



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Will a Drug Warrior Be Hanged?

by James Bovard

Thailand's billionaire prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, was deposed in a coup last year by the country's military. Somchai Hom-la-or, chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, recently declared that "Thaksin and his government committed crimes against humanity." Thai lawyers and human-rights activists are suggesting that he be indicted and tried by the International Criminal Code for the thousands of killings committed by Thai police and other agents during his war on drugs.

While the odds of Thaksin's ever having to face charges for atrocities committed by his war on drugs are slim, it is refreshing that people are openly suggesting that an elected leader be held to account for his actions.

Thailand's war on drugs — vigorously approved by the Bush administration — has received far less attention in the United States than it deserves.

When Thaksin launched his anti-drug campaign in 2003, he declared that "in this war, drug dealers must die." Interior Minister Wan Muhamad Nor Matha promised that drug dealers "will be put behind bars or even vanish without a trace. Who cares? They are destroying our country."

The Thai government was concerned about the rising number of Thais taking amphetamine-type pills — popularly known as Yaa-Baa. The crackdown began in early February 2003. Within weeks, government officials were bragging about the number of bad guys killed. A *New York Times* article noted that "the killings started right on cue. Many victims were on secret, but official, 'black lists.'"

Throughout Thailand, local officials set up black boxes or mailboxes and encouraged people to accuse anyone suspected of involvement with narcotics — no evidence required. Many people used the anonymous system to accuse business competitors or personal enemies. According to a 2004 U.S. State Department human-rights report, the interior minister warned "governors and provincial police that those who failed to eliminate a prescribed percentage of the names from their blacklists would be fired."

The central government issued specific quotas for arrests for each state, city, and village. Sunai Phasuk of Forum Asia, a Bangkok-based human rights organization, noted,

Most of [the victims] got killed on the way back from the police office. People found their name on a blacklist, went to the police, then ended up dead.

Thai Senator Tuenjai Deetes observed,

The justice system was destroyed.... Here, the government official or police judged immediately, “You are doing drugs, you must be killed.”

Drugs were planted on the bodies of many victims after they were murdered. Amnesty International complained, “Authorities are not permitting pathologists to perform autopsies and bullets are reportedly being removed from the corpses.”

The interior minister even established an arrest quota for local politicians:

To prove the government is serious and spares no one, in March and April you will arrest big dealers — suspects such as provincial councilors and local politicians — four to five in each province.

Governors were permitted to keep 35 percent of all the drug assets they confiscated, and police detectives were entitled to skim 15 percent of the loot.

Many knowledgeable Thais believed the crackdown had little or no chance of permanently suppressing narcotics. Charan Pak-dithanakul, secretary to the supreme court president, commented,

People may take one look at the death toll and hail the government, but if you scrutinize the names of those killed, there’s not a single big-time dealer.

Many Thai drug gangs operate under the protection of politicians and the military and appeared to easily survive the Thaksin purge.

In early May 2003, the Thai government proudly announced that 2,275 suspected drug dealers had been killed and that 90 percent of the nation’s drug trafficking had been eliminated. The government insisted that it had no role in the vast majority of deaths of drug dealers, except for a small number of dealers whom police supposedly killed in self-defense.

Some of the killings did not enhance the government’s image, including the police slayings of a 9-year-old boy as he and his mother drove along a Bangkok street; a 16-month-old baby killed along with her mother when their car was riddled with bullets; a woman who was in

the eighth month of her pregnancy; and a 75-year-old grandmother gunned down as she walked along a street. Thaksin dismissed concerns about widespread violence in the drug crackdown, declaring that being murdered “is not an unusual fate for wicked people.”

U.S. response to the killings

The slaughter evoked muffled comments from the U.S. embassy in Bangkok. On May 7, a U.S. embassy spokesman, who insisted on anonymity, told the Associated Press that the Bush administration has “made very clear that we have serious concerns about the number of killings that may have been associated with Thailand’s war on drugs” and insisted that the Thaksin government “needs to ... investigate all unexplained killings and identify and prosecute those responsible.”

The Thai government ignored the anonymous State Department official’s comments. The following month, Thailand’s prime minister was invited to the White House to meet with Bush. Bush upgraded Thailand’s status with the U.S. government to “major non-NATO ally” (thereby entitling the Thai government to a bevy of U.S. government benefits and subsidies, including the right to buy depleted-uranium ammunition). A June 11, 2003, White House statement by the Thai and U.S. governments declared,

The two leaders recognized the long, successful history of cooperation between the United States and Thailand on law enforcement and counternarcotics. President Bush appreciated Thailand’s leadership in hosting one of the largest and most successful U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) operations in the world as well as the U.S.-Thai International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA). President Bush recognized Prime Minister Thak-sin’s determination to combat transnational crime in all its forms, including drug trafficking and trafficking in persons.

