, the armed forces and the state bureaucracy are deeply hostile to Yingluck and her brother, telecommunications billionaire and former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was removed in an earlier coup in 2006. Parties linked to the Shinawatras have won every election since 2001 and gained support among the rural poor by offering limited reforms including subsidies for rice farmers, which have now been eliminated.

Economist recently noted that as The result spending in rural Thailand has collapsed and the rural economy "has contracted for seven quarters in a row." Under the ousted government's subsidy scheme "a tonne of rice brought in as much as 20,000 baht ($625)" for a farming family. The amount has now dropped to 8,000 baht following the collapse in global rice prices and the removal of the subsidy.

The Obama administration has so far made no official statement on Amnesty International's report on torture in Thailand. Washington considers the country an important military ally in Asia, where the US is encircling and preparing for war against China. While making token criticisms of the coup-leaders, the US has continued to conduct regular military training with Thai forces, including the annual Cobra Gold war games in February, an anti-submarine warfare naval drill in May, and the Hanuman Guardian exercise in July, focused on search and rescue operations and aviation interoperability.

According to the *Nation*, on September 23 US ambassador Glyn Davies praised the junta's August referendum, which endorsed an anti-democratic constitution designed to entrench military rule, even if elections are held as promised in 2017. Davies told reporters: "The US considered the referendum to have been carried out in a fairly free and fair manner and could plausibly bring reconciliation to the country." In fact, the referendum was marked by widespread military and police intimidation of opponents, including the arrest of hundreds of people who campaigned against the draft constitution.

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