

# Patterns of intimidation - Authorities target activists and their families in the Northeast

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KHON KAEN - Northeastern activists who joined an anti-junta protest march last month say authorities have harassed their families through unannounced home visits and phone calls. Civil rights groups speak of a pattern of intimidation that emerged over the past four years as the government has been aiming to stifle displays of public discontent.

Thanatthakan Thanatamonthanasiri has been living with HIV for over ten years. An outspoken HIV/AIDS rights campaigner, she has been opposing proposed amendments to Thailand's universal health care coverage which could cancel affordable medicine for HIV patients.

But since the military government declared activism a danger to national unity and potentially illegal, the work of activists like Ms. Thanatthakan seems to pose a threat to the personal safety of themselves and their families.

Since the coup in 2014, activists across the Northeast say they have repeatedly fallen victim to intimidation by the authorities. These incidents include unannounced visits to their homes often targeting their families. In many cases, police or military officers refused to identify themselves, making it more difficult for the victims to file complaints.

## **Unannounced home visits**

On February 16, an unidentified police officer in plain clothes visited Ms. Thanatthaka's home in Sisaket Province. Asking about her whereabouts, he took photos of her parents and the house. At the time, Ms. Thanatthakan was participating in the "[We Walk](#)" protest march in Khon Kaen.

A police officer at the Wang Hin Provincial Police Station in Sisaket confirmed to *The Isaan Record* in a phone call on February 28 that an officer visited the house of Ms. Thanatthakan. The police followed an order to gather information about the family's plan to join the "We Walk" protest. The officer who followed the order dressed in plain clothes because he is part of an investigative unit, the responding police officer explained.

"I don't agree that [the police] comes to my house," Ms. Thanatthakan declares. "If they need to ask me something, why don't they contact me directly. I'm worried my family gets scared."

Several activists in the region report similar incidents during and after the "We Walk" campaign, a protest march from Bangkok to the Northeast between January 20 and February 17.

Satanon Chuenta, an environmental activist in Sakon Nakhon Province, says a man that claimed to be a police officer had intimidated his family on February 19. The man asked Mr. Satanon's mother about her son's participation in the "We Walk" campaign and made a threatening comment about the activist's safety.

Mr. Satanon [filed a complaint](#) with the provincial police on the next day. "I'm feeling like my life might be in danger. That's why I filed a police complaint today, to use it as evidence," he said in a phone interview.

The identity of man who threatened Mr. Satanon's family remains unclear. Police Captain Banphot Bunphairot from the Kham Ta Kla Provincial Police in Sakhon Nakhon Province told *The Isaan Record* that no police officer had been ordered to visit the activist's home.



Activists of the "People GO Network" arrive at Khon Kaen City's Democracy Monument on February 16. In the "We Walk" campaign, activists marched from Bangkok to the Northeast to raise awareness about the negative effects of the laws and regulations of the military government.

### **Intimidating activists and their families**

Sawat Oophad, a veteran community activist, says the authorities have been constantly monitoring his activities since the coup in May 2014. Soldiers have been following him on trips to his working area in Sakon Nakhon, where he engages in environmental and land rights activism.

The latest incident occurred on February 6 when Mr. Sawat received a phone call from a man claiming to be a police officer. He asked the activist about his participation in the "We Walk" protest.

The phone call was followed by a visit of two police officers to his home in Khon Kaen's Nam Phong District on the next day.

On February 8, six soldiers, travelling in two cars, came to his house. But as Mr. Sawat wasn't at home at the time, the soldiers talked to two repairmen working on the property and took photos of

the house before they left.

Mr. Sawat says he understands the authorities' work. "But my wife and my kid are scared and worried," he says, adding that police or military officers have also repeatedly made phone calls to his family.

He noted that this kind of behavior affects people's psychological well-being. The government should better distinguish between real security threats and citizens calling for their rights, he says.

### **Patterns of intimidation and fear**

Over the past four years, civil rights organizations have recorded several similar cases of intimidation. They notice a pattern in the tactics the authorities' apply to discourage activists from speaking out.

According to Yaowalak Anuphan, head of the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights Centre, there are two main techniques: Calling activists in directly for talks, or sending a message through their relatives. Authorities often approach the families of activists through unannounced home visits or phone calls with the purpose to instill fear, Ms. Yaowalak says.

"The authorities have been using these tactics constantly since the coup four years ago," Ms. Yaowalak says. "It creates an atmosphere of intimidation and pressure, preventing villagers from using their right to freedom of expression."

Last year, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) noticed that rights violation at the hands of the authorities were [common throughout the region](#). Most of the complaints the NHRC receives come from the Northeast.

While activists say they have grown used to being monitored by the authorities, Ms. Yaowalak points out that the application of the law under the military government is "not normal." She believes there cannot be a legal investigation for most of these cases until the country returns to a democratic regime.

Despite the authorities' attempts of intimidation and the harassment of her family, Ms. Thanatthakan says she will continue her work with the Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Sisaket Province.

Depending on affordable antiretroviral drugs herself, she says won't accept any proposals from the military government to amend Thailand's universal health care system.

"I won't stop my activism because it is directly linked to my life," she says.