

Thailand: ‘Swap Mart’ Targets Foreign Dissidents, Refugees

Stop Assisting Neighboring Countries’ Transnational Repression

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- **Thai authorities are helping neighboring governments to take unlawful actions against refugees and dissidents from abroad, making Thailand increasingly unsafe for those fleeing persecution.**
- **These targets of transnational repression have gotten caught up in a “swap mart” in which foreign dissidents are effectively traded for critics of the Thai government living abroad.**
- **The Thai government should investigate alleged harassment, threats, surveillance, and forced returns against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, and the role of Thai officials in these actions.**

(Bangkok) - [Thai](#) authorities are assisting neighboring governments to take unlawful actions against refugees and dissidents from abroad, making Thailand increasingly unsafe for those fleeing persecution, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. These targets of transnational repression have gotten caught up in a “swap mart” in which foreign dissidents in Thailand are effectively traded for critics of the Thai government living abroad.

The report, [“We Thought We Were Safe’: Repression and Refoulement of Refugees in Thailand.”](#) details Thai authorities’ upsurge in repression directed at foreign nationals seeking refugee protection in Thailand. Foreign governments have subjected exiled dissidents and activists living in Thailand to harassment, surveillance, and physical violence, often with the cooperation and knowledge of Thai authorities. In a number of cases, Thai officials arrested asylum seekers and refugees and deported them without due process to their home countries.

“Thai authorities have increasingly engaged in a ‘swap mart’ with neighboring governments to unlawfully exchange each other’s dissidents,” said [Elaine Pearson](#), Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin should break with this practice and prosecute Thai officials wrongfully collaborating with foreign governments acting on Thai soil.”

The term “transnational repression” describes efforts by governments or their agents to silence or deter dissent by committing human rights abuses against their own nationals or members of the country’s diaspora outside their territorial jurisdiction.

Human Rights Watch analyzed 25 cases that took place in Thailand between 2014 and 2023 and conducted 18 interviews with victims, their family members, and witnesses to abuses, along with representatives of local and international nongovernmental organizations. The governments responsible include member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as China and Bahrain, among others.

In one case, [a Cambodian dissident](#) who had fled to Thailand in July 2022, said he started receiving

letters from Cambodian officials urging him to defect from the main Cambodian opposition party. After he had received these letters for months, unidentified men attacked him in August 2023. “They did not say anything to me, they just came out and started beating me,” the Cambodian dissident said.

In recent years in Thailand, dissidents from Vietnam have been [tracked down and abducted](#), Lao democracy advocates have been forcibly [disappeared or killed](#), and a Malaysian LGBTI rights influencer was [targeted for repatriation](#). Thai authorities have detained and unlawfully deported Chinese dissidents and refugees, seemingly at the request of the Chinese government. Thai authorities also detained a visiting professional football player from Bahrain with Australian refugee status, and nearly [returned him to Bahrain](#).

At the same time, a number of Thai activists have been killed or disappeared in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The mutilated bodies of two missing activists were later found [floating in the Mekong River](#).

“Swap mart” arrangements increased under Thailand’s National Council for Peace and Order military government that came to power after the May 2014 coup and continued under the post-2019 government of Prime Minister Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha.

The Thai authorities, in addition to facilitating assaults, abductions, enforced disappearances, and other abuses, repeatedly violated the principle of nonrefoulement: the prohibition on returning anyone to a place where they would face a real risk of persecution, torture, or other serious ill-treatment, or a threat to life.

Thai authorities have arrested and summarily deported exiled critics and dissidents, even those with refugee status determined by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). One Cambodian activist pleaded with Thai police, saying he would “be killed or put in jail ... if deported.” Yet Thai authorities forcibly returned him to Cambodia within days of his arrest.

Thailand’s actions violate customary international law as well as the UN Convention against Torture and other treaties that Thailand has ratified barring refoulement. The actions also violate [Thailand’s Act on Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearances](#), which came into effect in February 2023. It states that “no government organizations or public officials shall expel, deport, or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be in danger of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, or enforced disappearance.”

The Thai government should thoroughly and impartially investigate alleged harassment, threats, surveillance, and forced returns from Thailand by foreign governments against migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Thailand and the role of Thai officials in those actions, Human Rights Watch said.

“Prime Minister Srettha should act to restore Thailand’s deserved reputation as a country that is a safe haven for dissidents from abroad,” Pearson said. “He should immediately order a full and transparent investigation into arbitrary arrests, violent assaults, and forced returns of refugees and political dissidents.”

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