

Southern Thailand Crisis Shakes Region

by Mike Billington

The violence which has plagued the southern provinces of Thailand since January of this year escalated into a national and regional crisis on Oct. 25, when 78 detained protesters suffocated to death while being transported in Army trucks. The gruesome story of more than 1,000 protesters at the town of Tak Bai—mostly young Muslim men—being placed under arrest, bound, and literally piled up in the back of trucks, face down, some of them five-deep, for a five-hour drive to a military barracks, has caused shock and anger around the world, especially in neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia. Another six demonstrators had been killed when Thai Army troops opened fire on the crowd, reportedly in response to escalating violence by certain elements among the demonstrators. Some reports claim that more demonstrators are missing and unaccounted for.

The eruption of violence in the south, after relative calm for several years, has yet to be explained in any comprehensive way. Most Thai Muslims, who make up less than 10% of the mostly Buddhist Thai population, are concentrated in the three southern provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala, near the Malaysian border. The Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), composed of several militant Islamic organizations which have long demanded independence for the southern provinces, is accused of involvement in the past year's violence, but others believe that forces from outside the country are responsible.

Since a January raid on an Army Depot made off with a supply of weapons, there have been about 1,000 attacks on government officials, civilians, and Buddhist monks—some by organized groups, but others individual random acts—leaving about 340 dead, including three beheaded, and hundreds wounded. From the Government's side, in addition to the Tak Bai disaster, another bloodbath took place last April, after an organized attack on a police station by a mob consisting mostly of youth armed with machetes or small arms was repulsed by the police. When 108 of the assailants took refuge in the historic Krue Se mosque, the Army opened fire, killing them all. Investigations into this atrocity were not yet settled, when the Tak Bai incident added to the environment of rage and retaliation.

Kra Canal

EIR has repeatedly argued (most recently in the July 16, 2004 article "Against Malacca Piracy and South Thailand Violence: It's Time for the Kra Canal") that the failure to

bring real physical development into the relatively poorer regions in the south has fed the resentment among the minority Islamic population, and left the region ripe for the instigation of rebellion. In particular, *EIR* has argued since 1982 that the proposal for a sea-level canal across the Kra Isthmus, an idea which was close to implementation in 1984, was necessary to facilitate global trade and to transform southern Thailand into a major hub for regional development, but also to prevent precisely the kind of social crisis which has now emerged.

Political and economic upheavals in Thailand have interrupted the impetus for building the Kra Canal over the past 20 years, but the idea has been raised again recently, as China has expressed support for the project. One concern for China is that the overcrowded Malacca Strait, which have become a lifeline for China's increasing dependence on oil from the Mideast, is vulnerable to accidental or intentional disruption. The Kra Canal would provide an alternative route, by-passing the Strait. There has even been discussion of the possibility that China would use the equipment, and the experience from the construction of the Three Gorges Dam to build the Kra Canal.

Terrorists From Abroad

There are many pieces to examine in the puzzle of southern Thailand. Some of the Thai Moslems are reported to have travelled to Afghanistan in the 1980s, at the behest of the American intelligence officials who organized the "Afghansi" resistance to the Soviet occupation, by recruiting radical Islamicists from around the world. When the U.S. deserted the region after the Soviets pulled out, many of these Afghansi returned to practice their newly acquired skills in their home countries. It is also known that several leading figures from the so-called Al-Qaeda circles travelled to the region in the 1990s, although none of the violence in the region has been aimed at symbols of Western presence in the region.

The Tamil Tigers from Sri Lanka have also operated out of southern Thailand, using their high-speed boats to trade drugs for weapons left over from the Indochina wars.

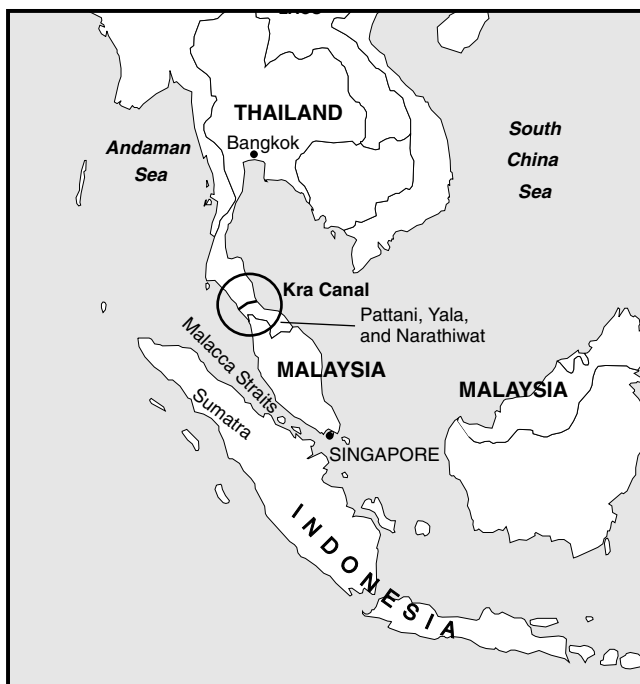
Indian intelligence circles have reported that elements of the Hizb-ul Jihadi Islam (HUJI), a terrorist organization originating in Pakistan, with ties to hard-core terrorist networks in Central Asia, have been training Thai (and Myanmar) Muslims in covert camps set up in Bangladesh, transporting them across Myanmar back into southern Thailand. They warn that radical elements from within Malaysia may be drawn into the conflict, with one included intention being to disrupt the growing alliance between India and its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Thai Malaysia Tensions

