



IDSS COMMENTARIES (56/2004)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

Carnage in Southern Thailand: Is there Recourse?

S. P. Harish and Sabrina Chua*

3 November 2004

Southern Thailand has witnessed one of the most tragic acts of violence in recent months that may just prove to be the tipping point in the southern Thai insurgency. What began as a demonstration ended with more than 80 people dead. The protest started with nearly 2000 people gathering around a police station in the Tak Bai district of Narathiwat province. They were objecting against the detention of six men accused of giving weapons to Islamic militants. The six were defence volunteers who had allegedly lied about their government-issued weapons being stolen. In the ensuing standoff between the protesters and security forces, six people were killed and almost 1300 were arrested. Twenty-four hours later, the media reported the suffocation and deaths of around 80 detainees within trucks transporting them to army camps around Narathiwat.

Uniqueness of the Tak Bai Riot

This is just the latest incident in the wave of violence that has swept across southern Thailand this year. In January, militants attacked a military arms depot and torched eighteen schools. On April 28, 108 militants were killed by security forces, 32 of them at Pattani's historic Krue Se mosque. Tak Bai is the third key event this year. While the recent unrest may seem like a continuation of the January and April incidents, it differs from them significantly. The riot did not involve a planned act of violence against security forces or civilians and hence cannot be classified as a terrorist attack. It was simply citizens exercising their constitutional right to stage a protest.

Closer examination of the Tak Bai riot reveals two interesting aspects. First, it involved the mobilisation of a sizeable number of demonstrators from all over southern Thailand within a very short timeframe. The protest took place less than two weeks after the arrest of the six defence volunteers. The crowd swelled from 100 at dawn to nearly 2000 within a few hours, with protesters coming from neighbouring districts, as well as the border provinces of Yala and Pattani.

Second and more importantly, they were not protesting for the release of community leaders or persons holding high positions in southern Thailand – in fact the six accused were 'ordinary citizens'.

Boiling Point Reached

This incident appears to be the culmination of months of harsh and wrongful treatment of suspects by security forces. Human Rights Watch and Thailand's National Human Rights Commission have consistently reported cases of human rights violations by Thai security forces. However, what is more important in explaining the Tak Bai riot is the entrenched perception of injustice among southern Thai Muslims that has given rise to a deep sense of mistrust of the Thai authorities. A few examples bear this out.

In March this year, Somchai Neelapaijit, a human rights lawyer disappeared and is believed to have been killed by security forces. He had taken up prominent cases such as defending individuals who had allegedly participated in the January attack on an army camp in Narathiwat and four suspected Jemaah Islamiyah members from southern Thailand. Four police officers have been charged for his abduction and they are still awaiting trial, more than half a year later.

Three months later, a religious teacher was shot at his home in Tak Bai. His family members claimed that the assassins were Thai police and avowed that a huge demonstration will be staged if the culprits were not brought to justice. The recklessness of the security forces has also raised the barometer of injustice in the Muslim south. In September, a university student was mistaken for an Islamic militant and was shot dead by paramilitary rangers in Yala.

The Muslim community has also been enraged by the raids on pondoks (religious schools) and the arrests of religious teachers without definite evidence. The Islamic School Association chairman Nideh Wabah warned in September that he would mobilise up to 60,000 people to protest security operations in the south. He said that the authorities had consistently violated local sensitivities in their quest to track down insurgents.

Things were coming to a boil occurred exactly a month before the Tak Bai riot. On September 25, a dozen paramilitary rangers were forced to flee for their lives as hundreds of angry villagers surrounded them. They accused the soldiers of shooting and wounding a local woman. The injured woman said, "No one here likes the police or the soldiers. They should not set foot in our village. We want to be left alone."

Thus, the Tak Bai riot is in essence, the result of events that were bubbling close to the surface. It is the pinnacle of pent-up discontentment with security forces by the people of southern Thailand. They did not believe that the six defence volunteers would get justice at the hands of the security forces.

The Impending Aftermath

Prime Minister Thaksin's comments that the fasting during the month of *Ramadan* contributed to the deaths of the arrested demonstrators and his praising the security forces for the way they 'handled' the riot (despite the number of deaths) were unhelpful. It is unlikely that the guarded apology, the independent inquiry and the release of 900 detainees will regain the trust of the southern Thai Muslims. Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej has urged Mr Thaksin to adopt a gentler approach and to engage the locals in solving the problems in the south.

We are already beginning to witness repercussions of the Tak Bai episode. The separatist Pattani Liberation United Organization (PULO) group has threatened to 'burn Bangkok to the ground' in retaliation. There have also been rumours of people organising themselves in to

small groups in Narathiwat. Since the riot, three bombs have exploded in the southern provinces killing one and injuring about forty people. A Buddhist village leader in Narathiwat province was reportedly found beheaded in what officials say could be a revenge for the deaths of the 85 protesters last week. Community leaders are considering appealing the Thai King to supplant the Thaksin administration in southern Thailand.

The Thai government's actions are likely to make southern Thailand a honey pot for global Islamic terrorist organisations. News of the mishandling of the riot has led to hundreds of Malaysians and Indonesians protesting outside the Thai embassies in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta. The Thai authorities' treatment of the Tak Bai protesters has already enraged ordinary moderate Muslims, so what more the jihadists?

* S. P. Harish is an Associate Research Fellow and Sabrina Chua is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.