

# Isaan people use human rights festival to air grievances in time of martial law and censorship

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GUEST CONTRIBUTION by *Alexandrea Lee, Catherine Darin and Rebecca Goncharoff*

*Photo credits: Aaron Hedquist, Emma Tran and Jeremy Starn*

KHON KAEN - Despite concerns from the military, about 400 people from thirteen provinces participated in the 7th Annual Isaan Human Rights Festival held yesterday at Kwanmor Hotel in Khon Kaen. New to the festival this year was the participation of diplomats from the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, the European Union, Sweden, and the United States.



From left to right: Mr. Hanno Trayhurn, Political Officer, British Embassy; Mr. Norman Pflanz,; Ms. Camilla Ottosson, Human Rights Officer, Swedish Embassy; Ms. Anne-Charlotte Malm; Ambassador Mark Kent; Ambassador Philip Calvert; Ambassador Reuben Levermore; Mr. Jarrod Weir

The event, funded primarily by European Union's "Thailand-EU Policy Dialogues Support Facility" program, has been organized almost every year since 2006 to commemorate International Human Rights Day. Event organizers say the annual festival has provided a venue for communities and networks to come together to share their human rights situation and make demands.

The morning session began with an opening statement by Mr. Jarrod Weir of the EU, and talks by Ms. Anne-Charlotte Malm, head of Sweden's regional SIDA program, and Mr. Norman Pflanz, a human rights officer from the United States.

The "Ambassadors' Forum on Human Rights" followed, featuring Mr. Mark Kent, UK ambassador to Thailand, Ambassador Philip Calvert of Canada, and New Zealand Ambassador Reuben Levermore.

The ambassadors related the human rights journeys of their respective countries, emphasizing the need for freedom of expression and assembly in the pursuit of a democratic society. Ambassadors Calvert and Levermore highlighted how indigenous people's rights became an important part of the "fabric" of the human rights landscape in Canada and New Zealand.



Ambassador Calvert:  
"Cultural rights essential  
component of human rights  
in Canada."

Ambassador Calvert said, "Canada has learned that when you suppress cultural rights—the right to speak your own language and connection to the land—the results are disastrous."

Ambassador Kent, who preferred to address the audience in Thai, spoke about the importance of equality and equal opportunity.

"I am from a small village in rural England. Growing up, my father was a truck driver, yet I was given the opportunity to go to Oxford. From this I have seen the importance of equal access and rights for all people, whether they are rich or poor, from the city or the country."

The ambassador's affirmation of equal rights for rural people was received warmly by the audience.

Members of various affected communities and networks throughout the Northeast had the rare chance to share with the foreign guests their growing frustration with the enduring human rights issues facing their communities.

Villagers in Kalasin province who are fighting to prevent the drilling of petroleum near their land

were among those voicing concerns about Thailand's inequities.

"Usually foreign companies collaborate with the Thai government to create problems for our communities," a Kalasin villager said. "They look at us as a minority and claim that we have to sacrifice for the nation. We sent letters and spoke to the media, but our rights are still violated. You might have a more powerful voice than us, so I think you can make our small voices heard."



Ambassador Kent reiterates UK disappointment with coup and continued imposition of martial law

The visiting diplomats acknowledged the value of this chance to speak directly with common people from the Northeast to better understand the human rights situation in the Thailand.

"Bangkok is important to us [as ambassadors], but it's not the whole of Thailand," said Ambassador Levermore. "The Northeast is a very important region. The chance to come up here for the day gives us an opportunity to hear the concerns people have on a day to day basis."

An afternoon session focused on human rights abuses in the Northeast, with eight short videos on consumer rights, right to healthcare, right to land and livelihood, and right to a safe environment, followed with statements from each community.

The festival was one of the first of its kind since the imposition of martial law in Thailand. Many academic seminars have been cancelled or closed down due to military intervention.



NZ Ambassador Levermore:  
“Isaan perspective important  
for understanding Thailand.”

The festival was organized by the NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NGO-CORD), the Council on International Educational Exchange in Khon Kaen (CIEE), and a student network of the Northeast.

