

The Role of Foreign Trainers in Southern Thailand's Insurgency

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The first five months of 2007 have seen a dramatic increase in both the lethality and brutality of the Thai insurgency, prompting numerous Thai military officials to suspect the growing presence of foreign trainers. The arrest of an Indonesian on May 19 further raised suspicions. Nevertheless, Thai political leaders, including former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, head of the National Reconciliation Commission Khun Anand Panyarachun and current Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont, along with the diplomatic community, have all insisted that the insurgency is a purely domestic affair with no foreign linkages. This view is being challenged by a growing body of evidence that shows that Thai officials have begun to speak more openly about the influence of foreigners on the Thai insurgents.

After three years of insurgency that has left some 2,200 people dead, militants have dramatically increased the tempo of attacks in 2007. The insurgents are clearly buoyed by their own successes, as well as the lackluster performance of the Thai security services. Moreover, the attacks this year have been far more provocative in various ways. At the political level, there have been three attacks on the Thai royal family or their entourage. At a more local level, beheadings, machete attacks and desecration of corpses have become more frequent. There have been 10 beheadings in 2007, one-third of the total number. Nearly as many people have been killed by machete attacks or have been bludgeoned to death. In dozens of cases, the bodies have been set on fire, and in one instance a female victim was burnt alive.

Targeting has also been more brutal—women, children and monks, people who would never have been targeted in earlier iterations of the Thai insurgency, are now systematically gunned down. In a shocking case that occurred in mid-March and was reminiscent of the carnage of Algeria or Kashmir, a minivan was disabled by an IED and all 10 passengers, including three women and a girl, were shot execution style (Terrorism Focus, April 24). IEDs have also grown in size and complexity. It took insurgents almost two years to develop IEDs larger than five kilograms. This year has already witnessed 15 and 20 kilogram devices used several times a week, causing much higher casualty rates, especially among police and soldiers. Many of the devices are similar to the one found and defused on May 28: a 20 kilogram ammonium nitrate bomb constructed in a fire extinguisher, stuffed with bolts, nuts and pieces of rebar and hidden on the side of the road awaiting an army convoy (Bernama, May 28). The bomb was command detonated, but cell phone detonators are still currently used. Casio watches, which have been used routinely in Iraq, are now also regularly employed in southern Thailand.

There is a possibility that exogenous factors are at play. As a Thai army spokesman simplistically put it, videos of beheadings in the Middle East have been recovered in insurgent safe-houses and training camps. He reported, "You really need to know certain bones of the neck to behead someone, and Thais don't really know how. You need someone to be trained overseas or foreign trainers to teach them how." While beheadings were not commonplace in the sectarian bloodletting in the outer Islands of Indonesia in 1998-2001, numerous people were hacked to death with machetes, an ordeal that was captured on video by an al-Qaeda documentary filmmaker whose videos are readily available in Malaysia and Southern Thailand. Yet, Thai military intelligence officials interviewed by this author believe that there are Middle Eastern trainers involved in the insurgency, based on the fact that the IED technology has improved so rapidly. They tend to dismiss the notion that such technology was available through the internet.

While there is frequently a diplomatic salvo of allegations and responding denials from Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur alleging that militants are being trained in Malaysia, there is little evidence to prove that this is indeed the case. The militants enjoy logistical and rear-services support in Malaysia's Kelantan Province, and Malaysian authorities have made several crucial arrests of Thai insurgents (Terrorism Monitor, March 15). It is probable that Indonesia holds the most responsibility for militant training activity.

