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**Thailand: Authorities must investigate abduction of Vietnamese journalist**

The Thai authorities should investigate the Thai police’s role in Viet Nam’s abduction of journalist Truong Duy Nhat, Amnesty International said today.

Documents and information obtained by Amnesty International raise serious questions about the possible involvement of Thai police officers in events that led to Nhat’s abduction in Bangkok on 26 January. The Vietnamese authorities have acknowledged that Nhat is currently in detention in Hanoi.

Both Thailand and Vietnam are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is meeting this week in Bangkok between 20 and 23 June. Thailand will be assuming the Chairmanship of ASEAN until the end of the year.

“Nhat’s abduction appears to be part of a deeply worrying trend in the region regarding the forced and often unlawful return of refugees and asylum seekers,” said Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International’s regional director for East and Southeast Asia.

“A number of countries in the region are trading off political dissidents and individuals fleeing persecution as part of an unholy alliance to shore up each other’s regimes. ASEAN leaders need to put an end to this downward spiral.”

Several countries in the region – notably Thailand, Viet Nam, Cambodia and Malaysia – have handed over political dissidents sought by neighbouring states in blatant violation of customary international law protections for the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. In extreme cases, dissidents appear to have been forcibly ‘disappeared’ from the country where they were seeking refuge, only to reappear in another state’s custody weeks or months later.

The chain of events in Nhat’s case suggests a possible quid pro quo exchange between Thailand and Viet Nam. Nhat’s abduction and return to Viet Nam in January was followed, a few months later, by Viet Nam’s detention of three Thai dissidents, whose whereabouts remain unknown. The three men – Siam Theerawut, Chucheep Chivasut and Kritsana Thapthai – were picked up by the Vietnamese authorities at the Viet Nam-Laos border in early 2019, and were reported to have been handed over to Thailand in early May 2019.

On 7 February, then-Chief of Immigration Police, Police Lieutenant General Surachate Hakparn announced an investigation into Nhat’s disappearance, but there have been no further announcements about the case since then.

Amnesty International is calling on the Thai authorities to conduct a prompt, thorough, impartial, and effective investigation into Nhat’s reported abduction and the role of Thai police in it. Any official suspected of involvement in the abduction must be brought to justice.

According to information received by Amnesty International, Nhat was picked up on 26 January 2019, the day after he filed a refugee application with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Four Thai police officers stopped him at around 5:30 pm at an ice-cream shop on the 2nd floor (G level) of the Future Park mall, in Bangkok. The officers brought Nhat to a restaurant, ate with him for a couple of hours, and then, sometime after 8 pm, drove him a short distance away, delivering him to a group of Vietnamese police officials. The Vietnamese officials forced Nhat into a van and drove away with him.

Nhat is now detained in Hanoi and is facing trial on corruption charges.

The Nhat case is unusual for its secrecy, but it is far from the only case of forcible return to a neighbouring country in violation of international law. Others who have been handed over in recent years to face persecution in their home countries include Moua Toua Ter, an ethnic Hmong leader from Laos, deported from Bangkok to Laos in June 2014; Sam Sokha, a Cambodian opposition figure who was arrested in Bangkok and handed over to Cambodia in February 2018; Rath Rott Mony, a Cambodian union leader who assisted in a controversial documentary, who was arrested in Bangkok and deported to Cambodia in mid-December 2018; and Praphan Pipithnamporn, believed to be a member of a Thai federalist movement, who was arrested in Malaysia and returned to Thailand on 10 May 2019.

Thailand also forcibly returned refugees Dong Guangping and Jiang Yefei to China, and to Amnesty International’s knowledge, has not made public any finding from investigations into the cases of Chinese nationals, including Gui Minhai, who disappeared in mysterious circumstances while traveling in Thailand, and who later reappeared in Chinese custody.

Amnesty International is calling on Thai authorities to sign and ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, make the forced return (*refoulement*) of refugees a crime, and institute a robust legal and administrative framework to protect refugees from being handed over to face persecution.

“The case of Truong Duy Nhat makes a mockery of ASEAN’s stated vision for a partnership that ‘leaves no one behind and looks to the future.’ To deny rights to people is to deny them a future,” said Nicholas Bequelin. “ASEAN governments should stop actively supporting one another in crackdowns on critics, and should ensure full respect for the right of freedom of expression in their countries.”

“The Nhat case shows precisely why the international community has created international standards to protect refugees and asylum seekers. Thailand, as ASEAN Chair, should be showing leadership in enforcing these standards, not in violating them.”

**Background**

Truong Duy Nhat, a Vietnamese journalist and political commentator, was jailed in Vietnam from 2013 to 2015 on charges of “conducting propaganda against the state.” At the time, Amnesty International called him a prisoner of conscience.

After his release from prison in 2015, Nhat worked as an independent blogger and journalist, including serving as a weekly contributor to Radio Free Asia’s Vietnamese blog section. In December 2018, after Nhat was warned that he was likely to be re-arrested, he noticed a heightened police presence near his house. He travelled to Thailand in mid-January 2019 to avoid arrest.

On 25 January, Nhat disappeared shortly after submitting an asylum claim at the Bangkok office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). On 21 March, he reappeared in Vietnamese custody at T-16 prison in Hanoi. According to prison officials who reportedly spoke to his family members, he had entered the prison on 28 January 2019. The Vietnamese government announced Nhat was under investigation on 25 March, and he was charged with corruption on 10 June.