One Khon Kaen military source told organizers that the military had been “50/50” on whether to cancel or allow the event. Military authorities requested on the day prior to the festival that the organizers write up and sign an agreement to refrain from criticizing the NCPO, or mention politics or martial law. Organizers agreed that they would themselves not bring up these topics and they would censor festival media.

However, organizers stated at the beginning of the day’s events that while they had agreed not to bring up such topics, they hoped that participants would speak freely, given it was International Human Rights Day.

One participant stood up and asked, “If we can’t talk about martial law, the NCPO, or politics, what can we talk about?”

The self-censorship on the part of organizers made some of the videos incomprehensible, given that martial law had affected many of the communities represented at the event, especially those affected by the NCPO’s controversial land policies which have led to the arrest and eviction of many Isaan communities.

In the showing of a short documentary on evictions of communities from forests, confused voices broke out in the many parts where the film’s sound was muted and subtitles blurred. When an organizer explained that the film had been subjected to censorship, the room burst out in a chorus of knowing laughter.





Energy high in tightly-packed meeting room as attendees eager to be heard by others and international guests

One of the villagers whose words had been silenced in the film stood up, his fists clenched, and said, "I am not afraid to say here what was censored on the video. Forty four days after the coup the military issued an eviction notice in my community. [The junta] just wants us out of the forest. They don't care how many decades ago we moved in."

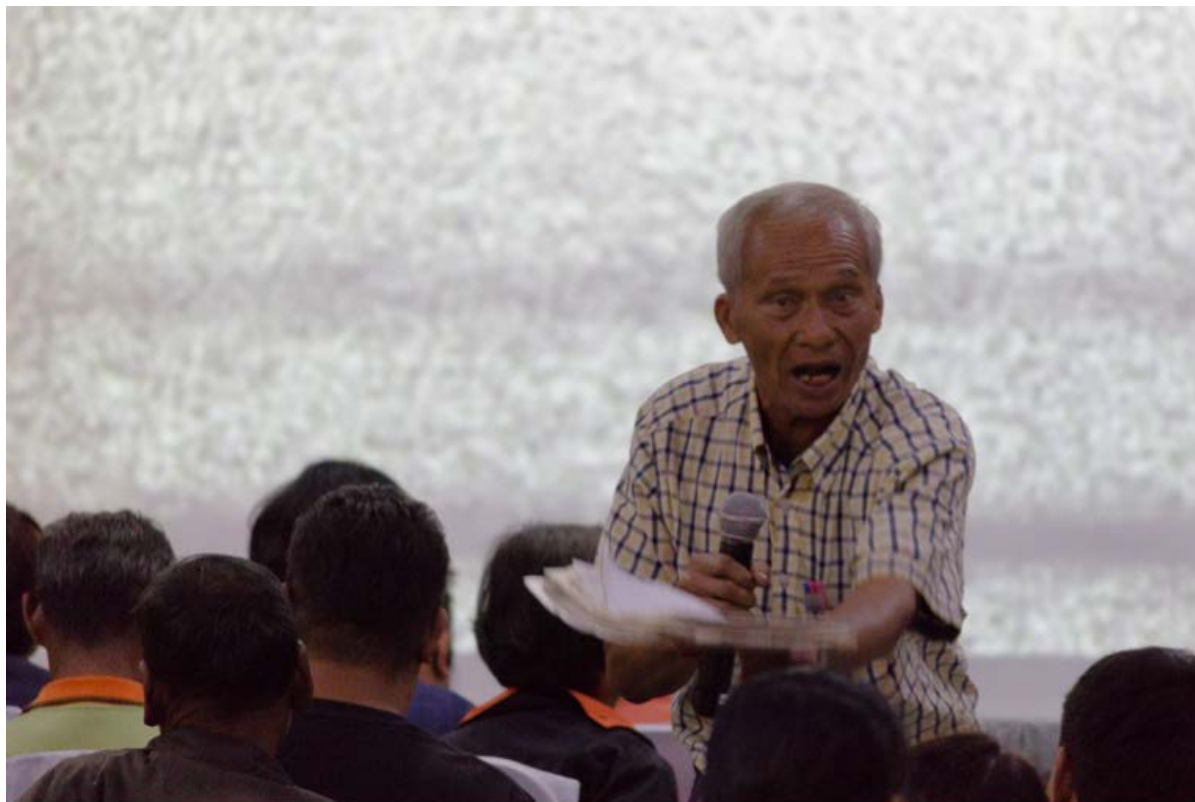
His defiance was met with cheers and support from other affected villages.

