Thai Army Whistleblower Faces Up to Seven Years of Jail Time For Fleeing Retaliation

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In February of this year, the Thai Army launched a new initiative to combat corruption and abuse within its ranks—a 24-hour hotline that reports directly to the Army Chief General, Apirat Kongsompong. This initiative was created in the wake of a shocking incident in which a soldier killed 29 people after a dispute with his commanding officer. The new hotline, while not anonymous, was set up to provide Army whistleblower confidentiality and work in conjunction with National Anti-Corruption Commission, where complaints would be transferred if outside of the Army’s jurisdiction.

In rolling out this new program, General Nattapol was quoted as saying: “[T]he Army is doing our best...This is not a public stunt.” However, in light of the treatment of one of the first major complaints that was submitted through this channel, this statement could not be further from the truth.

As reported by Human Rights Watch, Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi filed several complaints with the new hotline just two months after it was created, alleging fraud involving staff allowances at the Army Ordnance Materiel Rebuild Center. However, no action was taken on his complaints. Then, despite the promised confidentiality of the hotline, Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi began receiving death threats and was informed that he would be facing a disciplinary inquiry for “undermining unity within
the army and damaging his unit’s reputation.” This inquiry was nothing but a sham, intended to intimidate Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi. In fact, a leaked video of the inquiry shows Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi’s superior directly threatening him for reporting, including by stating: “You may be able to get away this time, but there is no next time for you.”

Because after all of this Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi reasonably feared for his personal safety, he fled his post and publicized his experience, including by making a report to the Thai Parliament’s Committee on Legal Affairs, Justice, and Human Rights.

Instead of ceasing retaliation due to the new publicity around Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi’s case, the Army has doubled down: They have requested a military court warrant his arrest him for delinquency in his duties. Under this charge Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi could face up to seven years in prison as well as a dishonorable discharge.

This abhorrent treatment of a whistleblower will make the Army’s new system completely ineffectual and nothing more than symbolic piece of propaganda, discouraging any future whistleblowers from coming forward for fear they will be treated the same way. In order to make right their grievous actions, the Thai Army must abandon all charges against Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi, issue a formal apology for the breach of confidentiality, and discipline those accused of participating in the retaliation.

Sgt. Narongchai Intharakawi is a hero for stepping out and trying to report corruption under a new, untested system and should be treated as such both in Thailand and globally.

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