

# 10 Violent crime: Thorn in the flesh of Thai tourism

The late night cry for help of two British tourists murdered on Koh Tao, Surat Thani on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 focused worldwide attention on the lack of safety, life and property of tourists in Thailand.

Only two days after the murder, the British newspaper The Daily Mail focused its headline on news regarding perils of traveling to Thailand. According to the UK Foreign Ministry, since 2009, eleven Britons have been murdered, eleven cases of rape and eight cases of assaults against British citizens have been reported and 267 Britons have been taken to hospital in Thailand.

## Koh Tao case focuses attention on crime against tourists

The Koh Tao incident and subsequent international news reports on crimes committed against tourists in Thailand inevitably brought negative attention to Thailand's tourism industry, casting doubts on the government's security measures and inefficient law enforcement which left several cases of violent crimes unsolved and perpetrators unpunished.



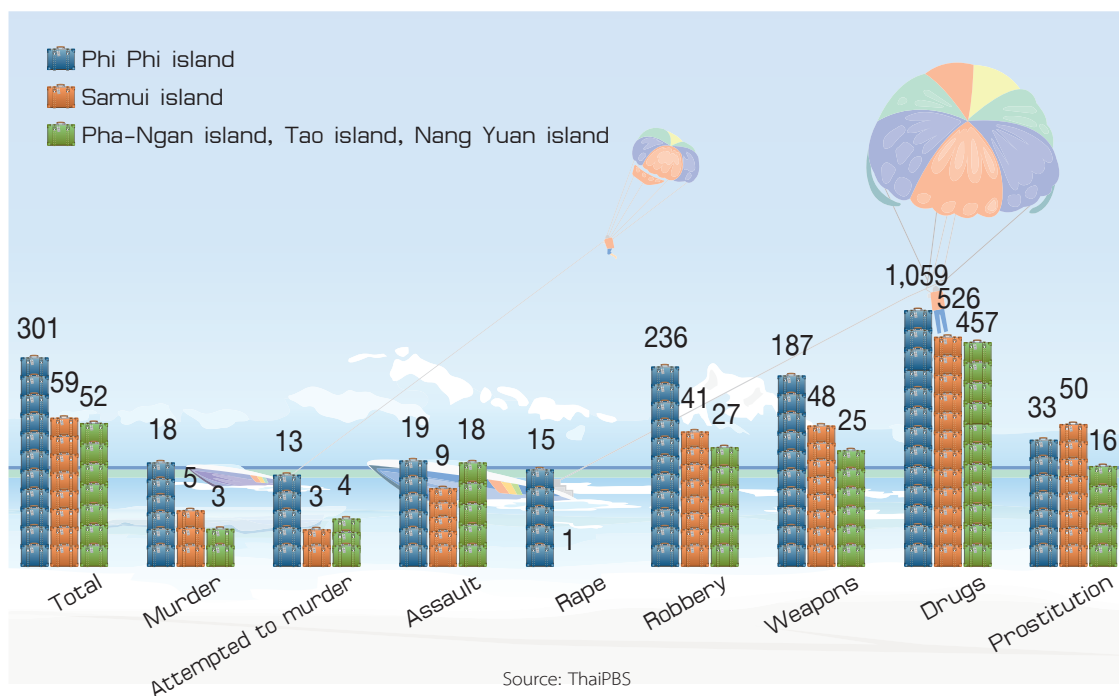
Because of the delay in apprehending the Koh Tao perpetrators, CNN and The Mirror began to expose other unsolved cases of crime against foreign tourists in Thailand over the past several years to warn tourists of the dangers of traveling in Thailand. These include the 2013 fatal assault against an American tourist and his son in Krabi,<sup>1</sup> the murder of a young British man on Koh Pha-Ngan's Hat Rin beach on New Year's Eve 2012,<sup>2</sup> the robbery and murder of an Australian travel agency owner in Phuket,<sup>3</sup> the rape of a Dutch model at Krabi's Ao Nang,<sup>4</sup> the alleged framing and blackmail against an Australian tourist by the Thai police as exposed by the Australian media and the impunity of a Thai car driver who ran over an Australian tourist on a motorbike. Countless cases of assaults, robberies, scams, pickpocketing, grab-and-runs as well as credit card frauds that happen to tourists in popular destinations such as Koh Samui, Phuket, Chiangmai, Pattaya and Krabi also added to the negative image of Thailand's tourism industry.

