

Thailand's South Erupts As Neo-Cons Eye Straits

by Mike Billington

After two decades of relative peace, the Islamic-majority southern provinces of Thailand have erupted in violence, escalating towards a potential religious/separatist revolt. While the roots of the outbreak, both foreign and domestic, remain largely a mystery, there is no question that the neo-conservative faction in Washington is prepared to take advantage of the crisis, to expand their imperial designs to include a U.S. military presence in the strategically crucial Malacca Straits.

The terrorist networks in Southeast Asia, loosely labeled Jemaah Islamiah (JI), have their roots in domestic Islamic separatist movements in the region, supplemented by returning fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, who were financed and trained by U.S. intelligence agencies during the war against the 1980s Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Shi'ite Muslim sources in Thailand have identified the emergence of violence in the South as primarily serving those in the United States who have called for stationing U.S. forces in the Straits.

On April 5, U.S. Pacific Commander Adm. Thomas Fargo told Congress the United States was considering deploying marines and special forces on high-speed vessels in the Malacca Straits, a program to be called the Regional Maritime Security Initiative, ostensibly to combat transnational threats like proliferation, terrorism, trafficking in drugs, and piracy. This comes in the context of the so-called "Proliferation Security Initiative" (PSI), promoted by the leading neo-con operative within the State Department, Undersecretary of State John Bolton. The PSI aims to scrap the International Law of the Sea, allowing America and its allies to board the ships of targeted nations at will on the high seas—just as the Bush Administration has declared that it need no longer observe the international laws of war nor the Geneva Convention.

The Malacca Straits, however, are not on the high seas. Admiral Fargo told the Congress, based on his just-concluded meetings with Singapore: "There is very large, widespread support for this initiative." In fact, only the bankers' city-state of Singapore supported the proposal. The Malacca Straits are primarily within the sovereign domain of Malaysia and Indonesia, both of which issued angry denunciations of any such U.S. military deployment in their sovereign territory. The crisis in the Southern provinces of Thailand, which sit at



the northern entry into the Straits, may, it is feared, be used to justify this unwanted U.S. military presence.

The utopian, imperial "military-transformation" promoted by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld envisions rapid deployment capabilities with fewer permanent bases, but vastly expanded basing rights in strategic locations. Singapore has long offered its facilities as a U.S. staging area. Washington has been slowly expanding its military presence in Thailand, and recently leaked that it is interested in establishing bases there. Thailand, of course, provided its territory for a number of major air bases and ports used in the disastrous U.S. war in Indochina. The target this time would be "international terrorism," as represented by the instability in Thailand's South. A similar slide towards a permanent U.S. military presence is well under way in the southern Philippines province of Mindanao.

Pattani Unity Liberation Organization

The Islamic separatist Pattani Unity Liberation Organization (PULO) flourished in the 1960-80 era, but was essentially disbanded after a peace offensive by the Bangkok government, which offered amnesty to all, and economic development for the South. The peace held for nearly 25 years, although the region remained the poorest in Thailand, even during the boom years of the 1990s. A major development project in the South, the building of a canal across the Isthmus of Kra to allow passage to Asia without sailing through the crowded Straits of Malacca, has been repeatedly postponed, despite strong support from the current Deputy Prime Minister (and former Prime Minister) Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. Such a project would economically transform the region, but has faced stiff opposition from the international financial institutions, which oppose all large-scale infrastructure projects, and also from Singapore for

geopolitical reasons.

The poverty in the South, exacerbated by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, and combined with anger across the Islamic world over the targeting of Islamic nations and peoples by the U.S. “war on terror,” created the conditions for the recruitment of Islamic radicals to violence. The recent crisis erupted in January with an armed raid on a military armory, making off with weapons and explosives, and the systematic torching of government buildings, including schools, across the provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. Efforts to identify the source of the coordinated attacks were unsuccessful. Over the next three months, over 130 people were killed, and 120 wounded, in bombings and individual random attacks on Buddhist monks, police, and other government workers. Still the culprits remained elusive. Relations between Thailand and Malaysia became strained, as Thailand accused Malaysia of allowing refuge to the terrorists, while the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia accused Thailand of state terror. (The two countries now coordinate closely.)

The attacks culminated on April 28—perhaps chosen to commemorate an April 28, 1948 revolt by Muslim villagers in Narathiwat—when hundreds of rebels, many of them teenagers armed only with machetes, attacked police stations across the region. While five soldiers were killed, the Army killed over 100 of the attackers, including many youth. When a number of the rebels took refuge in the revered 400-year-old Krue Se Mosque in Pattani, the commander of the Thai Forces, Gen. Panlop Pinmanee, ordered a raid after a six-hour standoff, killing over 30, and provoking anguish in the region’s Islamic populations.

Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit immediately recalled General Panlop to Bangkok, accusing him of disobeying a direct order to solve the standoff at the Mosque peacefully. However, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Chaisit Shinawatra (the brother of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra), defended Gen. Panlop, and accused General Chavalit of demoralizing the troops by his reprimand. The crisis is certain to create severe strains within the government and military.

Prime Minister Thaksin visited the South, including the Mosque itself, and the families of many of the slain youth. Some of the captured youth reported that they had been lured into the violence through one or more local religious leaders, who had convinced them that they would be invincible after drinking holy water. Evidence of outside influence remains sparse, although the region has long served as a trans-shipment point for weapons, many left over from the Indochina wars, to the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, and the Aceh separatists in northern Sumatra.

A backlash is feared. Indian intelligence sources told *EIR* that the Tamil Tigers often instigate such suicide assaults, intending to provoke a bloody reaction, to recruit others to violence. On May 17, three Buddhist temples in Narathiwat,

near the Malaysian border, were bombed overnight. Both Government and Buddhist leaders have pleaded with Buddhists not to retaliate.

American Special Forces

The United States has active military forces in Thailand. In 2001, a group of U.S. Special Forces were deployed to train and augment a Thai Special Forces unit called Task Force 399, deployed along the northern border with Myanmar, supposedly to combat drug traffic. However, soon thereafter, Task Force 399 engaged in over-the-border attacks on Myanmar military units, nearly provoking a war between the often testy neighbors. Prime Minister Thaksin intervened forcefully at that time to restore peace, downgrading Task Force 399 and kicking the commander upstairs to remove him from the Myanmar frontier. But the neo-conservatives dominating the Bush Administration have condemned Thailand for refusing to follow the U.S. policy of confrontation and sanctions against Myanmar.

Another U.S. Special Forces unit is active in precisely the same southern provinces where the recent violence has occurred. Also set up in 2001, the Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Centre (CTIC), made up of U.S. and Thai Special Forces, is intended to monitor movements of suspected terrorists in the region. *The Nation* in Bangkok reported April 17 that authorities in the South had suggested that the American units were involved in the recent violence, in order to push Thailand toward further military collaboration with the United States. Thai Army chief Gen. Chaisit Shinawatra, the same brother of the Prime Minister who defended the attack on the Mosque, denied any U.S. involvement in recent unrest, saying, “There is nothing beneficial for them in this.”

Diplomats of 12 Islamic nations toured the South after the bloodshed at the Mosque, promising to work for a peaceful solution to the crisis. Still lacking is a plan for the economic development of the region, preferably with Malaysia and Indonesia, as the only lasting means of bringing peace. Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisang issued a program based on the 1980s peace plan, including amnesty and development programs; but events have left it languishing. Such a solution is more urgent than ever, and Thai officials would be wise to keep a close eye on Mr. Rumsfeld’s friends in the process.

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