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Court jails 5 officials for extortion racket

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The Appeal Court on Tuesday overturned abuse of authority convictions against five Chiang Mai officials who operated an extortion racket targeting market vendors in the northern city.

The men will still serve jail time, however, as the court upheld the six-year sentences for extortion, handed down earlier

by the Criminal Court .

It also upheld the lower court's order for the defendants to pay compensation to damaged parties.

On April 26, 2011, the Criminal Court sentenced army officer Maj Chalermchai Matchaklam, widely known as "Phu Phan Tueng", along with Chiang Mai city inspectors Thani Futhong, Pornchai Sukhanthasirikul and Thirayuth Suwanpanit, to six years in prison for their roles in the extortion racket.

The men bullied 128 vendors at Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar into paying unofficial monthly fees from November 1995 until May 1996.

The lower court found them guilty of abuse of authority, extortion and receiving illegal benefits.

The Appeal Court yesterday quashed the abuse of authority conviction, but upheld the others.

The extortion ring's mastermind, Sarayuth Puplap, a former chief of Muang Chiang Mai municipality, is serving nine years behind bars for his role in the scheme.

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