

Former police officer massacres 38 people, including 24 children, in Thailand

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A horrific attack at a childcare centre in Thailand's northeastern province of Nong Bua Lamphu has claimed at least 38 lives. Some 24 of the victims were young children, in what has been described as the country's worst mass killing in decades. An unknown number of survivors have been hospitalised with injuries.

The official fatality count has changed several times over the past 36 hours, each time being revised upwards.

Panya Kamrab, a 34-year-old former police officer, has been identified by Thai authorities as the perpetrator. He reportedly arrived at the childcare facility, in the rural town of Uthai Sawan, in the early afternoon of Thursday, before indiscriminately opening fire.

Most of the children who were killed were between the ages of 2 and 5, according to officials. Only one child who was on site reportedly survived. Staff members were also murdered, including a 25-year-old teacher who was eight months pregnant. According to witness reports and press accounts of the autopsies, many of the victims were butchered with a large blade, similar to a machete, used by farmers to cut sugar cane. Their injuries are said to have been horrific.

Kamrab allegedly returned to his nearby home after the massacre, killing his own children and his wife before turning the gun on himself.

Local officials have told the international press that Kamrab had gone to the childcare centre, and was agitated when he found that his own child or children were not there.

In comments to Reuters, Jidapa Boonsom, a district official, said that Kamrab had first shot four or five staff members, before entering the facility. The children were asleep or resting during naptime when he entered. People nearby had initially thought that fireworks were being let off, before becoming aware of the developing tragedy.

In the days since the massacre, dozens of family members have made harrowing visits to the childcare centre, to the morgue and to other points of congregation, where a collective mourning has unfolded.

Their comments have pointed to the magnitude of the

horror that has taken place. Relatives have spoken of the interests and hobbies of the young children, the hopes they had for their future and the unbearable grief of losing them.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported: "Four-year-old Thawatchai's grandmother, Aoy Yodkao, had hoped the boy would take care of her as she grew older. He would call her 'Yai Aoy, Yai Aoy,' meaning Granny Aoy, and loved to play with her phone, she said..."

"Now, she says, she can't sleep or eat. She worries about the health of her pregnant daughter, the boy's mother. 'I have no idea what to do next,' she said. 'I can't think of anything right now.'"

The attack, targeting defenseless children and those who care for them, has shocked masses of people in Thailand and around the world.

Many of the details remain sketchy, and undoubtedly more information will emerge.

Already, however, the mass killing has raised a host of questions about the culture of the military and police, whose personnel have been involved in most attacks of this nature; a growing epidemic of drug use, and the malignant growth of social tensions, which, whatever the psychological and individual characteristics of perpetrator, have to be present in such a horrific social event.

The few details that are publicly known about Kamrab paint him as a forlorn figure whose life was falling apart. The 34-year-old had lost his job as a police lieutenant colonel last year after being caught with methamphetamines. It is unclear if he had been in work since. Kamrab was embroiled in ongoing drugs proceedings, which had been the subject of a court hearing the morning of the attack.

Other reports speak of the inevitable money problems stemming from such a predicament and the possibility that Kamrab's marriage was on the cusp of a separation.

Initially, police said that Kamrab was likely under the influence of methamphetamines when he carried out the attack, having taken the drug after his court hearing.

The country has a growing drug problem, with some reports placing the number of adults who have tried

methamphetamine, often sold as “ya ba” pills at almost 15 million people out of a population of 69 million. Record seizures have occurred during the pandemic, and some 80 percent of all prison inmates are incarcerated for drug offenses, mostly related to meth.

Government officials seized on these reports, ascribing the attack to the substance, which can be associated with violent behavior, and seeking to damp down discussion of the broader issues raised by the attack by declaring that it was purely the outcome of a drug addiction.

These assertions have been complicated by reports that Kamrab’s autopsy found no traces of narcotics in his system, indicating that he had not taken any illicit substance over the 72 hours prior to his death.

Several witnesses described seeing Kamrab walk out of the childcare centre, having carried out his unspeakable crimes, in a calm state, as though nothing had happened, and seemingly disconnected from what was taking place around him. The descriptions, connected with the apparent absence of drugs as an immediate factor, raise the possibility of a major psychological break or other mental health episode.

Angry comments on social media have highlighted Kamrab’s former position in the state apparatus, as a police officer. Previous attacks of this nature have also been perpetrated by police and military figures.

The second-deadliest attack, after last Thursday’s, took place in February 2020, when a soldier went on a two-day, live streamed rampage, murdering 29 people and injuring 58. That rampage took place in the city of Nakhon Ratchasima, also known as Korat, which, like the scene of Thursday’s mass killing, is in the impoverished northeast of the country.

In June 2021, a former soldier fired on a COVID clinic, killing one. Last month a soldier suddenly began shooting his colleagues at a Bangkok military base, killing two and wounding another.

Thailand’s military and its police are notoriously corrupt. For decades, they have played the role of political kingmakers, sometimes more openly, sometimes behind the scenes. They are thus a focal point of power intrigues, hierarchy and often criminal money-making operations. Current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha is a former army officer who took power in a military coup in 2014.

As is the case throughout Southeast Asia, the political prominence of the military and the police is bound up with the immense social tensions and the fears in the ruling elite of social opposition from below. Prayut has overseen repeated, brutal crackdowns on protesters demanding democratic rights, including in 2020 and 2021. Being on the frontlines of such state suppression cannot but toughen and brutalise those involved, including lower-level police and

soldiers.

Like all civil servants, they are entitled to own personal firearms, the purchase of which is subsidised by the state. That appears to have been how Kamrab legally acquired the gun that he later turned on the children. Thailand has the highest rate of gun ownership in the region.

Widely shared comments on social media have asked, “Who will watch the watchers?” and “Who do you call when the police are doing the shooting?” One Tweet, cited by *Time* magazine, stated: “Shooting in Korat caused by stress. Shooting at Nong Bua Lamphu caused by drugs and stress. Shouldn’t we look at the system? With security organisations like this, no one will dare trust them.”

In a bid to shut down this discussion, the national government has pledged compensation for victims and their families. Thailand’s King Maha Vajiralongkorn yesterday visited some of the victims’ families, a rare act by the figure who sits at the apex of the Thai state and is protected from criticism by some of the harshest *lèse-majesté* laws in the world. He is the latest in a string of state officials to have made an appearance.

Some of the visits have backfired, serving only to underscore the social chasm between the governing representatives of the ruling elite, and the impoverished victims’ families. A red carpet laid outside the childcare centre for visiting government officials was the subject of derision and anger online. So were reports that victims’ relatives were told to hold up signs, thanking the government for compensation.

As is the case throughout Southeast Asia, Thailand is a society of gross social inequality. The divide has only been intensified by the pandemic, which has wrought a devastating toll, and by inflation, which is pushing millions to the brink.

Like the phenomenon of mass shootings in the US, the Thai massacre has pointed to a deeply diseased society, riven by social tensions.



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