

# Surge of Bombings Rock Thailand's Troubled South

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On June 15, an unprecedented number of bombings rocked the three troubled provinces of Southern Thailand, where an Islamist insurgency has been underway for more than two years and has left more than 1,300 people dead. In the course of four days, some 74 bombs were detonated, including 50 on the first day alone (12 in Yala, 18 in Pattani and 20 in Narathiwat) (Bangkok Post, June 16). On June 17, another 12 bombs were detonated and at least 10 more were defused. Approximately 10 people were killed and more than 70 wounded in the four days.

The bombs were quite small and the vast majority of them were 2-3 kilograms. The death toll was also surprisingly low, but the unprecedented scope of the attacks said far more than the damage wrought. The organizational capacity of the militants to perpetrate this number of attacks, many simultaneously, is greater than previously acknowledged by the government. The insurgents have perpetrated near-simultaneous attacks many times before, but never to this scale. While many bombs were left in public places (train stations, public toilets, etc.), half of them were detonated inside major public office buildings, including four city halls, two provincial offices, two district police stations and two municipality offices (The Nation, June 16). "Half of the bombs were planted just a few meters from the work desks of district chiefs and mayors," and one came close to the acting deputy prime minister who was on an inspection tour (The Nation, June 19).

The government claimed that they had some forewarning of the attacks, compounding their lack of command and control and overall ineptness. This show of force is a stunning rebuke to the Thai security forces that continuously assert that the insurgency is under control and that the government's policies are working. The government's heavy-handed policies and the 2005 Emergency Law, which have heightened popular animosity toward the government, have failed to stem the insurgents, who are able to attack at will.

Not all the bombings were of small scale, and some demonstrated new detonating technologies and tactics. In one assault, an M79 grenade launcher was used. Several of the bombs were detonated by new digital alarm clocks and remote-control devices, while several more were detonated by cellular phones despite a November 2005 ban on all unregistered prepaid mobiles. Remote controlled detonating devices were employed in two roadside IED attacks (roughly five and 10 kilograms) against police convoys, which wounded 10 police and two civilians. One motorcycle bomb that was detonated in a market was roughly seven kilograms (Thai Day, June 18). A Yala hotel was also attacked, killing one and wounding many. In addition to the bombings, militants have continued their campaign of targeted assassinations. Two high profile Muslim politicians were killed over the weekend.

While authorities were lax in their vigilance, following the attacks security forces fanned out over the weekend and by June 22 had made some 17 arrests and killed at least one suspected militant (Bangkok Post, June 20; Thai Day, June 19). Several suspected bomb-makers were among those apprehended, including Yunu Joh-ning, who was in possession of a bag of potassium nitrate, mobile phones, digital watches and electrical wires (Bangkok Post, June 20). Another bomb-maker died when his bombs accidentally detonated (The Nation, June 20). Three others arrested were found with small arms, ammunition and four kilograms of urea-rich fertilizer (Bangkok Post, June 19; Gulf Times, June 17). Another important arrest was that of an alleged drug dealer, Paosi Nisare, who was thought to be a financial backer of the militants (Bangkok Post, June 18).

The most notable arrest, however, was of a 37-year old Indonesian from Sumatra, Sabri Amiruddin (known as Zablee Hamaeruding). He was arrested in Narathiwat province with 10 kilograms of urea fertilizer and three kilograms of nails and spikes in his possession (The Nation, June 19). It was still unclear whether Amiruddin is the Indonesian known as Mudeh, alleged to be the head of the South Warriors of Valaya, a newly formed radical group, or the Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK), a group of Indonesian-trained militants (Bangkok Post, June 17). While his arrest does not give clear evidence that Jemaah Islamiya is involved, it clearly belies the Thai government's claim that this is purely a domestic insurgency and that there are no foreign forces at play.

The attacks had two other implications, the first being a further strain in relations between Thailand and Malaysia. The Thai interior minister asserted that the bombs had been assembled in Malaysia, provoking an angry response and denial from the Malaysian foreign minister (The Nation, June 18). Second, on June 20, caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra gave full authority to army chief Sonthi Boonyarataglin in an attempt to have clearer lines of command and control (Bangkok Post, June 20). Reactions to this were mixed. While many understood that poor coordination and unclear chains of command among the 11 different security agencies working in the south have hampered counter-insurgent operations, and that Sonthi, himself a Muslim, understands the problem, most locals feared that this signaled that the government would only increase its military-oriented strategy (Bangkok Post, June 21).

It is unlikely that the militants will stage a large number of attacks like this again for some time. Thai security analysts believe that they will resume their traditional tactics and operations, shifting their targeting between bombings, assassinations and arson attacks in response to government counter-measures. Indeed, on June 21, two more people were gunned down and a house was set on fire (Bangkok Post, June 22). Nevertheless, there is some intelligence that a militant leader, Yagareeya Yuerapae, a former Islamic teacher of Thammawitthaya School and a close aide of Sapaeing Bazo, the leader of the largest insurgent group, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate, is preparing a second wave of attacks (Bangkok Post, June 20). Despite Thaksin Shinawatra's pledge to not be part of the next government following his April resignation, he is fully ensconced in power and his security team remains untouched; indeed, Deputy Prime Minister Chidchai Vanasatidya remains in overall control (The Nation, June 20) [1]. No change in policies should be expected, despite alarming shortcomings in personnel, policies and tactics.

## Notes

1. Following the announcement that Sonthi would assume control, the head of the National Security Council announced that Chidchai would continue as the country's security chief, overseeing national security policy, and was not being sidelined.

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