

Irish bridge player in police raid on Thai resort 'gambling club'

By Neil Michael
Chief Reporter

AN IRISH person is among 32 pensioners arrested by Thai police after an evening spent playing bridge.

Thai authorities claim the group of pensioners, who meet regularly in the resort of Pattaya, were breaking the law by gambling for money.

Members of the bridge club tried to explain that they were playing cards for points.

But despite money not changing hands, the players were deemed to have broken the law and were arrested, jailed and each had to pay 5,000 Baht (€125) bail before being released.

According to local newspaper reports, some 50 soldiers, police and officials burst into a rented room above Alto's Restaurant and Bar off the Thappraya Road, in south Pattaya.

The Jomtien and Pattaya Bridge Club meets there three times a

Ban on owning more than 120 cards

week and is a favourite haunt for mostly British ex-patriates who live in the Thai resort.

At the time of the raid, there were eight tables filled with players, made up of 26 men and six women.

It has been reported that among the items seized were a results book, numerous decks of cards and a number of computers.

Those playing bridge were questioned before being arrested and taken to Pattaya Police Station, where they were held in custody for more than 11 hours.

The players included an 84-year-old Dutch woman, at least one player from Scandinavia and a player from Ireland.

Police Colonel Sukathat Pumpamuang, superintendent of Pattaya Police Station, said the law enforcement agents were acting on a tip that illegal gambling was taking place there.

Although police eventually accepted they had not been playing for cash, other laws appeared to have been broken.

Section 8 of the Playing Cards Act of 1935, which prohibits any one in-



Rudely Interrupted: The expat pensioners concentrate on their game before the officers barge in

dividual from possessing more than 120 cards at any one time.

In addition, it was reported that action was also taken over the fact that the playing cards the players were using did not carry an official government seal on the card boxes.

The card players' plight was eased after the president of the Contract Bridge League of Thailand, Chodchoy Sophonpanich - a civic activist who is a member of Thailand's most prominent banking family - went to Pattaya yesterday morning to advise police that bridge was treated under the law as a sport rather than gambling.

'Police know that bridge is a sport because a similar case happened before, but this time it was military and district officials who initiated the raid and they probably didn't know,' said Chaiyut Assanayarat, the bridge league's manager.

The chief of Thailand's junta,

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, began a crackdown on gambling, especially at illegal casinos, after taking power as part of a broader anti-corruption campaign.

Last night, the Jomtien and Pattaya Bridge Club was 'temporarily closed'. A message on its website read, 'whilst we get a new licence to

'Bridge players don't like to be disturbed'

play bridge for money. It was all quite absurd.

The Thai government has ordered a crackdown on illegal gambling, and officers in 'sin city' Pattaya - more used to tackling prostitution, drugs and gangsters - apparently received a tip-off about a 'regular gathering of foreign nationals with packs of cards' above Alto's Restaurant and Bar. The club has been meeting there three afternoons a week since being founded in 1994.

Chairman Jeremy Watson, 77, an Englishman who worked as an accountant in the Far East before retiring to Pattaya a few years ago, said: 'There were about 50 police, soldiers and internal ministry officials, with guns and handcuffs.'

'We ignored them. Bridge players don't like to be interrupted halfway through, especially if they are doing well.'

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