

***The West Australian* : Thailand denies visas to Vietnam rights activists**



BANGKOK, 13 September 2010 (Reuters) - Thailand, under pressure from neighbouring Vietnam, denied visas to two political activists seeking to speak at a Bangkok media event on Monday about human rights issues in Vietnam, a Paris-based group said.

The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) said the Thai embassy in Paris had informed its representatives that their visas had been invalidated.

The Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) said it was dismayed the Thai government had blocked efforts to publicise a report that listed recommendations to Vietnam on how it could improve its rights record.

"This is frightening. It illustrates that it is impossible to speak about Vietnam's human rights record not only in Vietnam, but also in neighbouring countries," Souhayr Belhassen, president of FIDH, said in a statement.

Vietnam currently holds the chair of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations, a grouping that has its own human rights body but follows a policy of non-interference in the domestic issues of other members.

Thailand's Foreign Ministry had on Friday urged the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FCCT), which was to be used as a venue for the event, to cancel it.

In an email to the club, published in an FCCT statement, the ministry said the government had a "long-standing position of not allowing organisations and/or persons to use Thailand as a place to conduct activities detrimental to other countries."

The FCCT said it was unfortunate the government had tried to pressure the club, adding that it did not sponsor the event so was unwilling to convey to the VCHR the government's intention to deny its representatives visas.

The ban comes amid a wave of censorship in Thailand, where anti-government television and radio channels, magazines, newspapers and thousands of web sites deemed threats to national security have been blocked by a military-run agency overseeing a state of emergency in and around Bangkok.

(Reporting by Martin Petty; Editing by Jason Szep)