

13 December 2019

Thailand: Human rights defender Arfan Wattana's house raided

On 09 December 2019, around seventy heavily armed rangers raided human rights defender **Arfan Wattana's** house in the Narathiwat Province of Thailand at 12:30am. Arfan Wattana was present at his home along with his family when the incident took place. Four days later, the grounds for the raid have still not been communicated.

Arfan Wattana is a prominent Patani leader and human rights defender predominantly working in the region of Patani, one of the most militarized regions in Asia which has been under martial law for the past 15 years. He currently works as assistant of foreign affairs at an NGO, The Patani organisation. In his capacity, Arfan Wattana advocates for Patani issues at the international level. He is a vocal critic of Thailand's assimilation policies in Patani and the recipient of the Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative scholarship.

On 9 December 2019, a little after midnight, Arfan Wattana's house was raided while he and his family of nine were at home. About 70 rangers in fifteen cars surrounded his house and asked the human rights defender and his family to exit the house. The raid was led by the 48th ranger forces regiment along with the Department of Special Investigations.

All of the family, including two young children and his ailing older parents were asked to leave the house while it was being raided. The human rights defender requested that the children be allowed to sleep, but no regard was given to the request. The officers then began to photograph Arfan Wattana and in return, the human rights defender took photographs of the officials, at which point one of them snatched his phone away and deleted all the photos on it. Arfan Wattana was further threatened that he would be taken to the military base if he tried to resist the raid.

The raid took place over a two hour period and ended with the human rights defender having to sign a few documents. In addition to this, the officers also took copies of his and his family's ID. Due to the Martial Law in place in the region, the military have been able to exercise their authority with no checks. According to Section 8 of the Martial Law Act, "the military authority shall have full power of search, compulsory requisition, prohibition, seizure, staying in, destruction or alteration of any place and turning out of persons". Police and military officers can also "cordon off, search, arrest and detain persons without having to establish search warrants or arrest warrants issued by the Court".

This is not the first time that Arfan Wattana's house has been raided. Since 2007, Arfan's house has been searched 10 times by the police or military on account of his involvement in student activism calling for the respect of human rights and the Patani's right to self determination. It has become increasingly common for Patani leaders to be arbitrarily detained, tortured or killed over the past years. To add to this climate of fear, the region is closely watched by a military force which is guarded by impunity laws so, despite the alarming human rights violations, no military officials have ever been prosecuted.

Front Line Defenders expresses serious concern about the ongoing harassment and intimidation of Patani human rights defenders, specifically Arfan Wattana and his family, as it believes that they are solely motivated by his peaceful and legitimate activities in defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders further condemns the unjustified and intimidating house raid, which was carried out

without reason, in the early morning, by a large number of heavily armed rangers, with no regard for the children or elderly in the home.