Thailand

IN SOUTHERN PROVINCES LIKE PATTANI, TEACHERS ARE TARGETS OF A SHADOWY INSURGENCY

Scarred Schoolyards

BY ERIC RANDOLPH

ALMOST EVERYTHING IN THE PLAYGROUND of the Ban Ba-Ngo primary school, in the Pattani province of southern Thailand, looked like it belonged there. Newly potted plants had little pink name-tags hanging from them, a tatty poster with cartoon children explained why fruit was important for nutrition, and a collage on the wall, with crepe-paper flowers stuck around its edges, celebrated the life of King Bhumibol, the country's monarch. What did not belong was the line of four men in combat fatigues, who sat facing the playground, their M16 assault rifles leaning against a wall.

Kasem Jeh Ali, the acting principal of the school, whom I met in his office, explained why the military men were there—but he did so with great reluctance. Ali was weary of reliving the moment in December 2012 that had led to these soldiers showing up at the school every day.

"I was eating lunch with six colleagues in the canteen," Ali said. He paused, and in the silence, his eyes reddened. Then, he continued. "We suddenly noticed there were two strangers standing beside us. They didn't say a word. They just pulled out their guns and fired."

The gunmen put three bullets in the body of 51-year-old principal Tatiyarat Chueykaew. Frozen with shock, the teachers could not react as the gunmen turned their weapons on her young colleague, 34-year-old Somsak Boonma.

The Ban Ba-Ngo school slayings were not a rare occurrence. A couple of weeks before these shooting, another female principal, Nanthana Kaewchan, was gunned down as she drove out of the gates of her primary school in nearby Nongchik district. The children watched as a teacher and janitor dragged her bloodied body out of the front seat to drive her to hospital; Kaewchan died on the way.

Schools have been one of the battlegrounds of a cultural conflict in Thailand's southernmost provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala. Here, separatists claiming to represent Malay-Muslims, who make up 80 percent of the population, have been fighting a decades-old insurgency, which, after a relative lull in the 1990s, flared back to life in 2001. The conflict stretches back to the annexation of this former Sultanate in 1909 by Thailand (then Siam) under a deal with the British. Years of protests against Buddhist rule came to a head in the 1960s, when the government in Bangkok imposed a secular curriculum—to be conducted in the Thai language—on the Islamic schools of the region. That was a breaking point for many Malay-Muslims—an armed independence movement rose up and lasted for three decades. Since it restarted in 2001, the insurgency has claimed over 5,500 lives—of these, 157 have been teachers, targeted because they are seen as propagating the Thai system.

The Thai military believed they had crushed the insurgency in the mid-1990s, but the militants merely regrouped across the border in Malaysia, and when they returned in the early 2000s, they were even more brutal than before, and more secretive, operating in independent cells with little organisational structure, more deeply embedded in the villages rather than up in the mountains where they had been cornered last time. The new wave refuses to issue political statements or claim responsibility for their near-daily attacks on security patrols and civilians. They refer to themselves simply as *juwae,* meaning 'fighter'.

The insurgency in the region, where the dominant Shafi'i Sunni school of Islam is traditional, but moderate, has never taken on a fundamentalist religious edge. The militants reportedly shunned approaches in the early 2000s by Jamaa Islamiyaah, an Al Qaeda-linked Indonesian group—instead, they have stayed resolutely focused on their local struggle for autonomy. The refusal to globalise the struggle has been a tremendous relief to Thailand's beach resorts, where holidaymakers remain almost entirely oblivious to the violence just a few hours' drive south. But it also means the daily violence is barely mentioned outside the region.

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At Deep South Watch, a human rights organisation that monitors the conflict from a leafy bungalow on the grounds of the Prince of Songkla University (PSU) in Pattani, I met 27-year-old Arida Samoh, a researcher with the group, who grew up in a badly affected district of Narathiwat province. "When I was at school, no one talked about *medeka* ['independence'] openly, only in secret, with people they trusted," she told me. "Half of my classmates could have joined the militants, but I never found out. Even my best friends could have joined and I wouldn't know. That's how secretive it is." She remembers being approached once, when she was around 16, by a group of older girls, who asked her for her thoughts on local history, "Thai colonialism" and justice. It was only some years later, when she grew more aware of the situation surrounding her, that she realised she had been tested. "I told them violence is not the teaching of Islam. I just wanted our people to be more educated,"

she said. "I don't think that's what they wanted to hear. I never heard from them again."

