
Thailand: forest defenders arrested

Kanchanaburi March 6, 1998: Sulak Sivaraksa and some 50 students and activists who have been camping in the forest were arrested and taken out of the Huay Kayeng forest about noon time. Kanchanaburi governor was present at the event to instruct some 20 officers to take away the activists. Even though Sulak was shown a letter requesting him to testify to the police on the charge filed by PTT (Petroleum Authority of Thailand) before the arrest, the other activists were taken away without being informed properly on what charge they were taken.

The nearly three months encampment was ended, so is the forest which will be cleared soon to pave way for the pipeline laying. The last forest strip we have been trying to protect by risking our lives in front of bulldozers is to be destroyed. Streams which are home to rare species like Rajini crab are being filled up. Elephants which have been so far so frightened by the construction will find their lives harder when the project can continue at its full scale after the removal of the protesters.

It was evident on arrival at the police station that those taken forcibly from the protesting site were held with intention of prosecution. Supporters of the cause congregated on arrival at the police station. Along with Sulak, a core group of students as well as an Englishman Daniel Campbell were finger printed. The police showed a great concern for the foreigners who were showing support for Sulak. Those who had arrived this morning were questioned and asked not to return to this area. Passports were asked for and names and addresses of the foreigners. Meanwhile, Sulak had been escorted to a private room next to the governor's office while the Thai students had been released under Sulak's request that they may not be charged as he would be kept, refusing bail. From this room Sulak was able to give us the comment.

" This situation would bring awareness to three things, one, that The Prime minister allowed the gas pipeline to go on without consulting the facts, relying only on the information from lies, he went over the area in a helicopter on the 28 February and promised to meet the conservation groups who had been camping since the 21st of December, but he refused to meet them; he was only told by the military and the PTT officials that it was good for the project to go ahead. From the helicopter he claimed that he saw smoke and claimed that the forest was degraded. The conservation groups would have shown him pristine forest including the tracks of elephants. Besides, he was to read the report on 25th of February by Mr Anand Panyarachun and the committee, but he did not, as he announced on 28th of February that PTT was to go ahead bearing in mind the recommendation of Mr Anand's committee which said that PTT has abused its power, it has been lying, abusing people at the grassroots and has no consideration for the environment. That PTT could go ahead with consultation and approval with the Minister of industry and the Prime minister office. PTT did not follow the Prime minister's instructions and started felling big trees on the 1st of March and then using the big machines on the 2nd.

That is why friends and students started to protest. I told the officers that what we are doing is helping PTT as if they do not finish the construction in time they can claim it is "force majeure" and they will not be fined. If they hurry the gas pipeline to finish by 1st July, it means that the Thai government have to

pay \$400 million annually to the dictatorial regime in Burma and we could not use the gas as EGAT(The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand) announced that they could not build the power plant to make use of the gas by the end of this year. It may not even be built at all due to the recent financial crisis in Thailand. Is it then, just, to pay money to Burma for her to buy arms to kill Burmese people? These \$400 million dollars are equal 20,000,000 Baht which the tax payer have to pay; yet the forum of the poor received the promise from the last government that they would compensate 100,000 families in the North East which have been uprooted. The amount was 3,700 million baht and the present government refused to pay to the poor but is willing to pay to the military junta.

I told the foreman that the president of PTT publicly admitted that PTT had done all the wrong in the past and wanted to do the right thing with transparency, but it appeared to me that they went on as bad as before, using media as before. If he is sincere, he can come to talk to us and do according to the instructions of the prime minister and I would ask my friends not to obstruct the building of the pipeline, or the two cabinet ministers are willing to talk to us and are willing to supervise the pipeline strictly according to the Anand committee's we would also withdraw.

Secondly, I further want to demonstrate to the world that the Thai authorities must first of all have concern on truths and not falsehoods; besides, the Thai authority must not have any commercial dealing with any country without concern for real basic human rights. In the case of the pipeline, our conscience should be clear that we do not want gas at the expense of our neighbour's blood.

Thirdly, I want to remind the Thai government that development must take every consideration for environmental balance, consideration to take care of people in various local areas, forest, trees, rivers, elephants and various species. Indeed the area we came to demonstrate in is a prime forest, a source of various streams with fresh water feeding into rivers of the central plain of Thailand on which Bangkok depends. The building of the pipeline is polluting streams already.

Lastly my friends and I may not be able to protect the forest but we want to demonstrate that development without consideration for human rights, consideration for the environment issues and without consideration of the local participation is fundamentally wrong. Development must benefit the poor, the grass roots, animals and trees, etc. Most grand schemes of economic development and technical advances benefit multinational corporations and the super rich, but harm the majority of people."

The trial shall begin in the morning of 7 March. The charge against him is "prevent PTT officers and as well as others involved in any project of petroleum development from performing their duties.", as stipulated in the Petroleum Act, a special law which protects PTT's petroleum operations The maximum punishments can be 6 months jail term, 1,000 Baht fine, and/or both. Nonetheless that he will plea guilty he hopes he will be able to ask for permission from the court to read a statement to explain his actions.

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Kalayanamitra Council

Source: Spirit in Education Movement, Thailand

