

Updates on the 10 major issues of 2005



1. The Tsunami: The Worst Natural Disaster in the World

One year after the tsunami, the official death toll is 2,059 Thais killed and 1,921 missing. In addition, 407 villages were destroyed. The government has spent 300 million baht on memorials and merit-making ceremonies for the victims. The survivors would have preferred the money to be used to help them recover. Many children have been made orphans, and many people have been disabled, or have lost their livelihoods, because of the tsunami. Many people still suffer because of memories of the disaster, with adverse consequences for their mental and physical health. In response, the Department of Mental Health established a Mental Health Recovery Center in Phang Nga Province, on May 26, 2005. The Center provides advice and helps people return to their normal lives.

2. Fire in the South

Violence continues to occur in the four southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla. The main victims are ordinary people. Altogether, 509 members of the public have been killed and 850 injured. In addition, 55 police and soldiers have lost their lives, and 253 have been injured. The most common types of incident are the shooting of government officials and members of the public and the planting of bombs in government offices and public places. In 2004 there were 1,843 violent incidents, and in 2005 there were 1,703, giving a total of 3,546.

3. The Dilemma of the Bird Flu Epidemic: Human Health or Poultry Exports?

Outbreaks of bird flu continue to occur throughout the country most frequently during cold weather. However, people have gradually become less afraid of eating poultry, and consumption of chickens and ducks has returned to former levels. The systems for disseminating information and preventing the spread of the virus have improved. Community volunteers keep alert for signs of the virus, which permits a rapid response. People have become more confident in their ability to cope with the epidemic. Between January 2004 and December 2005, 22 Thais contracted bird flu, of whom 14 died. Unlike Thailand, some countries are experiencing rising rates of infection. Health organizations in Thailand and overseas have been preparing plans for a possible pandemic. There is evidence that a pandemic, similar to historical pandemics that took millions of lives, may occur in the near future.

4. Rape and Thai Society

Rape is becoming more common each year. Newspapers reported a total of 391 cases over the past year, which is 62 higher than the year before. Even more disturbing, the perpetrators are increasingly likely to be known to the victim. This is the case in 80% of rapes. The rapist may be a spouse, a friend, a teacher, an employer, a person in authority, a relative, or a family member—particularly fathers preying on victims who are unable to seek help. Some victims are raped repeatedly over several years, until neighbors are forced to intervene. Even small children in their homes are not safe. Current laws make it very difficult to secure a conviction. Thai lawmakers show little interest in designing policies to protect victims of sexual vio-

5. Sugar in Children's Milk and Snacks

Addiction to sugar is another worrying trend among Thai children because it is likely to lead to health problems in the future. Tooth decay and obesity are both becoming more common among Thai children. Experts recommend that Thai children reduce their consumption from the present level of 20 teaspoons a day to about 6-8 spoons a day. With the assistance of the Network Against Sweet Food in Thailand and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth), many projects to reduce sugar consumption have been launched.



6. Will Thai Traditional Medicine Fall into the Hands of Foreigners?

Kwao khrua, a valuable Thai traditional medicine, has been expropriated once again by foreigners. As discussed in the previous issue, a Japanese company has used it in cosmetics. In late 2005, two American companies applied for patents on the use of kwao khrua khao for skin care, wrinkles, and breasts. Even worse, the companies have been selling their product in Thailand while waiting for the patent application to be processed. When foreign companies sell Thai traditional medicines, local companies have trouble competing, since many Thai consumers prefer foreign-made products. The huge range of natural products in Thailand has attracted the attention of foreign companies, who are looking for opportunities to be granted patents. Some Thai products that are at risk of being stolen by foreigners are fa talai jon, mon, som khaek, chum het ted, luk prakob, kamin chan, plai, krachai dam, bua bok, and phrik thai.

7. Pornography and Teenage Sex

Pornography can lead to sex crimes and antisocial behavior. There are no signs of the problem abating. People's tastes are changing, and secret photographs and videos are now popular. Couples take videos of themselves having sex, and then someone puts the pictures on the Internet. These pictures have even appeared on the front pages of newspapers. Such incidents violate people's right to privacy. In response to the changes in publishing technology, the government is preparing new legislation. Pornography rules will cover new media such as the Internet and pictures taken on mobile phones. The maximum penalties are three years in prison and fines of one million baht.

8. Teenage Violence

The Office of Psycho-Social Health has summarized evidence on teenage violence from 10 newspapers, covering the period January 1 to December 31, 2005. A total of 2,093 violent incidents were reported in Thailand. The types of violence were as follows: murder, 847 cases; assault, 531; rape, 362; suicide, 129; murder-suicide, 86; intimidation, 67; self-mutilation, 42; and murder and rape, 29. The age-group responsible for the most incidents was 16-25 year olds. The next most violent age-group was 26-35 year olds. The reason for the violence is social change, whereby people place material things above humans. If the social fabric remains weak, then these trends will continue.

9. Hazardous Waste

In 2005, Thailand produced and imported a total of 33.7 million tonnes of dangerous chemicals, a 7.5 million tonne increase on the year before. The number of mobile phone batteries increased to 25 million. The Pollution Control Department established a program to collect used mobile phone batteries and other electronic waste, setting up bins in every province. The Pollution Control Department will sell the waste, or arrange for it to be reused. Electronic goods companies are cooperating by accepting used goods. Once again, the media reported many cases of hazardous waste being dumped secretly outside cities. For instance, in Chiang Mai, a business sent trucks to dump waste in neighboring areas in the middle of the night. Eventually the villagers could tolerate the problem no longer, and called the police. In Rayong there was a case of industrial chemicals being dumped in a gully. In Chonburi, a factory produced noxious odors, disturbing many residents. Many people, whether out of laziness or lack of knowledge, tip used oil down drains, which does not make the headlines, but nevertheless harms the environment and local people.

10. Thai Young People Trapped by Legal Vices

Alcohol and tobacco were often in the news in 2005. The Ministry of Public Health prohibited shops from displaying cigarettes on counters and from selling cigarettes and alcohol to people under the age of 18. It prohibited alcohol companies from advertising alcohol on television and radio. In 2006, the Ministry of Public Health will cooperate with the Customs Department to prevent the importation or sale of cigarette packets containing less than 20 cigarettes, or cigarettes with fruit flavors, to reduce sales to teenagers and women. It is also campaigning to ban smoking and alcohol consumption in workplaces and to discourage shops in temples, schools, and government offices from selling alcohol. The Ministry of Public Health will set an example and promote the ideas more widely through Thai society. For example, apartments established around universities are now required to register and to prevent male and female students from living together. They are prohibited from renting rooms to more than five people. From 1 April 2006, apartments that fail to comply will be closed down.