

Thailand's Southern Rebels Return to Spotlight

No solution apparent as round of attacks signal insurgent pressure

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A series of attacks in Thailand's deep south this week are raising raised fears of a new militant offensive in the predominately Malay-Muslim region and underscored just how difficult it will be for the new government to stop the carnage.

On Monday, a day after six suspected militants escaped from a police cell, about 20 insurgents hiding along a road ambushed an eight-man army patrol. After a roadside bomb flipped the vehicle, the attackers shot the survivors in the head and stole their weapons. They beheaded one of the victims and attempted to do the same to the rest before fleeing.

Then on Tuesday, a bomb strapped to a motorcycle exploded at a busy market in Yala, injuring 37. About 11 people are in critical condition.

Monday's brutal attack was the first effective ambush since May 2007, said Anthony Davis, a Thailand-based security analyst for Jane's Information Group.

"It was the first case since then of a properly executed ambush with an IED (improvised explosive device) attack followed by small-arms fire, survivors killed and weapons taken," he said. "If you're in the business of ambushes, that's the way to do it. That hadn't happened for months and it's back again... With other incidents like the bomb in Yala, it's probably not a coincidence either."

While it's too early to tell if the latest attacks are kicking off a fresh wave of increased violence, analysts say they serve as a reminder that peace in the restive region remains out of sight. The attacks this week were the deadliest since the military-run government stepped up an offensive against insurgents in July 2007 with mass arrests that put militants on their heels.

"There is a certain trend in play in which the military is more pro-active, the insurgency to some extent is disrupted and violence to some extent is down," said Davis. "The insurgency is hurting. I don't believe it's mortally wounded, but it's been pushed onto the defensive and that is a place it had not been from 2004 to the middle of last year."

The fight for an independent state in the southern Thai provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, Pattani and parts of Songkhla dates back centuries. Thailand formally annexed the autonomous Malay-Muslim sultanate in 1902, prompting successive Thai leaders to undertake forced assimilation policies and aggressive measures to quell frequent rebellions - all of which have led to today's grievances.

The dormant insurgency re-ignited in January 2004 under the watch of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The former premier was widely blamed for helping to spark the conflict by scrapping a joint civilian-military-police task force that provided intelligence and communication with influential leaders, sanctioning a brutal drug war that authorized extra-judicial killings and disbanding the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), which acted as an intermediary between local factions and the state.

At first Thaksin dismissed the insurgents as common thugs, but then ordered tens of thousands of security forces to the region. The strong-arm approach became characterized by kidnappings, extra-judicial killings, torture and the mass killings at the Krue Se mosque in April 2004 and Tak Bai in October of the same year.

After royalist generals removed Thaksin in September 2006, many analysts saw a window of opportunity for peace in the region. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad revealed that Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej had agreed to have him broker peace talks with militant groups. Ex-army chief and appointed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont also vowed a softer approach than the one used by Thaksin.

"What was good about Surayud's policy was that he enunciated a clear policy on reconciliation," Davis said. "In November 2006 he stood up in Pattani and made an historic apology for problems under numerous administrations. That was a marked change in atmosphere, but then no effort was made to bring to book people guilty of crimes or at the very least criminal negligence. It was beautiful rhetoric without much substance."

General gets off

General Pallop Pinmanee typifies the government's reluctance to pursue justice seriously. During the 2004 Krue Se mosque incident, he defied orders from Bangkok to negotiate with insurgents and instead ordered soldiers to move in with guns blazing. About 30 insurgents and three members of the Thai security forces were killed in the attack, which likely could have been avoided through negotiations.

An independent judicial inquiry into the event recommended that the government initiate a criminal investigation into Pallop and two other generals. But Pallop has avoided all scrutiny, and the junta even appointed him as an adviser to the shadowy Internal Security Operations Command headed by coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin.

"Surayud's best policy was to start negotiations and take a reconciliatory policy approach to the militant movement," said Srisompob Chitpiromsri, a political science lecturer at Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani. "But the use of force and deployment of more troops into the area is a military approach that seems to follow Thaksin's approach. The military leaders claimed to have a different approach, but the heavy-handed one still holds and they have been more tough in terms of sending more troops. This is why they cannot solve the problem in the long term."

Number are dire

Based on statistics alone, it's hard to see any improvement in Surayud's approach to the violence. Last year saw 2,025 violent incidents, with 867 killed and 1,720 injured, according to statistics compiled by Srisompob and published by Deep South Watch. That's up from 2006, which saw 1,815 violent incidents, but down from 2005's 2,297 incidents. Altogether more than 2,800 people have died since the insurgency flared up in 2004.

