

Israel-Hamas war

Thai worker describes ordeal as Gaza captive

Wichian Temthong was held for seven weeks in tunnels by Hamas with three Israelis later killed by IDF

Verena Hölzl in Buriram, Thailand and **Polina Ivanova** in Jerusalem 9 HOURS AGO

Wichian Temthong woke up at his home in Thailand on a Saturday morning last month to a text message that floored him. It came from Israel: “Yotam, Alon and Samer are dead.”

“My mind went blank,” Wichian recalled. His legs buckled as he tried to get out of bed. For seven weeks, Wichian, a 37-year-old Thai national, had been held hostage in [Gaza](#)’s tunnels with three young Israeli men, after being kidnapped from a kibbutz where he was a migrant worker.

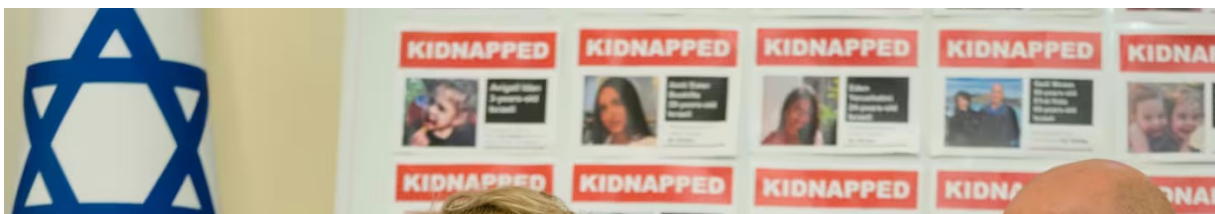
Wichian was released in November in an exchange between Israel and his Hamas captors, and travelled home. But his three fellow hostages were kept: Yotam Haim, Alon Shamriz and Samer Talalka.

Even more devastating to Wichian was news of how they had died. The young men managed to escape from Hamas, but as they walked through the battlefield in Gaza, shirtless and waving a white flag, they were gunned down by Israeli soldiers who mistook them for a threat.

The shooting shook Israel, still reeling from an [October 7 attack](#) by Hamas on its southern communities that killed about 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials. Israel’s retaliatory offensive on Gaza has killed more than 22,000 Palestinians, the Palestinian health ministry says.

Wichian was the only civilian witness to the three young Israeli men’s final days. “I am thinking about them all the time,” he said. “I really miss them.” An ex-soldier himself, he was shocked by the news that the army had killed three of their own. “This should not happen,” he said.

Speaking to the Financial Times at his home province of Buriram in northeastern Thailand, and later by phone, Wichian described the conditions in which the group was first held, kept in a tunnel about 20 metres below ground.





Iris Haim, the mother of Israeli hostage Yotam Haim © Kin Cheung/AP

“It was very cold at night, water was dropping down from the ceiling, and it was always damp,” he said. The group survived on a single meal a day, which mostly consisted of bread, sometimes canned peas, tuna or beef. Each had only half a litre of water to last two days.

At night they slept on blankets on the floor, and tried to forget their hunger by playing cards.

Wichian remembers Haim, a blue-eyed 28-year-old with ginger hair, as the quiet one of the group, who did not speak often and chose his words carefully. Sometimes, he would cry. A drummer in a band, he would tap rhythms with his hands on a pillow or on his lap to distract himself.

Occasionally, Shamriz, a computer engineering student, 26, would join him, singing. Once, the guards themselves asked the two men to play and sing, Wichian recalled.





Released Thai hostages hug their compatriots © Thailand's Foreign Ministry/AP

Haim and Shamriz were kidnapped from the same kibbutz, Kfar Aza, barely 2 kilometres from the Gaza border fence.

Wichian was kidnapped from there too. He had arrived in Israel just 10 days before the Hamas attack and had started working on the kibbutz picking avocados. Many migrants work in agriculture in Israel and of the 250 total hostages seized by Hamas, dozens were migrants, including 31 Thais, of whom eight remain captive.

A further 32 Thais were killed, including all the people with whom Wichian hid in a bunker on the morning of the attack.

