Thai hospital shootout punctures government's democratic pretensions

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Thai special forces last month stormed a hospital being occupied by armed Karen guerrillas from neighbouring Burma. The attack in Ratchaburi, 95 km west of Bangkok, was over quickly; none of the patients or staff were injured and the Thai troops sustained only minor wounds. All 10 of the guerrillas were killed, some apparently executed on the spot after being captured.

Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai has always traded on his democratic credentials as an opponent to the military dictatorships that have dominated so much of Thailand's history. His willingness to use the police and army in the most ruthless fashion against Burmese rebels is a clear warning that the democratic façade is only paper thin.

The hospital occupation on January 24 was an act of desperation by an armed group known as the God's Army, a small splinter group from the Karen National Union. The KNU and the God's Army are just two of a number of mainly ethnic-based groups engaged in a protracted guerrilla war against the Burmese military junta.

In January, the God's Army fighters, estimated to number around 100 and based near the Thai border, came under sustained attack from the Burmese army. At the same time they were being shelled by Thai troops, operating in tandem with the Burmese. Men, women and children who tried to flee over the border were turned back by Thai police and troops.

One of the guerrillas involved explained in a letter prior to the raid: “Our recent situation in the Kamaplaw region of the mountains is not good at all. It is likely that we will lose our base soon. The enemy troops consisting of four regiments led by Colonel Soe Thein, are approaching our base.

“Also, the Thai authorities have sealed the border and cut off all the support such as food, medicine, and border crossing. We are facing many difficulties. We have been under attack from both sides. In order to please Rangoon, the Thais are targeting the ‘God Army'... They report our movements to the enemy all the time.”

From all reports, the 10 guerrillas, who slipped over the border, had no clear plan. After commandeering a local bus they decided to take over the hospital. Their first demands were for the Thai government to stop the bombardment of their camp in Burma, prosecute the general in command and end the cooperation between the Thai and Burmese military. They also called for medical aid to be sent to the injured fighters and families in Burma, and for the border to be opened without the usual “fines” extracted by Thai 9th Division soldiers.

Thai special forces and police immediately surrounded the hospital and the Provincial Governor Komain Daengthongdee ordered the evacuation of nearby administrative offices and schools. Between 30 and 40 commandos infiltrated the outpatient department and other buildings disguised as medical personnel to gather information and prepare for an assault.

Chuan Leekpai gave approval for the National Security Council to “act firmly” despite the risk to hostages. A force of about 200 specially trained soldiers and police cut the power supply to the hospital and early on January 24, under the cover of smoke bombs, attacked the hospital. Little was heard in the way of gunfire but when the assault was over all the guerrillas were dead. All of them appeared to have been shot through the head.

According to the *Time* magazine of February 7: “When Thai security forces displayed the rebels'

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clothing and weapons at a press conference on Tuesday, none was stained with blood. The room where the killings took place bore no evidence of a firefight—no shot-up doors, window or walls. Just four bullet holes from a pistol about 30 cm above the pools of blood on the floor."

An eyewitness explained in the *Bangkok Post*: "They promised to set us free after they had left the hospital with the helicopter... The rebels did not seems to fight back. Some of the hostages shouted out to ask them to ceasefire. Some of the hostages cried. The rebels did not fire in return. [The police task force] did not seem to care for the safety of the hostages. The hostage-takers were about to lay down their weapons and surrender."

Another witness said the police team held the rebels at gunpoint. "They were shot in the head after they had been told to undress and kneel down."

The bodies were shown to the press wrapped up in white sheets, and then promptly buried without further examination. Chuan Leekpai sought to justify the attack by saying that peaceful means to resolve the dispute had failed. He denied that the troops had executed any of the guerrillas. Chuan has since ruled out any investigation.

Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart responded to news of the army's recapture of the hospital by exclaiming: "Excellent! Very good! They [the guerrillas] deserved it because they brought much trauma and suffering to the Thai people, especially those in the hospital". A Thai official commented: "This is a clear message from Thailand that we won't tolerate terrorism... When you are dealing with terrorists you have to aim for the maximum result."

The government's response was in marked contrast to its attitude last October when armed members of the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors took over the Burmese embassy in Bangkok. At that time, Thailand conceded to the group's demands, flew them by helicopter to the Thai-Burma border and Sanan spoke sympathetically of "students fighting for democracy".

The Burmese junta reacted by closing the border, banning Thai fishing boats from its waters and severing other economic ties. Relations were only mended after weeks of tensions. The hospital seizure provided the Thai government with the opportunity to demonstrate to the Burmese military that it would deal with Burmese rebels in the harshest manner.

According to Thai academic Chayachoke Chulasiriwongs, the Thai army's shelling of the God's Army camp in Burma had the same purpose. "The Thais were shelling the Karen positions because after the embassy siege they need to prove they are taking a stand against these people."

The Chuan government is also under pressure from the opposition over its handling of the embassy takeover. During a no-confidence debate at the end of last year, opposition leader General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh claimed that the government looked "like a fool in the eyes of the world" because it had given in to the demands of the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors group.

Chuan and Interior Minister Sanan, who was at the centre of opposition corruption allegations, have seized on the Ratchaburi hospital shootout to bolster their position and institute a further crackdown particularly against the large community of Burmese student exiles in Thailand. Sanan has warned that students could face legal action if they make trouble. Police have already detained one student after he expressed unease about the army's actions at the hospital. The government has announced that it will probably close the Maneeloy holding centre for exile Burmese students in Ratchaburi by the end of the year.

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