

## ***The Bangkok Post* : Rights group slams move to deny visas for activists**



Thailand has come under criticism from Human Rights Watch for its decision to deny visas to activists and ban a media event in Bangkok organised to criticise Vietnam.

Deputy Foreign Ministry spokesman Thani Thongpakdi said yesterday Vo Van Ai and Penelope Faulkner, who had been scheduled to speak at a media event, had not been allowed to enter the country.

Mr Ai, who is president of the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, and Ms Ms Faulkner, its vice president, planned to hold a news conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FCCT) today.

Their committee and the International Federation for Human Rights jointly planned to launch a report which, they said, would "shed light on the human rights situation in Vietnam and the serious gaps that remain between Vietnam's professed adherence to international human rights law and its actual laws and practices to the contrary".

The FCCT, which did not sponsor the event, said it had come under pressure from the the ministry to cancel the news conference.

It was told on Thursday that the report "might contain information detrimental to a neighbouring country".

Mr Thani said yesterday the government had a policy not to allow any person or group to use the kingdom to attack other countries.

He explained the position in a written statement to the FCCT on Friday.

"While the Royal Thai Government attaches great importance to the principles of freedom of expression and diversity of views, it also has a long-standing position of not allowing organisations and/or persons to use Thailand as a place to conduct activities

detrimental to other countries.

"I therefore hope that the FCCT will respect this position and not allow its premises to be used for such activities," he said.

The FCCT executive committee called in a statement released yesterday for the government to reconsider the position.

"We feel it is unfortunate that the Thai government has chosen to apply pressure on us in this way.

"We would appreciate if the government reconsiders the wisdom of such pressure," the statement said.

Sunai Phasuk, an adviser to the New York-based HRW in Thailand, criticised the government's decision saying the decision to ban the event and the visas of the two speakers had tainted efforts by the government to improve its image on human rights in the wake of the dispersal of red shirt protesters in May.

The decision also affected Thailand's regional image as the kingdom was trying to "cover up bad records on human rights of other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean)".

"It is disappointing to see a key player on human rights issues in Asean like Thailand adopt this kind of culture," Mr Sunai said.

Vietnam is chair of the 10-member Asean this year.

The Thai decision to ban the entry of the two speakers into the country forced the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights and the International Federation for Human Rights to cancel the event, the FCCT said.