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Thailand: Locals trapped by escalating violence in the South

People in the far south of Thailand are caught between daily drive-by shootings and bombings by suspected members of Muslim armed groups, and harsh or inadequate counter-measures by the security forces, said Amnesty International today.

On the second anniversary of a raid by insurgents on an army base that marked an upsurge in violence, the organization is launching a report on the issue urging the Thai authorities to adopt a consistent approach to justice, while calling on all armed groups to immediately cease indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

Since January 2004 there have been over 1000 deaths in the far south of Thailand, where Buddhists live side by side with Muslims. People of all ages and professions have been targeted by the insurgents, from schoolteachers and rubber tappers to Buddhist monks and Muslims perceived to be cooperating with the authorities. Violence has increased to an extent where it affects almost all areas of life for local people, both Muslim and Buddhist, restricting their ability to work, travel, trade and receive education.

The Thai authorities' response has included arbitrary detention, torture, and excessive lethal force. They have also failed to properly investigate attacks against both Buddhist and Muslim civilians. Young Muslim men have been "blacklisted" and assumed guilty with no reason given. Those detained are often denied access to a lawyer or interpreter. An unknown number of people have "disappeared", and human rights workers who try to gather information on such cases have faced anonymous death threats and other forms of intimidation.

One young Muslim human rights activist said, *"Even though I'm a university student I am subject to abuse -- what about the villagers? They suffer more... Villagers are constantly losing -- they suffer grief, loss, and pain. If you want peace you need to focus on justice and humanity."*

"The local villagers feel increasingly unprotected from the ongoing violence," said Amnesty International. "Clearly the Thai government is facing a great challenge in dealing with the violence, but it has responsibilities towards its citizens and needs to ensure justice is done."

A group from a small Buddhist village of 24 households said seven fellow villagers had been shot dead since February 2004. They only travelled in groups and were worried about sending their children to school. They had been unable to tap rubber for two months because they were too frightened of attacks.

One said, *"Can the government help us find jobs? We just live a meaningless existence... Nothing is safe. We are just waiting for death to visit us."*

Villagers also said that the authorities had not properly investigated these killings. The failure to conduct proper investigations has contributed to the acute sense of vulnerability felt by local people, both Buddhist and Muslim.

"The Thai authorities must investigate all reports of human rights abuses, whether attacks on civilians by armed groups or violations committed by the security forces," said Amnesty International. "Those found responsible must be brought to justice. Current laws which give complete immunity to security forces must be changed to allow for prosecution."

"Leaders of armed groups must instruct those under their command not to attack civilians or their property under any circumstances, and publicly condemn such attacks."

Background

The Sultanate of Pattani, which included the present-day Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala, and parts of Songkla Province, was annexed by the Royal Thai Government in the early 20th century. Approximately 80% of the population in this region are ethnic Malay Muslims, who speak a dialect of Bahasa.

Almost since the beginning of the annexation, armed groups calling for independence began to operate in the region. Muslim armed opposition groups' activities have ebbed and flowed over the last 100 years, but with the turn of the 21st century they increased dramatically.

On 4 January 2004, an unidentified armed group attacked a Royal Thai Army base in Cho Airong district, Narathiwat Province. Four soldiers were killed and some 400 weapons were stolen; at the same time 20 schools were set on fire in what appeared to be a co-ordinated operation.

Since the 2004 escalation in violence, armed groups who have launched the attacks have not identified themselves or made political demands, nor are they known to have indicated any willingness to engage in talks with the government. Moreover no group has so far claimed responsibility for individual attacks.

On 12 March 2004, Somchai Neelapaijit, a prominent Muslim lawyer who was representing some of those arrested in relation to the violence and had initiated a campaign calling for the lifting of Martial Law in the South, "disappeared" in Bangkok. His whereabouts are still unknown and Amnesty International is concerned at the lack of progress in the investigation. His "disappearance" has had a profound impact on the work of other human rights campaigners in the South, who feel they lack recourse with regard to threats they face.

In response to the violence, the government enacted an Emergency Decree in July 2005, which allows for detention without charge or trial for up to 30 days and legal immunity from prosecution for law enforcement officers. Under this decree, the state of emergency in the three southernmost provinces was extended for three months until 19 January 2006.

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