

## Why some suspect Thailand tortured confessions out of two migrants accused of beachfront murders



Thai national police chief Police General Somyot Poompanmoung (C) stands next to two detained workers from Myanmar, suspected of killing two British tourists on the island of Koh Tao last month, as he speaks to reporters on the island October 3, 2014. REUTERS/Stringer

Despite the gravity of the situation, the reenactment of the beachfront killings still managed to be absurd. Last week, before a bevy of cameras and onlookers, two terrified-looking Burmese migrants wearing bullet-proof vests and helmets stumbled across the beaches of Thailand's Koh Tao to show how they [allegedly killed](#) two young Britons last month.

Instead of a hoe, which had been used to kill Hannah Witheridge and David Miller in a pair of killings that have attracted sweeping international attention, [pictures show](#) the accused carrying plastic dust bins. Then the reenactment drew an ensemble of two onlookers to play the parts of the killed. A foreign tourist acted as Miller and a Sky News reporter, who "[jumped into her own story](#)," portrayed Witheridge.

It was just one more disturbing aspect of a murder case that is getting more disturbing by the day. Now the two Burmese migrants, Zaw Lin and Win Zaw Htun, [claim](#) that entire reenactment had been a sham. A Burmese official says they told him they didn't kill Miller and rape and murder Witheridge, as Thai police say they had confessed. They say they were tortured by police into lying, which activists say illustrates the crumbling Thailand's human rights situation since the military seized power.

On Thursday, the Guardian [reported](#) that Burmese official Aung Myo Thant said the confessions were "beaten out of them. ... They told me that they were on the beach that night drinking and singing songs. They said they didn't do it, that the Thai police beat them until they confessed to something they didn't do. They're pleading with the

Burmese government to look into the case and find out the truth. They were a really pitiful sight. Their bodies had all sorts of bruises.”

Then one of the suspects mothers said she thought her son was the victim of deception. “I do not believe that my son would commit murder,” the Bangkok Post [quotes](#) U Tun Tun Hteik saying. “I think he will be released if the investigation into the case is fair and systematic.”

If the suspicions are true, and Thailand either rushed its investigation or outright framed two innocents, it would lend substantiation to mounting criticism of Thailand’s justice system since the junta took over in May. Not only are Thai authorities [often accused](#) of framing Burmese and Cambodia migrants for local crimes, but Thai officials are also embroiled in other allegations of torture.



Two workers from Myanmar, wearing helmets and handcuffs, reenact the alleged crime. REUTERS/Stringer

In August, Amnesty International [voiced](#) “serious concern” over “continuing allegations of the widespread practice of torture and ill-treatment of detainees by military, police and prison officials. ... The right to a fair trial is currently in jeopardy.”

A brutal example the report cited involved the alleged treatment of 27-year-old Kritsuda Khunasen, who [claimed](#) she was stripped, sexually harassed and tortured while in the custody of authorities. “The worst that I experienced was when they placed a plastic bag over my head, tied up the ends and put a cloth over my head,” she told Amnesty International for a report that Thai authorities [dispute](#). “This knocked me unconscious and I was brought back by throwing water on me. They then put me in a body bag.”

Now Amnesty International [says](#) such abuse has likely been repeated, but this time in a situation fraught with international implications. Last month, the two British tourists, who didn’t know each other before arriving on the Thai island, reportedly left a late night party together — and were later found murdered. Miller had been bludgeoned and had inhaled large quantities of ocean water.

Initial reports said Witheridge had been raped, then later reports said she [hadn’t been](#), then later reports said [she had](#). More inconsistencies and oddities marred the investigation as it lurched from one misstep to the next. The fracas hit its zenith when Thailand’s Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, commenting on the murders, [said](#) only

ugly women were safe to wear bikinis in Thailand. Police then arrested multiple suspects, and at on point collected DNA samples from hundreds as tourism plummeted on the island.



British students Hannah Witheridge (L) and David Miller (R) EPA

They finally focused their inquiry on the Burmese migrants Zaw Lin and Win Zaw Htun, who had been in the vicinity that night and worked nearby. According to the Bangkok Post, they “pushed through DNA tests in record time, obtaining results in just hours, instead of the usual days.” In short order, after claiming their DNA matched the semen collected from the scene, national police chief announced that “Two Myanmar suspects have confessed to killing the pair.”

But had they? Thai authorities admitted no forensic expert had overseen the collection of evidence. “A case of two murdered people certainly needs a forensic physician,” the head of Thailand’s forensic science institute said, [according](#) to the Guardian. Now there’s confusion over the condoms. In the migrants purported confession, they [said](#) they hadn’t used a condom when sexually assaulting Witheridge, despite the fact that police had said their sperm had been found on a condom linked to the scene.

It’s now unclear what happened, when it did, and who did it. “The Thai authorities must initiate an independent, effective and transparent investigation into mounting allegations of torture and other ill-treatment by police,” Amnesty International Asia-Pacific Director Richard Bennett [said](#) in a statement. “The pressure to be seen to be solving an appalling crime that has garnered considerable attention should not result in the violation of rights, including to a fair trial.”