The White House Joint Statement dismissed the allegations of anti-drug carnage:

Regarding recent press allegations that Thai security services carried out extrajudicial killings during a counter-narcotics campaign in Thailand, Prime Minister Thaksin stated unequivocally that the Thai government does not tolerate extrajudicial killings and assured President Bush that all allegations regarding killings are being investigated thoroughly.

The only reference to the slaughter was a brazen lie by the Thai prime minister that was sanctified in an official White House statement. The prime minister’s pledge made as much sense as if he had promised to personally resurrect all the people wrongfully killed in the crackdown. *The Nation*, one of the most respected newspapers in Thailand, noted that “the American president saw the halos on Thaksin’s head,” including one from the “drug-suppression

campaign.” Thai-land’s interior minister said that Bush praised Thailand’s anti-drug campaign during the White House meeting.

On October 27, Bush visited Thailand and proclaimed, “Thailand is also a force of good throughout Southeast Asia.” A month later, William Snipes, the Bang-kok-based DEA regional director for East Asia, hailed the Thai crackdown: “Temporarily, we look at it as successful.” Snipes conceded that whether the reduction in drug activity “is a lasting effect, we will have to wait and see.”

Drug-war “success”

By early December 2003, the official bad-guy body count had risen to 2,625. Speaking at a giant Bangkok victory rally of thousands of government employees, Thaksin proclaimed,

Today is a milestone. More than 90% of ordinary Thais can now lead an honest daily life free from narcotics in their communities.... We are now in a position to declare that drugs, which formerly were a big danger to our nation, can no longer hurt us.

In his annual birthday message on December 5, 2003, King Bhumibol Adulyadej — the king in whose honor Thailand had been rendered drug-free — first said that the alleged killings of drug dealers were a “small thing.” Then he insisted that many of the killings were not the fault of the government. Then he called for an investigation of the killings. The king fretted that, unless the killings were cleared up, “the people will blame the King. This would breach the Constitution which stipulates that the King should not have to take responsibility for anything.”

But the government stonewalled such investigations. Deputy Attorney General Prapan Naiyakowit, the chief investigator of the killings, complained in early December:

In May I completed the probe report on drug-related deaths. Since then, police have not submitted a single report on any individual killing that happened during the anti-drug campaign.

A Thai senate committee concluded that

the government used rhetoric and ceremony to make people hate each other, to destroy the human dignity of suspected drug dealers, and incite people to handle the drug problem with violence and without mercy.

The government’s killing spree intimidated much of the populace. The Thai National Human Rights commissioner, Cha-ran Ditthaapichai, complained of the plight of the 329,000

people on the blacklist: “They feel they are no longer safe and could be exterminated at any time.” Amnesty International reported that the government’s murder spree left many Thais

afraid to leave their homes, and others avoided traveling to areas where they were not known for fear of being suspected as drug traffickers and shot dead.

After 9/11, Bush repeatedly proclaimed that any nation or government guilty of aiding and abetting terrorists would be considered to be as guilty as the terrorists themselves. Yet the U.S. government helped bankroll a Thai government campaign that terrorized the Thai people. The Bush administration gave Thailand \$3.7 million in anti-drug aid in 2003 — thus compelling American taxpayers to bankroll Thai state terrorism.

According to the U.S. State Department, 307 people were killed worldwide in international terrorist attacks in 2003. The Bush administration endorsed and helped finance an anti-drug crackdown that killed more than seven times as many people in a single country as were killed by all the international terrorists in the world that year.

It remains to be seen how vigorously the new Thai government will investigate the atrocities of the Thaksin regime. As Chairman Somchai noted, “Sad-dam Hussein was charged with committing crimes against humanity for the killing of 170 people. In that case, the 2,500 deaths we witnessed here must constitute crimes against humanity.”

If the Thais can help establish a principle of holding leaders responsible for the killings they order, they will be doing a far better service to the cause of democracy than anything the Bush administration has yet offered. Sometimes the threat of a noose is the best way to put government back on a leash.

James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) [2006] as well as [The Bush Betrayal](#) [2004], [Lost Rights](#) [1994] and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

This article was originally published in the October 2007 edition of *Freedom Daily*.