

# Thai prosecutors charge influential Buddhist monk over money laundering



Abbot Phra Dhammachayo (C) arrives for a ceremony at the Wat Phra Dhammakaya temple in Pathum Thani province, north of Bangkok on Makha Bucha Day, March 4, 2015. REUTERS/Damir Sagolj/File Photo

**BANGKOK (Reuters)** - Thailand's attorney general said on Wednesday it would charge the abbot of a powerful Buddhist sect and four others suspected of money laundering in the latest twist of a long-running saga that has divided Thai Buddhism.

Police in the predominantly Buddhist country have tried several times to arrest Phra Dhammachayo, abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, a futuristic-looking monastery located some 50 km (30 miles) north of Bangkok.

"Prosecutors have agreed to charge Phra Dhammachayao of Dhammakaya temple on charges of conspiracy to launder money, money laundering and receiving stolen goods," Somnuek Siangkong, spokesman of the Office of the Attorney General, told Reuters.

Thailand's Department of Special Investigation in 2015 summoned Phra Dhammachayo for questioning after his temple was accused of receiving more than 1 billion baht (\$28 million) of embezzled funds.

Prosecutors in charge of the case have postponed a decision to charge the monk four times while Phra Dhammachayo has failed to show up for police questioning, citing ill health.

The controversy over Phra Dhammachayo, 72, has fueled a feud between traditionalists in Thai Buddhism and those who support more modern sects.

The country's dominant religion has come under repeated scrutiny following a series of sex, drugs and money scandals involving several temples and monks over the years.

Critics say that the Dhammakaya Temple, which says it has millions of followers around the world, is too money-focused and encourages financial donations as a way to gain good karma.

They also say it strays from the Theravada Buddhism practiced by millions of Thais.

The temple denies this.

The attorney general's office on Wednesday said the statute of limitations in the case against Dhammachayo was 15 years and that police would have to arrest Dhammachayo within that time.

Phra Sanitwong Wuttiwangso, the temple's public relations chief, said Dhammachayo was at the temple and has not fled abroad.

"Our abbot is very sick and cannot travel outside the temple grounds," he said.

(Reporting by Amy Sawitta Lefevre, Panarat Thepgumpanat and Cod Satrusayang; Writing by Amy Sawitta Lefevre; Editing by Simon Cameron-Moore)