

Hat Yai Bombings Mark Shift in Tactics by Thai Insurgents

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On September 16, approximately six bombs went off in the southern Thai city of Hat Yai. The bombs killed at least four people, including a Canadian citizen, and wounded around 50 more (Bangkok Post, September 16). Although there was no claim of responsibility—true with all the attacks since 2004—the bombings occurred on the 21st anniversary of the founding of the Gerakan Mujahideen Islami Pattani (GMIP) separatist movement. The bombings were significant in that they portend a shift in tactics by Thai insurgents.

Martial law has been imposed in the region since January 2004, including the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala. It also includes three districts of Songkhla province, but not the city of Hat Yai, which has a Buddhist majority. The bombing of Hat Yai is important in that it is the key commercial and financial center for the entire south and is one of the largest rubber producing regions in the world. By some estimates, Hat Yai attracts some 100,000 foreigners a year, mainly traders.

The attacks were well executed and devised to cause panic. Bombs in three department stores went off around 9 PM, driving a throng of people onto the main commercial street where around four more bombs went off in front of a hotel, massage parlor and marketplace, each detonated five minutes apart, causing widespread panic (Bangkok Post, September 16). The thoroughfare has approximately 10 hotels on it and had almost 1,000 people checked in, according to the Thai police (The Nation, September 16). The bombs were detonated by cell phones, despite counter-measures put in place last November.

It was the second near simultaneous bombing in Hat Yai. On April 3, 2005, insurgents exploded simultaneous bombs at Hat Yai's international airport, a hotel and a department store, which killed two and wounded more than 80; out of the nine bombs, however, some failed to detonate or were defused. Bombings in Hat Yai always provoke a greater response from the government in Bangkok, which sees the insurgency as containable and marginal as long as it does not expand out of the three Muslim majority provinces. Attacks in Hat Yai are typically seen as evidence that the insurgency is spreading.

Yet the attacks were significant in that they were some of the first that explicitly targeted foreigners. While there have been 20 foreign casualties in the ongoing insurgency, mainly Chinese and Malaysians, the 2005 and 2006 attacks in Hat Yai led to Western casualties. This may indeed be an important threshold that the insurgents are crossing: the intentional targeting of the Western far enemy.

There are not many Westerners in Thailand's deep south. There is a small but steady stream of backpackers who cross over the land border from Malaysia at Sungai Golok and immediately take the train to Bangkok. Security forces in Thailand now are questioning whether foreigners will be routinely targeted, and if crossing this psychological threshold is the start of a bombing campaign that will target foreigners in key tourist venues. What is very obvious, however, is that the insurgents are determined to cripple the economy in the south. On August 31, for example, bombs were detonated in 22 commercial banks in Yala City (Terrorism Focus, September 6). This latest incident is another sign of this trend.

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