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Insurgency in Southern Thailand: What the bombings portend

Sabrina Chua*

The recent spate of bombings in Thailand's southern provinces has resulted in a mounting toll in casualties among civilians and security forces. Apart from security installations and areas commonly frequented by policemen, insurgents have also attacked hotels, bars and even petrol stations, indicating a shift from hardened security entities to softer targets. The daily explosions have replaced the drive-by shootings that had hitherto characterised violence in the volatile region.

Although 36 bomb attacks have been carried out in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat from January to July 2004, bombings have sharply increased in number and coordination since August. Two bombs were planted in Tak Bai on 20 August; a day later three bombs went off almost simultaneously at two hotels and a bar at Yala, wounding 11 people. A market in Narathiwat was bombed on 26 August, followed by an explosion at a petrol station on 28 August. A Siam Gas tanker-refueling plant in the same province was targeted the same day, but the bomb was defused in time. These attacks came five months after the bombing of a strip of bars in Sungai Kolok, near the Malaysian border, on 27 March which injured 30 people.

The increase in bombings followed a government ban on pillion riding by men in the three border provinces, in an attempt to control the spiralling violence. That measure hampered the militants' movements as gunmen riding pillion would be more conspicuous, making it easier for authorities to clamp down on drive-by shootings.

The insurgents were forced to switch to other methods, and with the ammonium nitrate and dynamite from the Yala quarry raid on 30 March still not yet found, it was a matter of time before they developed their bombs. However the bombs used so far have been crude, improvised explosive devices, most of them made from commercially available 'Powergel' and remotely detonated by mobile phones, although some are still detonated by timers.

The favoured method of delivery of the bombs appears to be the motorcycle, which was used in the attacks in Narathiwat and Yala. Explosives have also been concealed beside roads to target mobile security forces who are most vulnerable when travelling on narrow roads often flanked by thick vegetation. On 1 September a police escort for teachers in Narathiwat narrowly escaped twin blasts from roadside bombs, in what some analysts speculate was an imitation of the methods employed by insurgents in Iraq. Likewise in May, militants in southern Thailand had beheaded a rubber-tapper and threatened to carry out more such killings if security forces continued to arrest "innocent Muslims".

Global Jihad inspiration?

This Iraqi inspiration has raised questions about Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)- Al Qaeda links with the southern Thai insurgency. Foreign influences in the region have been confirmed by Thai authorities. Defence Minister Chettha Thanajaro has alleged that foreign Muslim organisations transferred over 100 million baht to leading Thai separatists to fund violent acts in the southern provinces. The Saudi-based International Islamic Relief Organisation is said to be the largest donor to Islamic causes in southern Thailand. JI leaders like Hambali and Arifin Ali have been arrested in Thailand.

While these may support the deduction that Thai insurgents are jumping on the global jihad bandwagon, area specialists caution against any hasty conclusion. If indeed the southern Thai militants have received help from Al Qaeda or JI, that would have been reflected in the lethality of their bombs. The death toll from bombings in southern Thailand so far has been small, with one or two killed in each attack. This is nowhere near the capability of their counterparts elsewhere in the region. The JI bombings in Bali in October 2002 killed 202 people while the Jakarta hotel bombing in August 2003 left 12 dead.

The southern Thai militants also differ in ideology from those with a global jihad orientation. The manual “Berjihad di Pattani” found on militants killed in the Krue Se Mosque siege on 28 April is not couched in the same vein as Al Qaeda literature; nor is it pan-Islamic in character. It has a decidedly nationalist bent in that the southern Thais want to have their separate state, Pattani, where they observe their Islamic religion freely and practise their Malay customs and speak Malay without threat of suppression. The current campaign by the Thaksin administration to eradicate the insurgents without a political campaign to address the root causes will only exacerbate tensions and deepen the alienation of the southern Thai Muslims.

While the insurgency in southern Thailand is a domestic conflict, the potential for it to develop into an externally oriented terrorist threat cannot be precluded. The present lack of sophistication of the attacks reflects a lack of resources and training. But if the insurgency is allowed to fester and the government crackdown results in even more bomb attacks and reprisals such as the Krue Se mosque siege, they may well invite involvement of external elements, as in the Russian Caucasus region, and escalation of the conflict. The failure to respond and resolve the underlying issues to contain the insurgency is likely to compound the intractability of the conflict in southern Thailand.

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