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Caught in the crossfire

Following the many Thai victims of the 7 October Hamas attack, the government in Bangkok is facing increased scrutiny and pressure from its citizens

Two months after Hamas militants launched an unprecedented assault on Israel from the Gaza Strip on 7 October, Thailand has been caught in a crossfire like it has never encountered before. Over the past several decades, Thailand has suffered casualties from military clashes on its border with Cambodia and Laos, while the Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist insurgency in the country's deep south has claimed more than 7 000 lives. But Thais have never been killed in other people's wars like they have perished under Hamas while working inside Israel: 39 Thai lives were lost, and another 32 were taken hostage.

First and foremost, the newly-elected Thai government under Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-nukara should have stood up for the murdered Thai workers. The prime minister's initial reaction was to categorically 'condemn' Hamas' act of terrorism, but shortly thereafter, Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) softened and hedged their tone by equating the 7 October attack to an 'unfortunate incident', calling on 'all parties involved to refrain from any actions that would further escalate tensions' while joining the international community to condemn 'any use of violence and indiscriminate attacks'.

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From a purely diplomatic point of view, this would certainly be the right approach — if it hadn't directly resulted in Thai casualties. But in view of Hamas' wanton murder of Thai nationals, Thailand's official position proved rather weak. Hamas warranted being called out in no uncertain terms for killing Thais for no reason other than to show sheer terror for its political objectives that had nothing to do with Thailand and its people. The Srettha government could have singled out Hamas while drawing a distinction between the

political organisation that uses violent means of terror and the cause and plight of the Palestinian people who deserve self-determination and a full-fledged state of their own.

The Thai government's tepid response was apparently tied to behind-the-scenes negotiations to secure the release of the 32 Thais held in captivity by Hamas. Muslim leaders in Thailand, led by House of Representatives Speaker Wan Muhamad Noor Matha, opened back channels with Qatar and Iran to get the hostages home — separate from the Thai government's diplomatic efforts. Twenty-three Thai captives were let go and returned to Israel during the recent weeklong hostage-for-prisoner ceasefire agreement. Seventeen of them have made it home, while the other six waited for the medical all-clear before doing the same. The other nine, however, remain in captivity. Among the released non-Israeli hostages, the number of Thais was ahead of other nationalities, suggesting that back-door talks yielded at least some results. The Thai workers who got out were also mainly working-age men, unlike the freed Israelis, who comprised mostly women and children.

An attractive labour market

It is difficult to deem the Thai handling an unqualified success on two grounds. Not only did the Thai government let Hamas militants have their way with Thai lives to begin with, but Thailand's Muslim-led efforts had to rely on the goodwill of mediating countries like Iran, which has supported state-sponsored and non-state terrorist organisations. And then, Thai negotiators also had to seek sympathy from Hamas perpetrators to release captured Thai workers who should not have been harmed in the first place.

To be fair, the Srettha government's intent was sincere in bringing home Thai workers. Repatriation flights were promptly organised, and remedial and compensation packages were quickly put together. Yet, fewer than one third of the estimated 30 000 Thais that had been working in Israel prior to 7 October decided to come home. The majority opted to stick it out in Israel, where wages were more attractive with acceptable work conditions. This points to a twofold Thai dilemma.

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Because Thailand's ties with Saudi Arabia were put on the backburner three decades ago until a normalisation last year, Thai workers who traditionally sought employment in the Middle East were relatively shut out. Israel plugged this

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gap and became the most popular destination in the region for Thai workers, thanks in part to a government-to-government deal to enable Thai workers, mostly from the country's agricultural northeast, to apply their labour and skill on Israeli farms. Israel's treatment of Thai farmhands was so well perceived that the deal was subsequently bolstered, resulting in approximately 30 000 Thai labourers in the Jewish state.

The fact that Israel's agricultural sector is located mainly in the south, next to the Gaza Strip, explains why Thai workers became a major target. There were also reports from returned Thais that Hamas militants knew about and picked on Thai workers, partly owing to the resentment that Thais were helping the Israeli economy and taking jobs that used to belong to Palestinians from Gaza.

That so many Thai workers preferred Israel to Thailand despite evident risks points to Thailand's own economic inequality. Apart from not condemning Hamas by name for killing Thais, the Srettha government has also not given due recognition to Thai returnees because they are merely countryside farmhands from poorer rungs of the economic ladder. Some of the families of captive Thai workers were kept in the dark and had difficulty accessing government and embassy channels to learn about the whereabouts of their loved ones. The Thai government has yet to properly recognise the 39 fallen labourers that were working in Israel to repatriate money home, thereby sustaining their families and also contributing to the Thai economy.

Overall, most Thais are still shocked and bothered at how and why Thai workers were killed and captured as hostages so indiscriminately. Until now, Thailand has been a bystander in the Middle East wars. Despite the country's restored relations with Saudi Arabia and other Middle East employment markets by connection, Israel will continue to attract Thai labourers due to its fair working conditions and relatively good wages, while job opportunities remain limited and income inequality keeps widening in Thailand. The twofold onus on the Thai government is to provide better jobs for its people at home and to support the Palestinians' legitimate cause and grievances without cowing to illegitimate militants who have killed and captured Thai people without accountability.



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