"Several months after the coup d'etat, violence seemed to go down a little bit, but in the early months of last year violence went up dramatically," Srisompob said.

June 2007 proved to be the most violent month since the insurgency rekindled in January 2004, prompting the military to go on the offensive. Soldiers arrested hundreds of suspects under the emergency decree and held them for 30 days. Some were prosecuted, while many others were given an "attitude correction," according to army spokesman Acra Tiproch. On Tuesday the cabinet extended emergency rule, which has been in place since July 2005, for another three months.

The mass arrests in July proved somewhat successful at reducing bloodshed in the short term. Violent incidents declined to 114 in September from 147 in July, and deaths fell to 125 from 209. But analysts fear the incidents this week could signal more trouble in the wind.

"Right now I think there is a new movement," Srisompob said. "The militants are regrouping and rallying themselves to make a new wave of violence to show they are still alive."

It's difficult to read too much into the ebbs and flows of violence, as the number of deaths has remained steady over the past few years even though the number of attacks periodically rises and falls. The army's tactics have yet to produce a sustained reduction in killings.

"Sweep operations since late June 2007 have interrupted insurgents' communications and reduced their ability to conduct major coordinated attacks," said an October report by the International Crisis Group. *"But whether this is sustainable, and whether the alienation of Muslim youths caused by mass, arbitrary arrests ends up outweighing the gains, remains to be seen."*

Autonomy ruled out

Indeed, signs are already emerging that the arrests may be sparking a backlash among some villagers.

"Quite frankly, most of these arrests have stirred up more problems and it hasn't stopped insurgents from making attacks," said Waedueramae Maminchi, president of the Islamic Council of Pattani Province. *"If the authorities are going to arrest someone, there should be strong evidence to support the arrest. They shouldn't just take people away and put them behind bars. These villagers, once they were arrested on groundless evidence, end up distrusting the authorities. That makes it even harder in the long run to solve the problems in the South."*

Many experts believe the path to peace rests in negotiations that will lead to more local control. While independence is off the table, some policymakers are quietly talking about a watered-down autonomous rule.

Discussions of autonomy always evoke strong rebukes from those who fear it could lead to similar demands from ethnic minorities in other parts of the country. In 2006, prominent public intellectual Prawase Wasi, deputy head of the National Reconciliation Committee, said *"using the word 'autonomy' will create more disputes."*

Instead, the buzzword now is "political decentralization." In July, Surayud ruled out a special administrative zone, which sounds too much like autonomy, but said it may be possible for the three provinces to operate under the same administrative system as Bangkok and Pattaya.

During the election campaign, the debate on the South focused mainly on defeating the Internal Security Bill proposed by the military government that would expand security powers. However, one winning candidate in Narathiwat, Waemahadee Waedao of the Pua Paendin party, backed autonomy as the best way to solve the region's problems.

"I think they should focus more on empowering the local people and try to avoid using a military approach," Srisompob said. *"This is a better way to solve the problems. If necessary they can set up a new model of local government or autonomous government under the framework of the constitution or laws that we already have now."*

Article 77 of the new constitution, which deals with national administrative policy, addresses the issue: *"The State shall decentralize powers to localities for the purpose of independence and self-*

determination of local affairs,” it says in part.

Besides local political rule, experts say the government must do more to boost the region’s sagging economy if it hopes to stem the violence. Authorities have proposed a special economic zone in the region and even floated a plan to locate a massive new industrial estate in Pattani, but neither idea has gained much traction.

The Southern Border Provinces Administration Center, re-established after Thaksin was removed, has proposed setting up special “safety zones” where strict security measures would be put in place to help businesses prosper. This is also still on the drawing board.

“What we would want out of the new government is for the leader to initiate some serious development in all aspects and not just one side,” Waedueramae said. *“They should not only be tackling the violence but also solving economic problems and strengthening the education system.”*

Many analysts believe the new government will be too concerned with surviving in Bangkok to concentrate on negotiating with insurgents. However, it appears that new army chief Anupong Paochinda has made the conflict a higher priority than his predecessor.

“When Sonthi was army chief, the morning meetings focused on the activities of PPP (the pro-Thaksin political party that won the most seats in parliamentary elections),” said a Western diplomat. *“But Anupong has put the South at the top of the agenda.”*

That’s where it needs to stay if the military and government hope to reduce the number of violent incidents this year. The optimism after Thaksin was booted out is now gone, and the cold reality of a protracted struggle appears to have set in.

“To me, there are still no good signs of reconciliation,” Waedueramae said. *“We still need to create a better, stronger understanding between villagers and authorities. This is going to take time and some serious effort from both sides.”*

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* From asia Sentinel:

http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=990&Itemid=31