

UN urges Thailand to drop charges against website

BANGKOK, THAILAND: The United Nations has urged Thailand to drop defamation charges against two Australian and Thai journalists for a report alleging military involvement in people smuggling, warning of a "chilling effect" on press freedom.



(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

The case relates to an article published by the independent news website Phuketwan in July, quoting an investigation by the Reuters news agency, which said some members of the military were involved in trafficking Muslim Rohingya asylum seekers from Myanmar.

If convicted of the charges, which were filed by the Royal Thai Navy, Australian editor Alan Morison and his Thai colleague Chutima Sidasathian could face up to two years' imprisonment for defamation and five years for breaching the Computer Crimes Act, the UN said.

"Criminal prosecution for defamation has a chilling effect on freedom of the press, and international standards are clear that imprisonment is never an appropriate penalty for defamation," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement released in Geneva on Thursday.

"We urge the government of Thailand to drop the charges against Mr. Morison and Sidasathian and to ensure the freedom of the press in the country."

The Rohingya, considered by the United Nations to be one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, have long made the perilous journey from Myanmar by boat.

But that exodus accelerated after Buddhist-Muslim clashes in 2012 in western Rakhine State, with thousands of Rohingya - including women and children - since fleeing the former junta-ruled country.

Rights groups have raised concerns about alleged cases of boats being pushed back out to sea after entering Thai waters.

They have also criticised the detention of hundreds of Rohingya in overcrowded facilities while Thailand waits for a "third country" to offer to take them.

Phuketwan, a small but well respected English-language news website based on the island of Phuket, has said the lawsuit will not stop its acclaimed coverage of the plight of the Rohingya.

Reuters has not received any criminal complaint about the original article quoted by Phuketwan, a spokeswoman said last week.

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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