## Phi Phi island: twenty-five cases per month

According to the TV channel Thai PBS, twenty-five cases of crime per month on average were reported to local police on the popular Koh Phi Phi in the twelve months between October 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 and September 30<sup>th</sup> 2014, whilst around five cases per month were reported on Koh Samui, Koh Pha-Ngan, Koh Nang Yuan and Koh Tao. Alarming, the rates of apprehension reached almost two thousand drugs-related cases, more than 300 robbery cases, 26 murder cases and 16 rape cases (see Figure 1). Many of these violent crimes can easily lead to fatalities.

The police force in charge of the area confirmed that these island destinations have higher crime rates than on the mainland. One reason may be because tourists around the world are attracted to the area's crime-prone activities, particularly the Full Moon Party, which is known for heavy drinking and which is susceptible to drugs, violence and prostitution.

Figure 1: Crime rates on tourist island



However, the question remains why these problems have not been adequately addressed, despite the fact that these are world-famous destinations with rich natural resources that attract tourists from around the world. How has the government ignored these problems for so long that they have now become deeply rooted?

### Social networks and increased crime awareness

The Koh Tao murder and similar past incidents which also involved Thai tourists made Thai society more conscious about violent crimes against tourists. Intense discussion and speculation took place in many fora, especially on social networks where many searched for information on investigations and shared their opinions. Many social networkers, both Thai and foreign, questioned security measures in the area and the transparency of the police investigation. The due justice process for the accused was also questioned, as it was suspected that those who were actually responsible for the murder may have

been mafia figures controlling the area who used their influence to cover their tracks. Whether this speculation is correct or not, it's undeniable that there is a criminal element infesting the local tourist industry.

### Mafia and crime in Thai tourism

In order to gain maximum profit from the lucrative tourist industry, many Thai and foreign entrepreneurs and investors have exploited legal loopholes or even used illicit power to violate the law in order to gain advantage over competitors. Some have obtained exclusive concessions and monopolies to exploit natural resources or encroach upon prohibited areas in forests, mountains, water sources, beaches or islands and turned them into tourist facilities. These illegal activities have led to the emergence of the "tourism mafias" in famous tourist destinations such as Phuket, Pattaya, Chiangmai and the Southern islands. This is a problem of national importance waiting to be addressed by the government.<sup>5</sup>



These “tourism mafias”, especially foreign gangs, have caused extensive problems to tourists and communities, leading to increased local opposition. In early 2014, a group of taxi owners, local entrepreneurs and some locals demanded that the Government deal with the “foreign mafias with Thai fronts”, especially those from Russia, Korea and China, who take away jobs, intimidate tourists and conduct illegal activities. After field investigation by the then Tourism and Sports Minister Somsak Purisrisak and Department of Special Investigation Chief Tharit Pengdit with the Phuket Governor, Police Commander and Tourist Police, the “Operational Center for the prevention and suppression of tourism mafia” was established to solve these challenges. However, concrete actions are still lacking.

After the 2014 coup, the NCPO issued measures to restore “order” at seaside tourist attractions such as Pattaya, Koh Lan, Bang Saen and Hua Hin by regulating landscapes and businesses including hotels, restaurants, beach chairs, vehicles-for-hire and others who may take advantages of tourists. In addition, the Ministry of Interior ordered all provincial administrations to strengthen security measures to ensure safety of tourists and locals. However, it is clear that such “order” works only with Thais whilst the foreign mafia gangs with large capitals and extensive business networks continue “business as usual” to violate law and order. This has sowed doubt amongst civil society groups whether such measures are effective in solving challenges.

## NCPO and tourism stimulus

The Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the Tourism Council of Thailand and the Association of Thai Travel Agents have all expressed concerns about the negative impacts of violent crimes on the Thai tourism industry. Meanwhile, the global economic slump and the announcement of countrywide martial law also contributed to low numbers of tourists since 2014. As a result, the military government under PM Prayuth Chan ocha initiated a stimulus package to promote tourism, including for example the exemption of visa fees for Chinese and Taiwanese tourists between August and October 2014.

## Where next?

Tourism mafias have spread and now have sunken roots at local and national levels, dominating the tourism industry and related businesses including tour agencies, real estates, restaurants, hotels, resorts, pubs, bars, vehicles-for hires and rent-a-car companies. This has resulted in monopolies, low-quality services and exploitation as well as threats and actual assaults aiming at the lives and properties of tourists. This will eventually lead to lack of tourist confidence and negative impacts on Thai tourism. If the industry, as the country’s top earner, faces a downturn because tourists choose to spend their money elsewhere, this will also impact on the country’s economy as a whole. When this happens, it will be difficult to recover this image and regain tourist confidence. Ensuring the safety of tourists and dealing with tourism mafias must be immediately addressed to tackle different forms of crime and exploitation against tourists.

