

Thai military launches bloody anti-terrorist crackdown in Muslim south

John Roberts
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In what appears to be a calculated state massacre on April 28, Thai security forces shot and killed around 112 men, mostly teenagers, in the country's southern, predominantly Muslim provinces. The confrontation signals a major government crackdown on Islamic separatist groups, which in recent months are reported to have stepped up their attacks on local officials as well as the police and army in areas near Thailand's border with Malaysia.

Thai officials claim most of the men were killed after they attacked 10 police stations and check points in an effort to steal weapons. The fighting was concentrated in Pattani province where 32 Islamic militants were slaughtered after they took refuge in a mosque and refused to surrender. Clashes also took place in neighbouring Songkhla and Yala provinces.

From the accounts provided by locals and human rights organisations, what took place was little more than a slaughter. Most of those killed were poorly armed and trained youth who walked into an ambush prepared by the army and police. Army chief General Chaisit Shinawatra indicated that the military had been tipped off about a series of coordinated attacks on police posts and were ready, waiting for the youth to arrive. Only five members of the security forces were killed in the encounters.

The bloodiest clash took place at the 425-year-old Krue Sae mosque in Pattani town, which is regarded by Muslims as one of the holiest sites in South East Asia. The security forces claim to have patiently waited for hours for the surrender of the 32 youth before lobbing grenades into the building and killing all inside. But according to a report on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio, the army refused an offer by local clerics to mediate.

Other sources confirm the indiscriminate and one-sided character of the fighting. The *New York Times* reported that locals identified the mangled bodies in the mosque as local villagers, most in their teens. Eighteen were members of the local soccer team.

Forum Asia, a human rights group, pointed out that only six firearms were found among the corpses. Forum Asia

Chief Gotham Arya told AFP: "Most of the attackers only had machetes and knives, so surely the well-armed soldiers and police who are trained to deal with this can handle these people. So why shoot to kill?"

The US-based Human Rights Watch also questioned the account given by security forces. "It is unclear whether all of the dead were armed or involved with the alleged assailants, or if any unarmed civilians were killed, particularly when security forces stormed into the Krue Sae mosque," it stated.

Thai national human rights commissioner Wasant Panich announced that he had witness statements declaring that police had killed suspected militants who were incapable of fighting back. Human Rights Watch, the acting UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Bertrand Ramcharan and others have called for a full inquiry.

The comments of army commander Chaisit provide the clearest indication that the military carried out a cold-blooded massacre in order to teach Islamic separatists a lesson. "I think now the insurgents will reevaluate their activities, because in the past we have been the passive side but now we are the active ones," he told the media. Following last week's events, the military has been pouring reinforcements into the area, with 700 more troops arriving in the south on Monday.

In response to the wave of outrage in Thailand and internationally, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra attempted to play down the involvement of Islamic separatists. Despite being on record earlier as blaming unrest in southern Thailand on Islamic extremists, he declared those killed last week were drug addicts and criminals. He later announced that he will visit the south in a bid to appease local anger.

No group has claimed responsibility for the abortive attacks but the army and police were in no doubt as to the target of their trap. National police commander Sunthorn Kraikwan said the militants killed and captured "had the clear intention to stock up firearms for their separatist operations". General Kitti Rattanchaya, who is involved in operations in the south, said the insurgents were part of a

terrorist organisation whose aim was the establishment of an Islamic state.

During the siege of the Krue Sae mosque, those inside used the public address system to urge their fellow Muslims to join them. Eyewitness Somprasong Tipyorea told the *Los Angeles Times*: “They said they were willing to sacrifice their life for their religion. They were given a chance to surrender, but the group was ready to die.” One of the 17 survivors, arrested Muslim cleric Mama Matheeyoh, told the media that the insurgents were fighting for a Muslim state.

There is a long history of opposition to control by Bangkok in southern Thailand. The area is home to most of the country’s six millions Muslims, many of whom are ethnic Malays and thus form a distinct minority in the country’s largely Buddhist Thai population. The Thai king annexed the region in 1902 as a buffer against British Malaya and remains one of the most oppressed and economically backward areas of the country.

Since Thaksin came to power in 2001, a rising number of attacks have been attributed to Islamic separatist groups. Their growing influence has been fuelled in large part by Thaksin’s heavy-handed methods and his government’s support for Washington’s so-called war on terrorism. As in other parts of the country, there is widespread opposition in the south to Bangkok’s decision to send troops to bolster the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq.

Thaksin has been under pressure from Washington to crack down on Islamic groups in southern Thailand. In July 2002, he ordered the military and police to reestablish their disbanded coordination centre for intelligence and suppression operations in the area. In August 2003, the alleged Al Qaeda operative and mastermind of the October 2002 Bali bombing, Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali, was arrested in the area and promptly handed over to US intelligence authorities.

A key turning point came in early January when a military base in Narathiwat province was raided and a cache of arms seized. Four soldiers were killed in the highly-organised operation during which 21 public schools were torched to divert from the main target. In the months that followed, at least 65 people were killed, most of them security force personnel and government officials. On March 27, a bomb blast at a bar near the border injured 30 people, including Malaysian tourists.

In response to the January raid, Thaksin vented his fury at the army, declaring that the four soldiers killed “deserved to die”. He imposed martial law on three of the five southern provinces and let the security forces loose.

An article on the *Asia Times* web site commented: “If the military is not careful, droves of peaceful Muslim Thais could start tacitly supporting the militants, providing the

widespread support they now lack. Disappearances, more than 100 during the past six months, including high-profile human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphajit, aggressive policing and extra-judicial killings are sorely testing their loyalty.”

Commenting on the latest events, Thai political analyst Somphon Wongchanglaw told the *International Herald Tribune*: “Thaksin sought to employ the same strategy in his war on drugs in the south. This only resulted in alienating the Muslim population even more. His CEO style has engendered an environment where immediate results are expected—no matter what the cost, legally or politically.”

Thaksin’s “war on drugs” in early 2003 involved the widespread extra-judicial killing of alleged drug dealers by police. It was a crude attempt to divert attention from growing economic and social problems by exploiting popular hostility to drug trafficking. The result was at least 2,274 deaths after government agencies drew up blacklists. Few people believed police claims that the murders were the result of inter-gang feuds, not least of all because there was not a single arrest in any of the cases.

There is also a strong element of diversion in the suppression of Islamic separatists in the country’s south. Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party won the 2001 elections by playing on deep resentment over the impact of the economic restructuring program of his predecessor Chuan Leekpai. Having postured as a defender of the poor, he then proceeded to implement similar open market policies. The popular discontent over declining living standards has been compounded by growing opposition to the war in Iraq.

On Saturday, more than 60,000 people joined the May Day rally in Bangkok, one of the largest ever, with workers joined for the first time by rural groups. The rally demanded an end to the government’s privatisation program of electricity, water and other utilities. For months, workers have been protesting against these measures.

Other demands included a higher minimum wage, more health and child care centres, protection for the right to organise and the protection of migrant labour. Significantly, these economic demands were connected to a call for the withdrawal of Thai troops from Iraq.

By raising of the spectre of terrorism, the Thaksin government is creating the climate for the use of the most draconian methods against any opposition—in the south or elsewhere in the country.



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