

# Thaksin stokes further conflict in southern Thailand

John Roberts

26 November 2004

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The provocative actions of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra since the murder of at least 87 unarmed protestors by the military at Tak Bai in southern Thailand on October 25 have ensured there will be further violence. Thaksin has not only refused to apologise for the killings, but made clear that the Thai military will be intensifying its campaign of repression and intimidation in the predominantly Muslim region.

The killings occurred after the military broke up a demonstration of some 2,000 people who were demanding the release of six men being held in the Tak Bai police station on charges of giving weapons to separatist militants. As many as 1,000 troops surrounded and fired into the protest, killing six men. Three more drowned as they were forced into the river. In horrific scenes, hundreds of demonstrators were then forced, bound and in some cases gagged, into trucks. Men were stacked four- or five-deep on top of one another. At least 78 died from suffocation, heat stroke or broken necks during a six-hour ordeal.

As the editorial of the *Nation*, Bangkok's English language newspaper, commented on October 28: "It is not an exaggeration to say that cattle being delivered to the slaughterhouse are provided better conditions and more humane treatment."

The scale of the killings may have been greater than the military has admitted. At least 40 men who took part in the protest are still unaccounted for, according to relatives. Witnesses told Thai Senator Nirand Pitakwatchara that they had seen security forces loading dozens of corpses onto other trucks after the prisoners were driven off. Army spokesman Colonel Somkuan Saengpattranet told the BBC on November 9 that the army and police would investigate the claims.

The Thai government has expressed "regret" over the Tak Bai deaths and set up a commission of inquiry headed by former parliamentary ombudsman Pichet Sunthornpipit. However, before the outcome of any investigation into the

security forces, Thaksin declared on October 30 that 300 of the 1,300 men arrested at Tak Bai would face criminal charges. He has also refused to apologise for the actions of the military, continuing to describe the atrocity only as an "unfortunate incident".

Far from backing away from repression, Thaksin has ordered the security forces to launch a new offensive in the southern provinces, ostensibly to crack down on illegal firearms. On November 6, after announcing the cancellation of his trip to Chile for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum meeting, Thaksin declared in a radio address: "Anyone who illegally possesses a war weapon will face the death sentence, but innocent people do not have to panic." Before visiting Tak Bai the next day, he told journalists he was going to the area to instruct the police and army to act more aggressively against separatist militants.

Thaksin's response to the killings at Tak Bai has provoked concerns among sections of the Thai ruling class that the state of affairs in the south could deteriorate.

Already, more than 26 people have been killed in the south in a wave of bombings and murders the government has blamed on Islamic extremists. A note left near where a Buddhist plantation worker was beheaded declared: "This is not enough. More will be killed in revenge for the innocents that were killed in the Tak Bai massacre." This week, five schools were burnt to the ground by separatists and an attempt made to assassinate the deputy governor of Pattani province. Police and government workers were also targeted.

Islamic cleric Abdulrazak Ali told *Time* magazine: "It will be impossible to control now. Before, the problem was just young people who were unhappy; now it's everybody [in the south]."

Leading Thai academic Chaiwat Satha-Amand wrote in the *Bangkok Post* this month: "One of the most important features of the violence in southern Thailand is its sustained deadliness and how this engenders the state's violent response... Justice needs to be delivered so that they [southern Muslims] will have faith that the system works and the illegal use of vengeful violence becomes

unnecessary and counter-productive.”

In perhaps the clearest indication of the depth of alarm, the Thai monarchy has publicly intervened—an action generally reserved for deep political crises. King Bhumibol Adulyadej has made several comments calling for moderation in the south, while Queen Sirikit delivered a television appeal for national unity.

Such is the climate of fear that teachers in Narathiwat province took strike action to highlight the dangers facing government employees. Thaksin contemptuously declared that Thai teachers working in the south were already receiving a “risk premium” of 1,000 baht a month (\$US25) and that “if they can’t stand the heat”, they should “get out of the kitchen”.

The conflict is also causing disquiet among the country’s regional neighbours. In Malaysia in particular, there is widespread sympathy among the majority Malays for the Muslim population just over the border in southern Thailand. This week the Malaysian parliament endorsed a motion condemning “the aggressive use of power in Narathiwat province that led to numerous deaths among Muslims.”

An editorial in the *Japan Times* on November 10 noted: “A failure to properly respond to Muslim complaints will guarantee that the anger becomes an insurgency, with potentially disastrous consequences for Thailand and all of South East Asia.” The paper warned that, combined with Thaksin’s support for the US invasion of Iraq, the government’s actions had created conditions for the growth of Islamic extremism. It accused Bangkok of ignoring the cultural and economic grievances of the impoverished region, giving fuel to “an independence movement that thus far has failed to gain widespread acceptance” among the six million Muslims in the south.

The *International Herald Tribune*, in an article on November 18 entitled “Thaksin and unrest stir doubt in region”, cited alarm being expressed by the member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). S.P. Harish of the Singapore Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies told the newspaper: “We can see ASEAN governments are getting more concerned. They are taking a supportive line, but they want the Thai government not to take the military option.”

The newspaper reported that briefings given by the Thaksin government to neighbouring states, “far from allaying concerns, have created doubts as to how much he understands the issues at stake”. An ASEAN official declared following a briefing: “He [Thaksin] doesn’t really see it as a serious problem. He is completely unrepentant and says he will solve the problem after the elections. He doesn’t say how but I suspect he means force.”

Mohamed Jawar of Kuala Lumpur’s Institute of Strategic

and International Studies said Bangkok’s neglect of the south had made Malaysia “highly concerned by possible spillover” of violent conflict. Antagonisms between the two countries will only be heightened by Thai allegations that Malaysia’s Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia was a possible source of support for the separatists in southern Thailand and tightened border controls.

Underlying Thaksin’s preparedness to not only escalate the repression in the south, but to make accusations against Malaysian organisations as well, is a calculated attempt to use nationalism to shore up support for his Thai Rak Thai party in the lead-up to the Thai elections, which are due to held in February.

Thaksin was elected in 2001 on the basis of populist promises of financial aid to rural villages and debt relief for farmers. Over the past three years, however, the focus of his administration has been using government spending and cheap credit to benefit sections of big business—such as his own companies—that established an oligarchic position during Thailand’s decades of military dictatorship.

Thaksin has brought the military and security forces back into the centre of political life, both through a “war on drugs” and the crackdown in the south. The Tak Bai incident is just one in a long line of acts of state violence since Thaksin took office. In 2003, over 2,500 alleged drug dealers were killed in extra-judicial executions when Thaksin launched the security forces on a wave of terror in Bangkok and other cities. Following the declaration of martial law in three southern provinces, as many as 112 Muslim youth, armed with little more than knives and stones, were slaughtered at the historic Krue Sae mosque and other locations in April.

The police state methods and the anti-Muslim hysteria serve to divert from the economic plight that faces the country’s workers and rural poor, which Thaksin’s regime has done nothing to alleviate. A political opponent of Thaksin, Senator Jon Ungphakorn, warned in the Singapore *Straits Times* this week: “The extreme right-wing patriotic movement is, I believe, being supported by the government itself because it deflects issues from the prime minister and the army. It is extremely dangerous for the entire country.”



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