

Guilty verdicts delivered in major Thai trafficking trial

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A judge handing down verdicts in Thailand's biggest human trafficking trial on Wednesday had announced 21 guilty verdicts by mid-morning from 103 defendants, with judgments expected to last late into the day.

Some of those found guilty of trafficking were also convicted for taking part in organised transnational crime, forcible detention leading to death, and of rape.

The legal process in handing down verdicts is lengthy in Thailand and it may take hours before the judge reveals the exact sentences for those convicted to a packed Bangkok court.

The defendants, which include a Thai army general, police officers, local politicians and Myanmar nationals, are accused of smuggling and trafficking migrants on the Thai-Malaysia border.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, head of the ruling junta, asked Thais not to put the blame for trafficking on military figures, a reference to the army general on trial.

"There are many people in this human trafficking network," Prayuth told reporters on Wednesday. "Don't group all soldiers in the country as one."

The trial began in 2015 after a Thai crackdown on trafficking gangs following the gruesome discovery of dozens of shallow graves near the Thai-Malaysia border which authorities said was part of a jungle camp where traffickers held migrants as hostages until relatives were able to pay for their release.

Many never made it out. Some of those who died are thought to have been Rohingya - a persecuted Muslim minority from Myanmar's troubled Rakhine State - although Thailand has yet to release a full report on the graves and the results of post-mortem forensic testing.

The trial has been marred by allegations of intimidation against witnesses, interpreters and police investigators.

Rights groups say trafficking networks were largely left intact by the 2015 crackdown and trial.

"We believe that the crackdown is only a disruption of a trafficking network but that network is still very much well in place," Amy Smith, an executive director of rights group Fortify Rights, told Reuters.

Future deterrent

Of the 22 verdicts read out during the court's morning session, only one person was found not guilty.

Sunai Phasuk, senior Thai researcher for Human Rights Watch, said the heaviest sentence for those convicted of trafficking could be the death sentence.

"The fact that there are very senior officials charged with this crime will help deter criminals in trafficking networks in the future," Sunai, who observed the court proceedings, told Reuters.

Thailand's government denies that trafficking syndicates are still flourishing and has said it has largely eliminated human trafficking in the country.

Journalists were not allowed in the court room on Wednesday but proceedings were relayed on television screens provided by the court.

Thailand has historically been a source, destination and transit country for men, women and children who are often smuggled and trafficked from poorer, neighboring countries including Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to work in Thailand or further afield in Malaysia, often as laborers and sex workers.

Last month the US State Department left Thailand on a Tier 2 Watchlist, just above the lowest ranking of Tier 3, in its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report because it did not do enough to tackle human smuggling and trafficking.

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