

May 21, 2020

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha
Royal Government of Thailand
Bangkok, Thailand

Urgent call for COVID-19 response for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Your Excellency,

We represent several different organizations of various backgrounds that support refugees and asylum seekers in Thailand and beyond, within the framework of international human rights and refugee law including state obligations under international human rights treaties. We appreciate Thailand's continued willingness to host many asylum seekers and refugees from around the world and cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the international community to enable them to seek protection through third country resettlement. However, we remain greatly concerned by the overcrowded conditions in the Immigration Detention Centers (IDCs) where numerous refugees and asylum seekers are being detained.

In light of the paramount need to prevent the spread of COVID-19, we respectfully ask the Royal Thai Government to **release the refugees and asylum seekers who are held in these cramped Immigration Detention Centers in Thailand in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.**

This sense of urgency is shared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the World Health Organization, which have released a joint statement to member states on the need to protect refugees and migrants during the COVID-19 outbreak. They strongly urge states to release "without delay" any migrants and refugees being held in detention centers and to release migrant children and their families "immediately."¹

Concern for the health and safety of refugees and asylum seekers detained in Thailand has become particularly urgent with the recent announcement that 65 of the 115 detainees in the Songkhla Immigration Detention Center have tested positive with the virus – the diagnoses came

¹ International Organization for Migration, *The Rights and Health of Refugees, Migrants and Stateless Must be Protected in COVID-19 Response - OHCHR, IOM, UNHCR and WHO - Joint Press Release*, 31 March 2020, available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/rights-and-health-refugees-migrants-and-stateless-must-be-protected-covid-19-response>.

about two weeks after a visit to the center by an immigration officer who later tested positive – and that the remaining detainees are also at risk.

We therefore respectfully pose three questions to the Royal Thai Government:

- What is being done to secure the protection of persons, and particularly of asylum seekers and refugees, held in the IDCs from becoming infected with the virus?
- What health checks and other health services are being provided?
- Will the Royal Thai Government consider the immediate release of the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers from the IDCs? A number of those being held in the IDCs suffer from underlying health issues, often because of torture and other traumatic experiences to which they were subjected in their home countries.

Understanding the overriding public concern to protect the health of everyone in Thailand, we respectfully urge that once a decision to release has been made, the Royal Thai Government should take measures to provide testing, information about the pandemic, and other appropriate safeguards for those released from immigration detention.

We respectfully request that you promptly act on this grave matter and immediately release all refugees and asylum seekers held at the IDCs, not only to protect their own health and safety but also to promote the health and prosperity of Thailand and all within its borders.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Human Rights Watch

Fortify Rights

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Boat People SOS – USA

Jubilee Campaign

People Serving People Foundation People's Empowerment Foundation Stefanus Alliance International – Norway

ALTSEAN-Burma

Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam

Christian Freedom International

Institute on Religion and Democracy – USA

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience – France

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office (USA)

Diocese of the Eastern US, Independent Old Catholic Church, Office of Ecumenical, Interfaith, and Global Engagement

Friends of Falun Gong

Minaret Foundation – USA

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization – Belgium Vietnam Veterans for Factual History

Montagnards Stand For Justice

Human Rights and Justice for Indigenous People of Vietnam Minh Van Foundation – USA

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Advocate and Solicitor, High Court of Malaya, Malaysia

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The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute

Shariq Abdul Ghani

Director

Minaret Foundation

Scott Morgan

President

Red Eagle Enterprises

Lauren Homer

President, Law and Liberty International

Dr. Grant A. McClure

Commander, Counterparts – Vietnam Veterans' Association

Thomas W. Turney

US. Army Special Forces Retired

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