

# Thai hostages freed from Gaza arrive in Bangkok

AFP- The families of Thai farm workers held hostage in Gaza for over a year wept with joy and hugged their loved ones as they arrived in Bangkok on Sunday.

The five Thais smiled as they walked into the arrivals hall at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport after being freed on January 30, as part of a ceasefire deal aimed at ending the Gaza war.

The five – Watchara Sriaoun, Pongsak Tanna, Sathian Suwannakham, Surasak Lamnau and Bannawat Saethao – landed in Bangkok at 7:30 am (0030 GMT) on Sunday and were met by a small group of overjoyed relatives and officials from the ministry of foreign affairs.

Pongsak told reporters that he was at a “loss for words” as he saw his family.

“I thank everyone who helped us make it out. We wouldn't be here today if it weren't for them. We can finally return to our motherland,” he said.

Somboon Saethao, the father of Bannawat, said he was “so happy” and that his family would welcome his son home with a traditional Thai ceremony.

“I don't think I want him to be far from home again,” Somboon, who comes from Nan province in northern Thailand, told AFP.

Bannawat moved to Israel nine months before his kidnap in search of a better income for the family, he added.

Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa said it was “very inspiring” to witness their return, and that officials would monitor their reintegration into Thai society, “focusing on their mental health”.

“We never gave up on these hostages,” he said during a press conference at the airport.

The five returnees are now making their way to their hometowns.

Boonsong Tapchaiyut, a labour ministry official at the airport Sunday, said that each hostage would receive a one-time payment of around \$18,000 (600,000 baht), along with a monthly salary of \$900 until the age of 80, to ensure they did not have to return to Israel.

When Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, 31 Thais were abducted, with 23 released by the end of that year and two confirmed dead in May.

One Thai national is still believed to be alive in Gaza.

The handover of the five hostages last month in Khan Yunis in southern Gaza was marked by chaotic scenes as Islamic Jihad and Hamas fighters struggled to hold back hundreds of spectators.

After the release Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra said she was “elated” that they were out of captivity and thanked Israel, as well as Qatar, Egypt, Iran, Turkey and the United States for their work to secure the releases.

A total of 46 Thai workers have been killed since October 2023, according to the foreign ministry in Bangkok, the majority in the Hamas attack and some by rockets fired by Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

Thailand’s labour ministry said last week that the country will expand its workforce in Israel by 13,000.

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