One evening, midway through her general science degree at PSU, some distant relatives appeared at her hostel and drove her back to her home in Narathiwat. "They didn't explain anything that was happening, but I knew something was wrong, so I went with them," she said. "When we got to my parent's house, I saw a body on the ground with a sheet over it and legs sticking out. It was my father."

Samoh's father had been head of the village council a few years earlier, making a lot of enemies with his rigid application of anti-drug laws in a region rife with cross-border trafficking. There were also suspicions he had provided information to the police on a local militant. "I was always angry with my father because he was such an honest man," said Samoh. "The authorities would ask what he knew, and he would tell them. It is a very dangerous place to be honest."

SURAPAN BOONTHANOM / REUTERS

A soldier stands guard as students leave their school in Pattani province in December, after the killings at Ban Ba-Ngo primary school.

Even though the insurgency is driven by the desire to assert Malay-Muslim identity, around 60 percent of its victims, like Samoh's father, are Muslim, many of them accused of being police informants, but many also the victims of a lawless environment in which criminal interests and personal vendettas have flourished. Despite her personal trauma, Samoh has grown to understand the motivations of the movement. She believes its wanton violence has been handed legitimacy over and over again by the heavy-handed reactions of security forces.

Of all the instances of the state responding to the threat of insurgency with unsparing violence, two from 2004 remain etched in the collective memory of Thailand's Malay-Muslims. One of these occurred at the Krue Sae mosque, about half an hour's drive from Songkhla University in Pattani. Almost 500 years old, it looks decayed at first glance—a small tomb-like square of exposed brick and crumbling walls. Inside, it has been refurbished, but the bullet holes that speckle the metal information board at the gate are a reminder of what happened here in April 2004. A group of 32 men, many of them young students, had gathered here on the night of the 27th. Followers of a bizarre strain of folk Islam, they carried out a series of rituals that they believed would make them impervious to bullets. On the morning of the 28th, they went across the road and attacked a police post, armed only with a single gun and some machetes. The attack was a total failure and they retreated back to the mosque. The police responded with a seven-hour siege on the mosque, unleashing machine guns, helicopter gunships and tear gas grenades until all 32 militants had been killed.

Locals believe that although the police were reacting to an attack, the intensity of their retaliation was indefensible. "They were given no chance to surrender," said Muhammad Mudur, a 45-year-old shopkeeper who watched the siege happen. "The army chief said they had to be killed or they would run into the jungle. But look around—there is no jungle anywhere near here."

That was followed six months later by the killing in the town of Tak Bai of 85 people protesting the detention of alleged militants. Six were shot dead by police, the rest stacked five-deep into the backs of army trucks and driven around until they suffocated to death. These incidents have left deep scars on the populace, and while the government has accepted that the responses were highly disproportionate, no security force personnel have ever been punished for their involvement.

The militants have grown much more professional since then. During my visit in February, around 50 men launched a three-pronged assault on a Marines outpost in Narathiwat—the latest in a series of daring raids on military camps. This one was repelled—the military had been tipped off beforehand—but the scale and ambition of the insurgent threat was clear.

In February, the Thai government made the surprise announcement that it will open peace talks with the BRN-Coordinate in Malaysia, considered the most influential of the exiled groups. But analysts are sceptical that the factionalised leadership has much control over fighters on the ground in Thailand. There is little pressure on the government to come up with a lasting political solution, and any talk of local autonomy is fiercely opposed by Thailand's powerful military.

For any hope of ending the violence, the southern provinces "need some level of autonomy and their own system of education", said Srisompob Jitpiromsri, director of Deep South Watch. Until that happens, a troubled history will continue to exert its malignant power, and memories of massacres in Krue Sae and Tak Bai, and schoolyards like Ban Ba-Ngo primary school, will continue to haunt people in the region. "We don't eat in the canteen anymore," Ali, the principal, said towards the end of my meeting with him. "I don't want to remember what happened. We try only to forget." ■