Mr. David Streckfuss, a lead organizer of the event and director of CIEE Khon Kaen, observed that the event was one of the first where red shirts activists, who have felt the full force of martial law in Isaan, and community rights activists who have likewise been arrested and detained, shared a unique moment in their common struggle against repression under martial law.

Mr. Decha Premrudelert a long-standing leader NGO leader in the Northeast, agreed. "People are made stronger by sharing experiences. They have to come together in order to find a way to survive."

Many participants were unfazed by the presence of plain-clothed security officials taking pictures at the event. "I'm not scared of the military because it is my right to be here," said Mr. Miew Jongsadapklang from Yasothorn. "Why be afraid?"

Assistant Dean at Mahasarakham University's College of Politics and Governance, Dr. Alongkorn Akkasaeng, the event's moderator, said he believed the event was beneficial.



Not cowed by martial law: Villagers candidly speak out against human rights violations. In the background is the blurred screen of a censored video.

“There have been significant human rights violations in the Northeast for decades. Whenever we talk about rights in Thailand, it is only about political rights and elections,” he said.

“But usually the discussion is not about everyday rights, such as those guaranteeing having enough to eat or having a place to stay. These rights are neglected because they happen to marginalized groups. The persistent violation of these rights in the Northeast and Thailand should be something the world community is made aware of.”

Mr. Kritdsakorn Silarak, an activist based in Ubon Ratchathani, was proud of the event and its potential outcome.

“Community members were more confident and more assertive which can lead to a large community movement that fights for our human rights. This is an important first step for a brighter future.”

At the end of the festival, representatives from most participating groups each came up with a right they believed would address their issue. All these rights were drawn up to make the “Isaan Human Rights Declaration of December 10th, 2014.” The declaration states: “All Thai people have the right:

- to manage environmental resources and take part in solving problems;
- to take part in politics and elections;
- to freely and directly express their opinions;
- to air grievances to the government;
- to have their opinions taken seriously by the government and for the government to address grievances through concrete actions;
- to access education;
- to housing and land;
- to have the laws that guarantee the rights and protection of the people;

- to equal and fair treatment in the justice system;
- to public health and welfare services;
- to participate in the media;
- to access accurate information from the government”

Two days after the festival, UK Ambassador Mark Kent wrote the following on his blog,

*“At the festival I spoke about the importance of freedom of expression to a strong democratic culture. Freedom of expression and a free media and social media are essential rights that allow citizens to be adequately informed and able to vote according to their own interests. Without these rights, and without opportunity for debate, any return to elections will not be meaningful. The NCPO claims that they are providing the platform for debate on reform of the political system through the National Reform Council and various local initiatives. However it is clear that many local activists in Isaan feel they do not possess the opportunity for their voice to be heard, given the current limitations on freedom of speech. One activist told me it feels like local people are being forced to wait as the military imposes reform upon them, rather than being actively involved in the process.*

*It was also striking that many local people feel that the current restrictions are beginning to infringe upon their daily life. Farmers with concerns over their economic situation are unable to organise to protest for a change in Government policy. Local groups struggling to protect land rights against corporate interests in their area are unable to campaign or effectively access justice. They feel unable to voice concerns about health and environmental issues. Without the participation of local communities and transparency in decision making, injustice and corruption can flourish. It’s not hard to see how limitations on freedom of expression and assembly have a real impact on local communities throughout Thailand.*

*For a democracy to be genuine, it must be inclusive. All citizens should have equal rights and the opportunity to participate fully in the political process, and to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Democracy also subjects governments to the rule of law and ensures that all citizens receive equal protection under the law and that their rights are protected by the legal system. Thailand is a party to many international human rights conventions - including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - that are supposed to enshrine these democratic principles. Under martial law, these principles are not being upheld. If Thailand wishes to become a respected and active player in the global community it must take these issues seriously. The Isaan villages may not be familiar with UN conventions, but they should be able to benefit from the rights in them in their daily life.”*

The full post can be found [here](#).