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## Villagers arbitrarily arrested in Thailand

For the past five years, the small community of the village of Pang Daeng, in the mountainous northern province of Chiang Mai, Thailand, has been visited by lots of tourists seeking an exotic experience among exotic people. But now the hilltribes people in this picturesque hamlet want to keep as low a profile as possible. Why?

On the evening of March 26, Pang Daeng residents, which were going about their usual routine, were surprised to see an army of forestry officers and police burst into their village and begin to arrest people. The villagers showed no resistance thinking they had nothing to fear as they hadn't committed any crime. Besides, they were told by the officers that they just wanted to take them for a short briefing in town. Some reported overhearing talk of a donation of blankets.

Once inside the local police station the 56 villagers that were taken from their homes, ranging in age from 13 to 66, realized that they were all charged with encroachment on a national forest reserve and forest arson. They did get the blankets, but in prison!

Local villagers deny any responsibility on this regard. Naloh Poosu, whose husband is one of the arrested people, says: "Some rich men offered to hire us to cut down trees before, but we turned them down. Why don't they catch the big guys?" Academics have also denounced this new case of imprisonment of members of the ethnic minority in Thailand. "The Royal Forestry Department may also want to show the public that it is concerned for the environment," says Sombat Khamboonyueng, a researcher at Chiangmai University's Ethnic Studies Network. And he adds: "But they must find some justification for why their reforestation project in the area for the past 20 years is still lagging behind the target". Dr Chalardchai Ramittanond, an anthropologist at Chiang Mai University states that this incident "is simply a ploy for the government to support the idea that villagers are to be blamed, that they should not be allowed to live in the forest."

This piece of news, reported by a Thai newspaper, shows us another case of arbitrary detention of innocent and peaceful people, blamed for illegally occupying and damaging the forests. Meanwhile Thai authorities ignore the logging and plantation activities that are in reality responsible for the deforestation that affects the country.

Source: Vasana Chinvarakorn, Bangkok Post 19/5/1998. Comments: WRM Secretariat.