

Thailand sends troops to bolster US occupation of Iraq

John Roberts
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Despite lacking popular support, and amid growing criticism, the Thai government completed the dispatch of 447 military personnel to bolster the US-led occupation of Iraq earlier this week.

An advance team of 21 soldiers arrived in Iraq aboard a US Air Force transport on September 9. The remaining 400 troops flew out of Thailand on Monday to join a 10,000-strong Polish-led military force in the central Iraqi city of Karbala for a six-month deployment.

The decision to send troops, mainly engineers and medical specialists, was first announced in July, following a visit by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to the White House in June. The decision, made without any discussion in the national parliament, immediately came under criticism.

Thaksin had up until then carefully avoided offering any support for the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. In early April, Defence Minister Thamarak Isarankura declared that under no circumstances would Thailand commit combat troops. "The war is likely to intensify as towns have been targeted. Thailand will not join the coalition forces because it is a friend to both Iraq and the United States," he said.

The government is clearly nervous about the extent of public opposition. A parliamentary committee on foreign affairs in late August urged Thaksin to undertake a public relations campaign to convince the public that the Thai troops were going for humanitarian reasons. Committee vice-chairman Kobsak Chutikul called for a parliamentary debate to legitimise the move.

The country's Muslim leaders have expressed opposition. Thitti Siamwalla, director of the Islamic Social and Economic Foundation of Thailand, wrote in the *Nation* newspaper in August that Thai soldiers,

being Buddhists, should not "degrade their morals by doing the dirty work for an invading force that is being condemned by the international community. Thais should not be identified with these invaders of Iraq. Their fabricated lies about WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction] have been shown up beyond doubt."

The Thai contingent's departure was delayed following the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad in August, then the number of troops was cut from 886 to 447. Another massive bomb blast, which killed the Shiite leader Ayatollah Mohammed Barq al-Hakim in Najaf—part of the Thai area of operations—prompted a *Nation* editorial to pointedly asked on September 7: "What makes the Thai government so sure that our troops will be excluded from any acts of violence?"

Public fears were further heightened by reports from the advance party. Colonel Boonchu Kerdchot, leader of the Thai contingent, warned in the *Bangkok Post* in mid-September that Thai troops could not expect a warm welcome and that relations between Iraqis and the Polish troops in Karbala "were rather unfriendly". He explained that foreign troops could not leave military camps on work assignments without an armed escort and that the Polish camp had already come under mortar attack.

Thaksin's decision to brush aside these concerns and objections indicates that significant interests are at stake.

Before his White House visit, relations with Washington had been frosty. In Thai ruling circles, there continues to be resentment over the perceived lack of US support for Thailand during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Thaksin represents sections of the Thai economic establishment who are hostile to the continuing demands of the World Bank and IMF for a

further opening up to foreign investors.

Thaksin's joint statement with Bush in June pointed to significant payoffs to Thailand in return for the troop deployment. Negotiations for a bilateral trade deal are proceeding and the White House indicated that it would consider designating Thailand as a major non-NATO ally, making the country eligible for military assistance.

Thaksin is a right-wing populist and wealthy businessman with close links to the Thai security apparatus. He has been able to cash in on the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism" to extend anti-democratic measures in Thailand in the name of "fighting terrorism".

Well before his Washington visit, Thaksin was exploiting "law-and-order" fears to bolster his flagging political support. In the three months to May, the Thai police carried out a vicious anti-drugs campaign that resulted in the deaths of more than 2,000 suspects—most believed to be extra-judicial executions by police. Bush was notably silent on the killings, which provoked international outrage.

To highlight Thai support for the "war on terrorism," police rounded up three suspected members of the Islamic extremist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) to coincide with Thaksin's visit to Washington. Bush duly praised the Thai prime minister for acknowledging "terrorist activity" in his country.

On August 11, Thai authorities arrested Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali, the alleged organiser of last October's Bali bombings. Hambali was immediately handed over to US authorities and flown out of the country to an unknown destination.

On the same day, the government announced a new battery of anti-democratic measures, implemented by decree. These include new powers to track money and a sweeping definition of terrorism as any violent act that causes damage to life, personal freedom, public infrastructure, state or private property. Its inclusion in the criminal code will allow for broad police dragnets and detentions. Thaksin claimed the measures were necessary to protect the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum to be held in Bangkok on October 21-22.

Opposition senator Kraisak Choonhavan compared the new legislation to the now-revoked anti-communist laws that led to arrests without trial and extra-judicial killings in the 1970s. "We already have a national

security law. We have firearms laws. We have criminal laws. The government already has overwhelming laws to arrest terrorists and they have been doing so, sometimes with dubious evidence," he said.

Thaksin obviously views the dispatch of Thai troops to Iraq as the down payment on a closer relationship with Washington that will bring economic and political payoffs. As far as the Bush administration is concerned, Thai military and political support is just a small part of its increasingly desperate attempts to avert an unmitigated political and military disaster in Iraq.



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