

Repression in southern Thailand fuels diplomatic tensions with Malaysia

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A diplomatic row has erupted between Thailand and Malaysia over the fate of 131 Muslim villagers who fled to Malaysia in late August from southern Thailand. The asylum seekers were fleeing from the operations of Thai security forces in the predominantly Muslim provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani, and a conflict that has cost at least 1,000 lives since January 2004.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra took exception to remarks by Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar that the villagers would be returned to Thailand only if Bangkok could guarantee their human rights and safety. On October 7, the Thai Foreign Ministry summoned the Malaysian ambassador to protest “interference in the internal affairs” of Thailand.

According to a report in the *Bangkok Post*, Thaksin’s administration was also angered by the fact that United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees officials interviewed the villagers, who were being considered for refugee status. Thaksin declared: “Our human rights standard is high. We stick to and abide by the principle and the constitution, ours being very progressive as it is.”

The Thaksin regime’s actual record in the south includes two massacres of Muslim youth, at the historic Krue Sae mosque in April 2004 and at Tak Bai in October 2004, in which about 200 were killed by the police and army.

Despite talk of finding a “gentler” way in the south, military operations have since been stepped up. In July an emergency decree was issued in the region, giving the government wide powers of censorship, detention without charge for 30 days and immunity from criminal prosecution for the security forces deployed in the southern provinces.

Since then, insurgent activity has increased. In the last week of September and the first week of October, at least nine Thai soldiers were killed in two attacks.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid proposed on October 8 that the two governments hold talks to calm down their rift. He told the Malaysian media: “It is best for both sides to keep talking until the issue is resolved”. Thaksin shrugged off the suggestion and went ahead with plans for a scheduled visit to the European Union.

Kuala Lumpur’s concern over the deteriorating security situation in southern Thailand was apparent in the week before the diplomatic scuffle. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who heads the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and his predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad, both held informal talks with former Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, head of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC).

Thaksin supposedly set up the 48-member NRC panel to seek peaceful solutions to the conflict in the south after international criticism of the government’s actions in the Muslim south. The NRC chairman told the Thai media that Badawi and Mahathir had discussed the growing violence but assured him that Malaysia did not support the separatist movement.

The Malaysian leaders have little concern over “human rights” and have a long history of using anti-democratic measures, including the notorious Internal Security Act, to suppress political opposition. Their stand on the refugees reflects concerns that Thaksin’s actions in the three border provinces will stir up Islamic fundamentalism in Malaysia.

So sensitive is Kuala Lumpur that while the villagers first fled into Malaysia’s Kelantan state they were quickly transferred into the neighbouring Terengganu

state. Kelantan is controlled by the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). PAS is competing with UMNO for the support of the majority Muslim Malays, who have close cultural ties with the population across the border.

Malaysia's ruling elite has looked on with concern as Thaksin has over the past two years sought to secure an electoral base for his right-wing populist government by appealing to Thai nationalism in the predominantly Buddhist country. The insurgency has helped distract attention from Thailand's growing economic problems and from corruption scandals that have dogged the government.

Thaksin's rough treatment of the impoverished south has also compounded a century of discrimination and neglect since the three provinces were annexed in 1902, and revived a moribund separatist movement.

A report on the *AsiaNews* website lists three groups now thought to be active: the Pattani United Liberation Organisation, which almost died out in the late 1980s; the National Revolutionary Front Co-ordinate, which claimed recruits from Islamic schools; and the Pattani Islamic Mujahideen Movement, formed in the mid-1990s by veterans of the US-supported anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan.

The recklessness with which Thaksin has provoked discontent in the south has been accompanied by an apparent disregard for damaging relations with Malaysia. His administration has sought to blame its neighbour for the growing intensity of the insurgency.

In September, Thai Defence Minister Thammarak Isarangura Na Ayutthaya charged that Thai insurgents were plotting attacks from the Malaysian island of Langkawi. Thammarak's Malaysian counterpart, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak, immediately denied the claim, which further strained relations.

Although Thaksin has used his support for the Bush administration's "war on terror" as the cover for his operations in the south, there is concern throughout the region that his actions are creating a breeding ground for militant Islamic fundamentalism.

Bangkok Chulalongkorn University academic Surat Horachaikul told the AKI website that Thaksin's firm grip on power and intolerance would only "worsen the situation," as seen by the escalation in violence since the July emergency decree. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party's swept the general elections in February,

winning 400 of the 500 parliamentary seats.

As a result of Thaksin's repressive measures, the conflict in southern Thailand is escalating and threatens to spill over the border into Malaysia.



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