Press reports constantly mention the insurgent group Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK). The RKK is not an independent group, but refers to members of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi (BRN-C) who have received small-arms training in Indonesia (Terrorism Monitor, September 8, 2006). Thai police previously identified an Indonesian known as Mudeh, who had worked with the BRN-C's Sapaeing Basoe, the former principal of the Thammawithaya Foundation School (Bangkok Post, September 20, 2005). Thai police arrested Indonesian national Sabri Amiruddin (aka Zablee Hamaeruding) on June 16, 2006, following the four-day wave of bombings. 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, 2006). It remains unclear whether Sabri Amiruddin is Mudeh, or whether he has connections with Jemaah Islamiya (JI) or Acehese militants (he is a native of Sumatra). Thai authorities have never provided follow-up evidence. In May of this year, another Indonesian man, Sulaiman, and his Thai wife were arrested in Yala for firearms possession and drug trafficking (Bangkok Post, May 20). He was suspected of being a trainer for the militants, and was at least the sixth Indonesian arrested in southern Thailand. Another Indonesian arrested was an employee of the JI-linked charity, MERC, in November 2004.

The Thai government is increasingly examining the large community of Pattani students in Indonesia as both a base of support and pool of recruits for the insurgency. According to documents recovered by Thai security officials, Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Patani (Selatan Thailand) di Patani (PMIPTI), an association of Thai students in Indonesia, active on six campuses, has been active in fundraising and recruiting (Bangkok Post, April 7). Thai intelligence documents suggest that the PMIPTI is a BRN-C front organization. One of the top insurgent leaders, Jaekumae Kuteh, is believed to be in Indonesia. Originally arrested by Malaysia, he was sent to Indonesia despite Thai appeals for his extradition. It has been speculated that he is in Bandung, home of the largest concentration of Pattani students.

The Connection Between MILF and JI

Concern has grown regarding the connection between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and JI cells in Mindanao, in the southern Philippines. From March to April 2006, Malaysian authorities arrested members of a 12-man logistical cell comprised of Indonesians, Malaysians and two Filipinos that were responsible for getting jihadis in and out of Mindanao where they were being trained in MILF camps. The two Filipinos told the Philippine National Police who were sent to question them that they were bringing militants to Pattani for training. An undated Thai intelligence report names a Pattani Muslim, Ruli (aka Ahmed), who had studied at IAIN in Jakarta before joining the MILF. He went to Afghanistan in 1998, and upon returning to Indonesia he engaged in the sectarian fighting in Ambon and the Maluku following the fall of Suharto. He is believed to be running training for Pattani militants in Indonesia. This corresponds with the increased small-arms training JI was conducting for itself in 2006.

Foreign trainers could also portend a shift in tactics to softer Western targets out of area. A small surveillance team was caught in Bangkok in November 2005, while a much larger group was arrested in Phuket in September 2006. "Although possible, attacking soft targets will not be employed as a new tactic since they are winning with their old tactics," one security official told this author. For now, the major commercial center of the south, Hat Yai, will continue to be the main target outside of the three southernmost provinces. A series of six coordinated bombings, which killed the first and only Westerner, precipitated last September's coup. In the evening of May 27, seven bombs detonated across downtown Hat Yai (Bangkok Post, May 28; Terrorism Focus, May 29).

In the consciousness of the ummah, the plight of the Thai Muslims remains an inconsequential item on the list of grievances. Jihadi websites and articles rarely mention the conflict, although it is by far the most lethal in Southeast Asia. The focus remains centered on Iraq and Afghanistan, where the United States is leading the so-called Zionist-Crusader charge. After these countries, attention is turned to places of conflict involving U.S. surrogates, such as Israel. The U.S. presence or even support for the Thai government is, nevertheless, minimal, even when compared to the presence of a small number of U.S. forces in Mindanao.

There are, however, indications that this is changing. The veteran Middle East journalist Amir Taheri wrote in a March 2006 article in Asharq al-Awsat that "international jihadist circles" on the internet and across the Muslim world were discussing the possibility of waging a broader jihad in southern Thailand. He stated, "The buzz in Islamist circles is that well-funded jihadist organizations may be preparing a takeover bid for the southern Thailand insurgency." There exists a potential for bleed-out from Iraq. As the Thai insurgency drags on (and it shows no signs of slowing), its profile will be raised in the consciousness of Muslims around the world, and it may attract more attention and funding.

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