The fourth hostage of the group, Samer Talalka, a 22-year-old Bedouin, came from the village of Hura but was seized from the Nir Am kibbutz, also near the Gaza border, where he worked raising chickens.

Talalka spoke Arabic and did most of the talking with the guards, Wichian recalled. Once, when Wichian pointed at his fingers to show how long the nails had grown, Talalka asked the guards to bring a nail clipper.

With little water in the tunnel, the men wiped their plates clean with tissues. Not given the chance to wash himself, Wichian started scratching his itchy scalp until it bled.

Talalka was the only one allowed to take a shower once a week. A Muslim, he would bow his head to the floor next to the guards in prayer, Wichian recalled. When there was leftover food that the guards decided to share, they would give it only to Talalka and Wichian, not to the two Jewish men.

The guards also removed all cables from the space, which Wichian believes they did in order to prevent them from suicide.





Signs reading 'Help, three hostages' in Hebrew and 'S. O. S', that the Israeli military says were found on a Gaza building © Israel Defense Forces/Handout/ Reuters

Sometimes the rotating guards looked like ordinary people, sometimes they looked like soldiers, Wichian said. One guard even told them his name. “Some were kind, others were strict.”

One man seemed to be the senior commander. He did not carry a weapon, unlike other guards, wore clean shirts and perfume, and sat in the only room in the tunnel that had air conditioning. The guards paid him respect and he always ate first. He had a telephone and a TV showing images of the war that was raging above them, Wichian recalled.

To communicate what time of day it was, the guards would point at the symbols of the sun or the moon one of them had scribbled on the wall of the tunnel.

Wichian did not share a language with either his fellow hostages or the guards, as he spoke no English, Hebrew or Arabic. He resigned himself to communicating with his hands and facial expressions. He was so desperate that at times he felt like talking with his feet, he said.

Haim tried hard to communicate with him and support him, occasionally trying to learn some phrases in Thai, such as “There is no water” and “I am going to the toilet.”

It was also Haim who hugged Wichian and rubbed his shoulders when he did not feel good or had trouble breathing, though Haim also struggled, especially in the first week. He “cried a lot, and kept calling for his mama”, Wichian recalled.

One day a guard came with a length of electric cable and ordered Haim and Shamriz to come with him. Wichian heard them scream. When they came back they had weals on their arms. One of Shamriz’s nails was so damaged, it looked like it would soon
come off

COME OUT.

Wichian also remembered the sound of the bombardment drawing closer, and after about five weeks the group was transferred to another tunnel. From there, the fighting seemed farther away.



Wichian Temthong: 'It was very cold at night, water was dropping down from the ceiling, and it was always damp' © Verena Hölzl

One day in November, guards stormed into the tunnel, shouting, “Thailand, Thailand. Go home!” He would be one of 110 hostages released that month in the only truce and exchange that the two warring sides have agreed to so far.

It was dark and Wichian could see little. He hugged his fellow captives and caught glimpses of their faces in the torchlight as his handlers rushed him out of the tunnel.

Wichian went home to Thailand. A little over two weeks after his release, he received the message that his fellow captives had been killed.

An investigation by the IDF said soldiers shot Shamriz and Talalka on sight. during “intense fighting” on December 15 in the Shuja’iyya area, one of the most [densely populated](#) parts of the Gaza strip. The third hostage — Haim — hid from the gunfire in a nearby building, calling out “Help!” in Hebrew. The battalion commander told him to come out, and ordered troops not to shoot. But two soldiers did not hear the order over the noise of a nearby tank and shot him.

The ordeal has stayed with Wichian. His sleep is now disturbed by noises ringing in his ears. An Israeli psychologist has checked in a few times by phone

his ears. An Israeli psychologist has checked in a few times by phone.

“I don’t know how to describe the emotion, but I feel really bad when I think about my luck,” Wichian said. After his return home, he went to his Buddhist temple and asked the monk to repeat three names in prayer: Yotam, Alon and Samer.

Additional reporting by Mehul Srivastava

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