

**For Immediate Release****Thailand: 100 days since Chai's Killing, No Justice Yet for Murdered Land Rights Defender**

(Bangkok, 21 May 2015) Today marks 100 days since the murder of Chai Bunthonglek - a land rights defender and member of the Southern Peasant's Federation of Thailand (SPFT) from Khlong Sai Pattana Community, Surat Thani Province. Despite several calls from civil society groups to conduct a comprehensive investigation, Thailand's probe into the case remains dubious. The progress, if any, is unknown to the victim's family. Two suspects were released on bail after they had been arrested by the Chai Buri Police in Surat Thani.

*"As with previous murders, Thai authorities have failed to make any significant progress in finding Chai's killers and bringing them to book,"* says Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA, *"One of the most important elements in healing and recovery for the victim's family and those left behind is to see that those responsible are brought to justice."*

Since 2010, four members of the SPFT have been assassinated. In 2010, Somporn Pattanabhumi was killed. In 2012, Montha Chukaew and Pranee Boonrat were shot dead, while travelling to a local market. Out of the four killings of SPFT members, only two were brought to trial, but these never prospered for lack of evidence.

*"These killings underscore the current deadly environment for human rights defenders working on land rights issues in Thailand. Perpetrators remain free while those engaged in peaceful human rights activities are targeted by non-state actors - allegedly colluding with local authorities, military and companies,"* warns Renato Mabunga, Human Rights Defenders Programme Manager of FORUM-ASIA.

In recent years, FORUM-ASIA documented an increase in attacks and harassment against land rights defenders in Thailand. Land rights activists are more likely subject to violent type of violations such as beating or extra-judicial killing since they are often isolated in rural areas and with little resources and access to remedies.

Following Chai's killing in February, unidentified men in black clothing were reportedly shadowing the community. In March, two SPFT members were stopped by two cars, and one unidentified man uttered threats against the SPFT leader. The situation of constant harassment and intimidation makes it near to impossible for defenders to pursue their advocacy for land and community rights.

*"The lack of protection for human rights defenders at risk increases their vulnerability, obstructs the ability of authorities to undertake investigations and thereby contributes to the cycle of impunity,"* explains Mabunga. In this regard, he urges, *"the government of Thailand, in particular the Department of Rights and Liberties Protection, should extend their legal framework to provide protection for defenders at risk, and ensure preventive steps for their safety and physical and psychological security in order to prevent another killing of land rights defender."*

Thailand is impelled, as part of its obligations under the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, to take all necessary measures ensuring protection of defenders. It is therefore incumbent for the Thai administration to make sure justice is served for Chai's family by primarily conducting impartial and transparent investigation on the case now.

*“Thailand, as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), has the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the rights protected under these treaties, especially the right to land and natural resource which Chai had long campaigned for,”* concludes Balais-Serrano.

### **Background**

The Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT) is a network formed in 2008 to campaign for the right to agricultural land in the Khlong Sai Pattana community in Chaiburi District, Surat Thani Province and other areas in the region. The Khlong Sai Pattana community has been entangled in a land conflict with the Jiew Kang Jue palm oil company. The Agricultural Land Reform Office (ARLO) claims to rightfully own the land and sued the Jiew Kang Jue Pattana Co. Ltd. for illegal land encroachment in 2007. The ARLO won both the case in the first instance and appeal courts. Until the dispute is resolved, the government has granted the Khlong Sai Pattana community full entitlement to the land in question. Despite these rulings and the ARLO's decision, the company continues to occupy and work the land, while further mounting pressure on the community to cede the land.

### **About FORUM-ASIA:**

*The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a regional human rights group with 47 member organisations in 16 countries across Asia. With offices in Bangkok, Jakarta and Geneva, FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.*

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