
Thailand: Authorities play "Ethnic" and "Nationalist" cards

Recent violent and unconstitutional actions on the part of the Thai Royal Forest Department, provincial authorities and the police against peaceful demonstrators are arousing strong concern both within the country and abroad.

The demonstration for land, forests and citizenship rights of the Northern Farmer Network (NFN), the Assembly of Tribal Ethnic Minorities (ATEM) and the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) in Chiang Mai, started on April 25th, in which 40,000 lowlanders and highlanders are participating, is shaking political and social reality of Thailand (see WRM Bulletin 23)

The police and forestry department officials reacted violently against the demonstrators just as they were about to be addressed by high-ranking ministry officials with whom they had been peacefully negotiating. The demonstrators, many of whom belonged to minority ethnic groups resident in Thailand's highlands, were slandered as "foreigners" and harrassed by agents provocateurs before police forced them from their rally site in front of the Chiang Mai Provincial Hall. University faculty advising the demonstrators were pilloried a few days later by members of a conservation group who accused them of selling out the country.

The incidents reflect a growing trend throughout the country of official indifference toward the constitutional rights of ordinary villagers asking for land and forest rights, compensation for livelihoods lost as the result of dams or other development projects, or a representative voice in the future of their local areas. The facts registered in Chiang Mai are not isolated. Instances of repression have also occurred along the Mun river and in the Dong Larn forest area of Thailand's Northeast.

At present NGO workers and village leaders are working with villagers to help prepare them to register to obtain citizenship and to register their land. Leaders of NFN have given a press conference in Bangkok and discussed the possibility of taking legal action against the governor of Chiang Mai. Academics supporting the rally have confined themselves to providing more information to the public via the media, explaining the problems faced by NFN, ATEM and AOP and indigenous people in general.

It is important that the wider public know about the use of force to disperse the rally in Chiang Mai and ask for an explanation why Royal Forest Department officials were involved. If the repressive collaboration between the Royal Forest Department and local authorities is allowed to continue during the registration of highlanders and their land use under the pretext that the latter are "threats to national security", the result is likely to be further violations of rights such as those seen in Chiang Mai and in other places of Thailand.

Source: "Bulletin on disturbing events in N. Thailand" by Larry Lohmann, 4/6/99.

