

2. FIRE IN THE SOUTH

IN 2004, VIOLENCE IN YALA, PATTANI, AND NARATHIWAT, THE THREE SOUTHERN-MOST PROVINCES OF THAILAND, LED TO THE DEATHS, INJURY, AND DISAPPEARANCE OF LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE. THE GOVERNMENT WAS UNABLE TO PREVENT THE SITUATION FROM BECOMING INCREASINGLY HEATED, LEADING TO PEOPLE TO WONDER WHETHER THAILAND BEING DRAGGED INTO THE WAR ON TERROR.

The conflict in the three southern-most provinces began in 2004, but became increasingly pronounced on 4 January 2004, when 400 guns were stolen from the Fourth Army Battalion in Narathiwat Province, and four soldiers were killed. Almost 20 schools in Narathiwat Province were burned down.

These events led to a re-evaluation of the turmoil in the South, which Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had once described as the “work of simple thieves”.

Statistics from Provincial Police Region 9 show that in the three southern-most provinces in 2004, there were 919 violent incidents, of which 496, or 53 percent, were associated with the instability. Narathiwat Province had 455 incidents, Pattani Province had 276, and Yala had 183. A researcher from the Prince of Songkhla University has noted that the number of violent incidents in the year 2004 alone was 1.7 times higher than the combined total for the previous 10 years!

The initial attempt to put out the fire: Using money

The first approach that the government used to put out the fire in the South was economic. The Prime Minister announced that over a period of three years the government would bring tourism, investment, employment, and improved education into the three provinces, and in mid-2004, he authorized the use of 700 million baht from the emergency fund to pay for 75 programs.

However, the investment seemed to disappear as the violence continued unabated.

There were continuous fires, shootings, and bomb attacks, killing villagers, government officials, and religious leaders. The government responded by declaring martial law and sending in more troops. It regulated ‘Ponoh’—the local Islamic schools, and from time to time security forces entered them using force. This added to the conflict, and prompted the Islamic Center for the three provinces to announce on 9 February 2004 that they would stop cooperating with officials.

A seven-point peace plan proposed by the public in three provinces

The Prime Minister appointed Chaturon Chaisang, a Deputy Prime Minister, to consult with community people in the three border provinces, using the methods of civil society. The result was a peace plan in April 2004 with seven proposals:

1. Stop regulating Ponoh schools and instead support them, as Pattani has been a center for the dissemination of Islam for hundreds of years.

2. Appoint 3,000 local people from the three provinces as teachers, and stop using teachers from outside the provinces

3. Do not take away the right to dual citizenship of more than one hundred thousand people. Most of them are Thais working in Malaysia, who earn a total of around one billion baht for the country and has been granted work permission by the Malaysian government. Grant an amnesty to people charged before 5 January 2004, and find employment for these people.

4. Stop sending soldiers and special forces from other regions of Thailand to serve in the South because people from outside the South do not understand Islamic culture, and provoke many disputes. Establish village security forces, composed of local people, and use officials as trainers and supervisors .

5. End martial law in places where it is no longer needed.

6. Establish development programs in the three provinces, using a 1.2 billion baht budget. Allow people to participate in the formulation of these programs.

Aside from the peace plan, the most widely-repeated statement by Chaturon Chaisang was that “government officials need to cease using violence completely, particularly the kidnapping done by the police who have been spreading dissatisfaction among local communities.” However, the Cabinet never considered the peace plan, because as soon as it was announced on 5 April 2004, many ministers voiced their opposition, which later led to the Prime Minister’s decision to postpone discussion of the plan indefinitely.



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Conflict at the Krue Se Mosque

On 28 April 2004, the temperature in the South was heated up again. There were simultaneous attacks on officials in 11 places, but what drew attention from around the world was the violence at Krue Se Mosque, where thirty-two people were killed , and a further 76 in other places.

Criticism from inside and outside Thailand, and particularly from Muslim countries, forced the government to set up an Independent Fact-Finding Commission on the Krue Se Mosque on 4 May 2004. The commission found that non-violent methods would have been more effective and more appropriate. In particular, the use of explosives to force entry into the mosque was deemed to have been excessive. The commission recommended that the government should consider paying compensation to relatives of the all the deceased and to people who were injured.

