

Antonio Cichetti
President
Ufficio Istituzione Perdonanza Celestiniana
Residenza Minicipale Piazza Palazzo
67100 L'Aquila
Italy

Dear Mr. Cichetti:

We represent leading human rights and public health organizations in Thailand and around the world. We recently learned that your organization awarded the 2004 International Forgiveness Award to Prime Minister of Thailand Thaksin Shinawatra for "his government's treatment of drug abusers as patients rather than criminals." We are writing to urge you to reconsider this decision in light of the systematic and brutal human rights violations that have been perpetrated against Thai drug users under Thaksin's leadership.

In February 2003, Prime Minister Thaksin declared a "war on drugs" in Thailand in apparent response to a recent boom in methamphetamines in the country. Referring to suspected drug offenders as "the scum of society" and as threats to "social and national security," the Prime Minister issued cash incentives to police and local officials to remove thousands of drug suspects from previously prepared government "blacklists." Within three months, some 2,275 alleged drug offenders had been shot dead in apparent extrajudicial executions. On February 24, 2003, three weeks into the "war on drugs," the United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Asma Jahagir, expressed "deep concern at reports of more than 100 deaths in Thailand in connection with a crackdown on the drug trade." A similar alert was issued by the United States Department of State in February 2004, prompting Thaksin to label the United States "an annoying friend." In the two-week period from February 20-March 7, 2003, Thailand's National Human Rights Commission received 123 complaints of extrajudicial killing, false arrest, improper inclusion in drug blacklists, compared to twelve complaints in the preceding seven weeks.

As international observers amplified their condemnation of Thailand's drug policies, Prime Minister Thaksin repeatedly attributed the majority of drug war killings to internecine battles among drug traffickers. However, to date there has been no accountability for most of these deaths. On the contrary, leading government officials in Thailand have repeatedly condoned extreme violence against drug suspects and called for drug enforcement to be based on "an eye for an eye." In August 2003, Prime Minister Thaksin stated that Thai security forces would "shoot to kill" if they encountered persons smuggling drugs into Thailand from neighboring Burma. "There is nothing under the sun which the Thai police cannot do," Thaksin said in announcing the drug war in January 2003. "Because drug traders are ruthless to our children, so being ruthless back to them is not a bad thing."

As you are no doubt aware, Thailand in 2003 enacted legislation referring to drug users (as opposed to drug traffickers) as “patients” and guaranteeing low-level drug offenders drug treatment instead of incarceration. In practice, however, drug users along with drug traffickers were the victims of Thaksin’s brutal anti-drug crackdown. Numerous drug users reported arbitrary arrest, beatings, and detention by police officers during the period corresponding with the “war on drugs.” Some were forced to sign false confessions stating that they had trafficked methamphetamine tablets. While a substantial number of drug users enrolled in government-subsidized drug treatment programs during the drug war, many did so only after being arrested arbitrarily or threatened with arrest if they did not enroll. Others discontinued treatment for fear that identifying as a drug user would result in their arrest or murder.

A grave but underappreciated aspect of Thaksin’s drug policy has been its impact on Thailand’s HIV/AIDS epidemic. An estimated 100,000-250,000 drug users in Thailand inject heroin, which carries a high risk of HIV infection from the sharing of blood-contaminated syringes. During the “war on drugs,” countless injection drug users in Thailand escaped into hiding where they could not obtain life-saving HIV prevention services. Others were incarcerated in prisons where HIV-prevention services are non-existent and syringe sharing among inmates is widespread. An estimated 40 percent of injection drug users in Thailand are HIV-positive, the same figure as in 1988. In August 2004, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Health, Paul Hunt, stated he was “concerned that the anti-narcotics campaign . . . has inadvertently created the conditions for a more extensive spread of the [human immunodeficiency] virus in Thailand.”

