

Southern Thailand Still Suffering from Insurgent Violence

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By April, the commander of Thailand's 4th Army, Lieut. Gen. Ongkorn, asserted that, "The situation in the three southern border provinces should improve since the militant network has been weakened by the arrest of its top members." Instead, by April the insurgency was spiking back to the peak levels reached in June-July 2005 when an average of 60 people were being killed a month (Bangkok Post, April 17). The government claimed credit for a sharp downturn in the number of attacks in December 2005 and January, but that was clearly more a factor of the rains than good police work.

To date, more than 1,200 people have been killed since January 2004—a date that the media cites as the start of the insurgency (in reality it began in early 2001)—and several thousand more have been wounded. There have been three beheadings this year, bringing the total to 24.

Despite General Ongkorn's assertions, there has been only limited progress in Thailand's own counter-insurgent operations. Police contend that they have now detained 123 individuals and have concrete evidence that at least 105 of the 123 are linked to the insurgency, yet few have been in leadership positions (The Nation, April 16). Police intelligence is still weak, coordination of the 80,000 government personnel from at least a dozen offices and agencies is spasmodic and several heavy-handed counter-insurgent policies have backfired. By most estimates, there are some 1,000 insurgents, 247 "red zones," or villages controlled by insurgents, and the government still has only a rudimentary understanding of the organizational infrastructure involved (Bangkok Post, March 10).

Still, developments have improved since November 2005. For one thing, the government began to block all unregistered prepaid cell phones, which were the most frequently used detonating device for IEDs. This had an immediate impact. In the fortnight before the November 15 blockage, there were 11 bombings; in the fortnight afterwards, there were three. Since the ban went into effect, there have been roughly 60 bombings or attempted bombings, compared to May and June 2005 when they averaged more than one per day. Cell phone detonators are still used, but primarily with Malaysian SIM cards that work in the area around Sungai Golok. Insurgents have also been experimenting with other triggering mechanisms, such as infrared and other command-detonation systems.

The insurgents have proven to be very adaptive. For example, they responded to the government's blockage of pre-paid cell phones by launching a spate of arson attacks on cell phone towers, severely disrupting service across the troubled south. January had more than 100 arson attacks alone, a form of attack that diminished throughout 2004-2005 when their bombing tactics became more proficient. In the early hours of March 3, militants arsoned some 18 locations in eight districts of Pattani as well as in Songkhla's districts of Saba Yoi and Thepha. More than nine mobile phone signal towers in seven districts were torched. Vehicles, a school, phone booths and postal offices were also set aflame (The Nation, March 3; Bangkok Post, March 3). Likewise, they have increased the number of drive-by assassinations. The first three weeks of May saw more than 30 people gunned down by insurgents. Their raids are increasingly bold, employing larger numbers of militants operating in daylight hours (Thai Day, March 16). They have also taken on a more ominous sectarian tone. In a coordinated assault, 30 armed men raided a Buddhist village in Pattani's Yaring district, torched two houses and shot dead three villagers; two others were gunned down that night in a nearby village (The Nation, March 3; Thai Day, March 6).

The government has also made some progress in seizing arms caches and recovering stolen weapons in the first five months of 2006. In one raid, a 500-man force raided a house and unearthed 23 firearms, including two AK-47 assault rifles, four M-16 assault rifles, 10 sticks of dynamite, 11 bags of fertilizers, C4 explosives and more than 300 rounds of ammunition (Thai Day, February 21). In another raid, police found a large quantity of bomb-making materials including eight sets of detonators, iron boxes and steel sheets and 25kg of ammonia nitrate. In a third raid, police recovered six M-16 rifles, three AK-47s, other small arms and a fully assembled 10kg bomb (Thai Day, May 13).

In sum, tactical intelligence is improving, albeit slowly. Yet, the current methods of gathering intelligence may be counter-productive and could add to local resentment, fueling the insurgency. For one thing, the government is still rounding up youths without any evidence of wrongdoing and sending them off to re-education camps for several weeks. In addition to their re-education, the government took DNA records of the 122 men to create a database of suspected insurgents in Narathiwat (The Nation, February 24). The government has also announced plans to increase conscription in the Muslim region, provoking fears that they and their families will become insurgent targets (Bangkok Post, April 11).

More importantly, the head of the Thai Army has recently acknowledged the existence of "blacklists." Although he denied that individuals on these lists were being targeted by government hit squads, a large number of individuals have been killed in a questionable manner, reinforcing public acrimony over the security forces' culture of impunity and the statute in the Emergency Decree that gives security forces full legal immunity from prosecution.

With Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra back at the helm after resigning from the premiership in April and pledging not to be prime minister of the next government, it is unlikely that there will be any real change in policies. Poor intelligence and a misunderstanding of the Islamist nature of the insurgency portend that the conflict will continue to escalate.

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