

## **Thailand: its drug epidemic and use of the death penalty**

Thailand is one of sixteen Asian-Pacific countries whose laws continue to enforce the mandatory use of the death penalty for drug-related offences. The death penalty in Thailand is permitted for a total of 51 different offences. This is despite strong international concern about its appropriateness as a response to crime.

Although the last recorded execution took place in Thailand just over four years ago, there are currently over 1,000 inmates being held on death row. Of these, it is thought that around 125 have had their sentences confirmed, the final stage before execution. In most cases Royal Pardons are granted reducing death sentences to life imprisonment, however, convicted drug offenders have recently been considered 'unqualified' for a pardon of any kind. When executions were regularly carried out, authorities were known to hasten the killing of inmates who had been charged for drug offences. Shinawatra's controversial 'war on drugs' in 2003 saw the death penalty's decree dramatically increase. This was justified by authorities on the basis that it served as a deterrent.

With illicit drug use being the primary cause for organised crime, street violence and official corruption it is certainly appropriate for the Thai government to take action. However, numerous studies have confirmed the ineffectiveness of the death penalty as a method of deterrence.

Since December 2003 the chosen method of execution has been by lethal injection. The change from the use of the firing squad was made following concern about other methods being inhumane. It is strangely ironical that the use of the death penalty itself is not regarded in the same light

With the recent revival of the 'war on drugs' under the new leadership of Samak Sundaravej comes fresh cause for concern about the government's use of the death penalty. With the absence of due process and a flawed criminal justice system, the extrajudicial use of the death penalty and focus on death as a deterrent are matters of great concern.