Thaksin’s continual reference to drug users as “patients” bears little relation to Thailand’s repressive drug policies, but seems only to be aimed at deflecting international criticism of these policies. At the July 2004 International AIDS Conference, which Thailand hosted, Thaksin announced in his plenary address that Thailand had implemented a national “harm reduction” program for injection drug users, by which he meant services such as sterile syringe exchange and methadone maintenance therapy for drug injectors. At this writing, there is not a single syringe exchange program in all of Thailand despite overwhelming evidence that such programs reduce HIV transmission. Methadone maintenance therapy is severely limited in Thailand’s drug treatment centers. What few health services that are available to injection drug users have been undermined by a climate of fear surrounding drug use and drug addiction.

In awarding the International Forgiveness Award to Prime Minister Thaksin, you either failed to ascertain these facts or chose to ignore them. For the sake of those harmed by Thailand’s drug policies and the good standing of your award, we urge you to publicly retract this year’s award. As international ambassadors of forgiveness, you no doubt wish to avoid having your reputation permanently sullied by its association with a notoriously lethal anti-drug crackdown.

Sincerely,

ACT UP/New York, New York, USA
AIDS Access Foundation, Bangkok, Thailand
Argentinian Harm Reduction Association, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Argentinian Harm Reduction Network, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Campaign for Popular Democracy, Bangkok, Thailand
Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Montreal, Canada
Central and Eastern European Harm Reduction Network, Vilnius, Lithuania
CHAMP (Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project), New York, USA
Christa Cepuch, Health Action International (HAI) Africa, Nairobi, Kenya
CitiWide Harm Reduction, Bronx, USA
Coordinating Committee for Human Rights Organizations, Bangkok, Thailand
Daniel Wolfe, Center for History and Ethics of Public Health, New York, USA
Division of International Health and Cross Cultural Medicine, University of California, San Diego
Drug Policy Alliance, New York, USA
DrugScope, London, UK
Eliana Palazzi, Istituto di Astrofisica Spaziale e Fisica cosmica/ Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Bologna, Italy
European AIDS Treatment Group, Brussels, Belgium
Foundation for Integrative AIDS Research (FIAR), Brooklyn, NY
Friends of the People, Bangkok, Thailand
GAP (Grupo Português de Activistas de Tratamentos de VIH/SIDA), Lisbon, Portugal
Gay Men's Health Crisis, New York, USA
Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Grupo de Trabajo sobre Tratamientos del VIH, Barcelona, Spain
Harm Reduction Coalition, New York, USA
Health GAP (Global Access Project), New York, USA
Human Rights and Peace Information Center, Bangkok, Thailand
Human Rights Committee, the Law Society of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand
Human Rights Watch, New York, USA
Intercambios Asociacion Civil, Buenos Aires, Argentina
International Antiprohibitionist League, New York, USA
International Center for Advancement of Addiction Treatment, New York, USA

International Harm Reduction Association, London, UK
Johns Hopkins University Center for Public Health and Human Rights, Baltimore, USA
Kazim Khan, Visiting Academic/Senior Research Fellow, SPRC Middlesex University
Queensway, Enfield, UK
Lifeline, Manchester, UK
New Drug Policy Alliance, Moscow, Russia
New Mexico AIDS Infonet, Arroyo Seco, NM
North East India Harm Reduction Network, Manipur, India
Open Society Institute, New York, USA
Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Red de Personas Viviendo con VIH/SIDA, Mar del Plata, Argentina
Russian Harm Reduction Network, Moscow, Russia
Society for Community Health Rehabilitation Education and Awareness, Dhaka,
Bangladesh
Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group, Bangkok, Thailand
Thai Drug Users' Network, Bangkok, Thailand
Transform Drug Policy Foundation, Bristol, UK
Treatment Action Group, New York, USA
Ukrainian Harm Reduction Association, Kiev, Ukraine
Union for Civil Liberty, Bangkok, Thailand
Working Group for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Bangkok, Thailand
Zimbabwe Activists on HIV & AIDS, Mutare, Zimbabwe