The Muslims of southern Thailand are of Malay descent. They have largely assimilated the Thai language and culture, while maintaining their religion and some cultural ties with their Malaysian neighbors. On Oct. 14, just weeks before the

FIGURE 1

The Central Location and Purpose of the Kra Canal

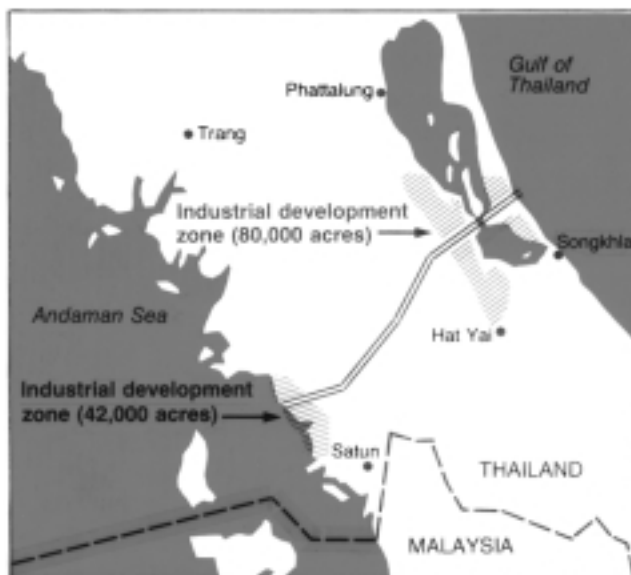


Source: EIRNS.

Tak Bai killings, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Malaysian counterpart, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, met in the border province of Narathiwat to discuss and implement policies for joint cooperation and development in the region, aimed at solving the mounting violence. They laid the corner stone for a new bridge across the Kolok river which divides the countries, as part of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle Cooperation Scheme, which was launched in 2001. Thaksin even announced that a third bridge across the Kolok was being planned at Tak Bai—the very site of the disaster on Oct. 25.

The Malaysian government has subsequently expressed its grave concern about the deaths at Tak Bai, and requested that a full investigation be carried out, but continues to offer full cooperation with the Thai government in solving the problem. The opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), however, was overtly hostile towards the Thai government, with a PAS leader calling for Thaksin to be tried for murder by an international tribunal.

There have been reports that the Bush Administration has offered U.S. special forces units to train and support the Thai Army in the south—and there are some reports that they are already there, covertly. With the re-elected Bush/Cheney regime already planning further pre-emptive wars around the world, such U.S. “help” would simply fan the flames of resentment in the region.



The Kra Canal, urgently needed for a generation, can be the nation-building project to integrate the three Muslim-majority provinces in the south of Thailand with the nation; and is critically needed to relieve the great congestion in the Malacca Straits, where piracy is leading to international strategic tensions. Above: the Kra Canal route chosen by the TAMS engineering study of 1973, still a viable framework plan.

National elections are due to be held in Thailand on or before Feb. 13, 2005. Prime Minister Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party is expected to win an overwhelming majority of the vote—by some estimates, he may take close to 400 of the 500 seats in the parliament. Although the crisis in the south does not appear to have threatened Thaksin’s popularity in the rest of the country, it is clear to all that its resolution is required soon, or the south will explode.

The much revered King and Queen of Thailand have directly intervened. King Bhumipol Adulyadej, the world’s longest reigning monarch, called Thaksin to the Palace on Nov. 3. According to Thaksin’s own report, the King “asked the government to consider being more lenient in dealing with problems, and to allow the locals to participate in problem-solving.”

Queen Sirikit, meanwhile, has spent the entire past three months in the south, attempting to use her good will and deep respect among all Thais to ease the tensions and find solutions.

The government has created an independent commission of inquiry, and has put forth economic proposals to create 100,000 jobs in the three southern provinces, through agricultural development and infrastructure programs. While these are useful and necessary, the crisis is regional, even international, in nature, and will not be solved by a vision which is less than global. The transformation of Asia through the development of the Kra Canal is precisely the scale of vision required to inspire cooperation and forgiveness, and the time is running out.

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