

Tribute to murdered environmentalist Charoen Wat-aksorn

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On 22 June 2010, more than 500 people gathered in the Buddhist temple situated at Ban Bor Nok village, Prachuap Khiri Khan district, Thailand. They were gathered here to remember their leader, who was murdered on 21 June 2004. Martyr Charoen Wat-aksorn was a leader of the common folk, particularly popular in Prachuap Khiri Khan for leading the movement against the Bor Nok coal-fired power plant project for a decade.

Six years earlier:

On the evening of 21 June 2004, as darkness was spreading over Prachuap Khiri Khan, one man got off a bus at around 9:30pm at the Bor Nok Crossing, and was in a hurry to get to his house. Little did he know that two persons were waiting for him under the shed of the bus stop, and shot him from the side as soon as Charoen moved towards the crossing. Charoen tried to run, but was again shot from the back and fell down. The two shooters then came close to him and shot five bullets at his face, head and chest. Satisfied that Charoen was dead, they left.

Charoen was a well-known environmentalist and president of the Love Bor Nok Association, involved in saving Prachuap Khiri Khan's environment and leading people against the illegal power plant project in Bor Nok. He was returning from Bangkok on June 21, after the senate hearing into the fraudulent use of public land when he was shot and killed.

His family claim the subsequent autopsy was deliberately botched, and over 1000 villagers took the body to Bangkok for reexamination by the Forensic Science Institute. Under public pressure, the case was transferred to the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) under the Ministry of Justice, and five suspects have since been arrested. However, the villagers and Charoen's family allege that the investigation has not been done properly; to avoid implicating senior and powerful persons, investigators have claimed his murder as the result of a personal dispute.

A path of struggle



Born on 21 July 1967, Charoen was the eighth son of his parents, and a nature loving boy since childhood. He studied Public Administration from the renowned Rajabhat University of Petchaburi. He came to Bangkok in 1995 and started selling soya milk. When he learned about the proposed power plant in Ban Bor Nok, he moved there and got involved in the movement to save the village. He established the Love Bor Nok Association (a community based organization) to save the village's healthy environment. He made his livelihood there from pineapple trading, but when he realized that the environmental movement needs full time involvement, he wound up the pineapple business. Soon he was recognized as the leader of the movement.

The movement against the power plant is the best example of a community based movement. The entire community was involved. One of their events, a road blockade, can be seen as an example. On 8 December 1998, 20,000 villagers came to block the southern highway of Thailand—the country's backbone, linking to southern Thailand and Malaysia. This road blockade became a turning point of the movement, after which every Thai citizen became aware of it.

After this, the government was willing to organize a public hearing, but the villagers had no faith in its outcome and boycotted the entire process. On 10 January 2002, thousands of villagers traveled to Bangkok to hand over a memorandum letter to the Prime Minister of Japan, as the Japanese government was a potential financier of the power plant project. The Thai police made many attempts to stop them reaching the capital, but failed. When the police stopped their buses, they ran towards Bangkok on foot. They ran almost two kilometers, and past every obstruction put up by the police. It was the power of the people that let them through that night, and again they took their struggle to new heights.

Thailand's prime minister at the time then visited the proposed site of the power plants, during which he faced enormous protest and met with thousands of people. He finally said he would take a decision on the Thai New Year, which came and went without any decision being made. He then said he needed more time to reach a decision. Love Bor Nok did not stop its movement and in the first week of May, the prime minister announced that "the plants would be deferred for 2-5 years". This is a huge victory for the people of Ban Bor Nok and Ban Krut.



Living with danger

Charoen was threatened and followed by hit men many times, and three times he survived attempts to kill him, with the bullets missing their target. The proponents of the power plant project tried to bribe him many times, offering USD 300,000 in 1996 for withdrawing from the movement. An opportunist friend, earlier involved in the movement and later joining the power plant company, also attempted to stop him from working with the movement. This brave and nature loving man did not lose his path however. When his house was burnt by some men from the power plant company, Charoen stayed in a temple, where people tried to guard him 24 hours a day.

When the power plant project was stopped, Charoen married Ms Krarok, and tried to start a new life. He opened a small nature friendly resort in Ban Bor Nok. On 21 June 2004 he was murdered. On June 22, thousands of people marched once again to Bangkok, this time with Charoen's dead body and demanded for an investigation into his murder by the DSI. They also demanded to keep his dead body for up to 100 days. The DSI investigated the case and brought the murderers to court, but only one man was found guilty. He is currently in prison awaiting an appeal court decision, while the others were freed due to a lack of evidence.

After losing Charoen, Ms Krarok was recognized as the leader of the Love Bor Nok Association. She said that she does not have enough experience, and therefore a steering committee was appointed to take leadership of Love Bor Nok.

Love Bor Nok continues to work hard; they are the people who made history and who fought to save their natural environment. They organize an annual commemoration of Charoen's death, and on this day they audit their past year's work and decide upon plans and activities for the coming year.

Charoen is still alive in peoples' hearts and in the spirit of Bor Nok.



Document Actions