

Phuket Opinion: It's no Joke

PHUKET: The sudden transfer this past week of Royal Thai Police Immigration Bureau Chief Maj Gen Surachate Hakparn has set the cat amongst the pigeons. The transfer was swift, sudden and silent. No reasons for his transfer have been given.

Gossip on Thai social media channels has alluded to corruption as the reason for the transfer. However, the effects of his campaigns on corrupt officials may be the answer to the enigmatic move, not his involvement in it.

Gen Surachate's immediate posting comes amid his drive to streamline immigration processes, such as wanting to remove the 90-day reporting requirement altogether, while he continues his ongoing blitz on illegal foreigners in the country under the "Good Guys In, Bad Guys Out" campaign.

His immediate transfer echoes that of former Governor Chockchai Dejamornthan out of Phuket to the exact same position at the Prime Minister's Office just two years ago. And both transfers share some concerning parallels.

Mr Chockchai's transfer came amid a push by Patong bar and nightclub owners to have the legal closing times for entertainment venues extended. They were open about their reason for wanting the change. They were tired of paying police and other officials to stay open later.

Mr Chockchai supported that push and passed on the bar and club owners' formal request to top-flight officials in the capital. No public response to that request was ever given by the Ministry of Interior, which also includes in its fold the Royal Thai Police. Instead, Mr Chockchai was quickly moved out of Phuket.

Now we see the same happening to Gen Surachate. There is no doubt that streamlining immigration processes and shifting applications and reporting online will remove the opportunity for corrupt officials to extort – sorry, "take bribes" – from powerless foreigners.

Gen Surachate's move to shut down "VIP" lanes at major airports would already have had a dramatic impact on shadowy officials' incomes. And that one move would be a drop in the bucket of the sheer volume of income that's now jeopardised by Gen Surachate's systematic rounding up of foreigners and his willingness to press charges against corrupt officials.

Right now it seems that if any official wants a fast ticket to a post at the Prime Minister's Office, all they have to do is target something that directly affects the unofficial income of other certain officials.

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