Protests at Tak Bai and the mysterious deaths of 85 people

Only 6 months after the fighting at Krue Se Mosque, another event took everyone by surprise. On 25 October 2004, about 1,000 people assembled in from the police station in Tak Bai District, Narathiwat Province, demanding the release of six village security volunteers. Security forces broke up the demonstration, killing six people in the process and arresting 300. Over the following days, it emerged that 85 people had been killed, and 1,300 arrested. This revelation led to a further deterioration in the situation.

The deaths at Tak Bai were reported around the world, and inflamed the South. There were calls within Thailand and overseas for an independent investigation into the deaths. In early November 2004, an Independent Commission on the 25 October 2004 Incident at Tak Bai District, Narathiwat Province was established. The Commission found that the 78 deaths had been caused by suffocation on the truck while being transported. This led to disciplinary hearings against three solders. On 7 March 2005, the Ministry of Defense transferred these three soldiers to new positions as advisors to the army.



Reactions from military operators and academics

The worsening situation in the South led many groups to ask whether the Center for the Administration of the Southern Border Provinces and the organization overseeing cooperation between the police, army, and civilian administrators should be disbanded. Supreme Army Commander General Chaisit Shinawatra and Mr. Phummarat Thaksadipong, former director of the National Intelligence Office, argued against disbanding the organizations, on the grounds that it would create a vacuum in strategy and intelligence.

At the same time, Professor Chaianant Samutravanit observed that the Center for the Administration of the Southern Border Provinces was only organization in which officials had experience working in the South, and which the local people trusted.

Reactions to the repeated crises, and particularly the events at Tak Bai, varied enormously. A group of 144 academics from many universities signed a letter asking the Prime Minister to resolve the crisis in the South through peaceful means, and recommended that a Commission for National Reconciliation be established. Twenty-two representatives from this group met with the Prime Minister on 14 November 2004. One of the representatives took a paper bird, a symbol of peace, to give to the Prime Minister-a gesture which led to the construction of 120 million paper birds. The proposal to establish a reconciliation commission was adopted in March 2005. The Prime Minister invited Mr. Anand Panyarachun to be the Chair. The commission was to have about 48 members from every stakeholder in society.

The ‘fire in the South’ is still burning, and will be difficult to extinguish

The conflict in the South captured the entire country’s attention in 2004. The annual report of the Project on ‘Direction of Thai Information and News’ summarized that Thais felt they were being drawn unwittingly into the ‘war on terror’, because it was increasingly clear that the terrorist attacks were being carried out by “separatists”.

The government’s attempts to solve the problems in 2004 were based on trial and error. Officials and agencies were changed many times. There were also attempts to improve intelligence sources gathering and to find an organization to take overall responsibility for coordinating policy and implementation. However, some people wondered whether these efforts made the problems in the South worse or better.

Establishing a permanent battalion: The new strategy of 2005

The government has had a clear policy to establish a Fifteenth Battalion stationed permanently in the three southern provinces, costing as much as 16.77 billion baht. In mid-February 2005, the Prime Minister announced that the government would distinguish between ‘red’, ‘yellow’, and ‘green’ villages. Red villages would receive no budget. Yellow villages, with small problems, and green villages, with no problems, would receive increased budgets. Officials in the South announced that red villages were villages that housed people causing the conflicts, yellow villages were ones where the situation was unclear, and green villages were ones that were normal.

The government was confident that this ‘military’ approach would be effective. However, many commentators fear that it will only increase the violence. Dr Mark Tamthai, a Peace Studies researcher, argued that when governments of other countries, such as Mexico, Spain, the Ivory Coast, and the Philippines, have used similar strategies to deal with separatist movements, they have only increased the violence.

Following the non-violent approaches proposed in April, 2004, there was an official establishment of the National Reconciliation Commission in April 2005. This led to abandoning the ‘zoning’ policy of distinguishing between red, yellow, and green villages. The government also stated that it would not use violent methods, but would focus on strategies involving all groups. Peace in the South, although a long way away, is starting to seem possible.

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Numbers of people killed and injured in 2004

The total number killed and injured in the four southern provinces of Songkhla, Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat was 1,020. Sixty-four police officers were killed and 183 injured. Twenty-six soldiers were killed and 58 injured. Altogether, 299 civilian officials and ordinary people were killed and 390 injured. These totals do not include the deaths of 106 people in Krue Se, and 85 people in Tak Bai. Over 1,000 people were injured in these two incidents.

Source: Provincial Police Region 9, 17 February 2005.

