A Conspiracy of Silence: Who is Behind the Escalating Insurgency in Southern Thailand?

Publication: Terrorism Monitor Volume: 3 Issue: 9
May 6, 2005 06:07 PM Age: 5 yrs

By: Zachary Abuza

On January 4 2004, militants conducted simultaneous raids on police and military posts across three provinces in Thailand's Muslim majority south. The raids were well coordinated and displayed considerable planning and professionalism. Though described as the start of the new insurgency, the same type of attacks had been conducted by groups since 2001-02 on a smaller and more sporadic basis. The seizure of 300 M-16s caused the Thai government to impose martial law and deploy additional troops. The heavy-handed military response has, in turn, led to a cycle of violence. There are currently more than 20,000 troops, police and intelligence officials deployed across 10,000 square kilometers. Yet, the violence has steadily escalated. Since January 2004, roughly 700 people have been killed. Only in Iraq were more Muslims killed in 2004.

Most of the victims in 2004 were killed in drive-by motor-cycle shootings or machete attacks. The victims usually died in insurgent attacks: police, soldiers, local government officials, and in particular local Muslims that the militants deemed to be collaborators. Between January and the end of October 2004, there were 24 bombings (including one double and one triple) and in addition there were seven attempted bombings. Together, only five people (including three police) were killed and 72 were wounded; nine bombings had no victims whatsoever. Initially the bombs were relatively small (between 2-5 kilograms), but the attack on insurgents at the Krue Se mosque fueled the insurgency. By August the bombs had become more sophisticated: insurgents employed roadside IEDs to target troop convoys, began to use time delayed bombs to target police investigators, and made use of cellular phones as detonators.

On October 25, the Thai army killed over 85 people, including 78 protestors who, after being loaded onto trucks, died of asphyxiation. Though some armed leaders fired on Thai security forces, most were unarmed. The Tak Bai incident, which was captured on video and was widely distributed by VCD, was a turning point.

Between Tak Bai and the middle of March 2005, the number of bombings doubled. There were 48 bombings, including four double and one triple; and 12 attempted bombings. The lethality of the bombings also increased: 31 were killed and more than 315 were wounded. Another technical threshold was crossed on February 17 2005 with the detonation of the first car bomb. The size of the bombs gradually escalated post-Tak Bai: averaging between five and 10 kilograms. Bombs in the 20 kilogram range are now being deployed, suggesting that the militants had gotten past logistical and technical hurdles. Interestingly, assassinations and arson attacks have increased at the same rate as the bombings.

Bombings continued apace through March and April 2005. Though instead of roadside IEDs that targeted military convoys or bombs in front of bars, the targets became increasingly economic. For example, March saw a number of attacks on the vital rail link that connects Thailand and Malaysia. But it was the triple bombings in Hat Yai in early April that really shook the government: the Hat Yai airport was bombed (injuring four Western tourists), as was the Carrefour supermarket and a hotel. What was less reported in the press is that there were six other bombs that were defused or failed to go off that day, all targeting economic interests. This was meant to have a devastating psychological impact as the militants were moving beyond their area of primary activity. Hat Yai, the capital of Songkhla province does have a sizeable Muslim population, but it has been spared most of the violence in the past year. It is the major economic center of the south, both a tourist hub and a regional wholesale and financial center. That same weekend, militants chopped down more than 500 rubber trees, the region's other economic pillar.

The Hat Yai attacks led to an increased security and military presence in Bangkok's Don Muang airport and the screening of cars at several five-star hotels in the capital; though a common occurrence in Manila and Jakarta, this has been very infrequent in Bangkok. The mood amongst security personnel is divided: while some contend that it is only a matter of time before a major bombing, others argue that if the militants were going to do it, they already would have.

This debate is indicative of the fact that still very little is known about who is behind the insurgency. Statements range from the Prime Minister's assertions that they are merely "criminal gangs" to policy makers who assert that "separatists with possible links to foreign Muslim extremists" are to blame. Making things more confusing is the fact that no group has taken any responsibility for any of the attacks in 2004-2005, nor has any other organization publicly stated their goals or platform. The Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), which was active in the 1970s and 1980s, but had disbanded by the 1990s, has taken a degree of responsibility through its web site postings warning foreigners to stay away, but few believe that PULO has revived. [1]

Based on my interviews and analysis of the range and the different styles of attacks, there are four distinct organizations, two of importance, while two others are more fringe groups. The most important groups are the Gerakan Mujahideen Islamiya Pattani (GMIP) and the outgrowth of the old Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) organizations now known as BRN Coordinate (BRN-C). The two smaller fringe groups are Jemaah Salafi and some elements of the 1990s splinter group, New PULO.

The GMIP was founded in 1986 but quickly degenerated into a criminal gang until 1995 when two Afghan veterans consolidated power. Since then, the rural-based GMIP has led attacks on police and army outposts. The group had close relations with a Malaysian militant organization, the Kampulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM), which was also founded by veteran Afghan Mujahideen in 1995.

The Thai National Security Council acknowledged that there is "a new Islamic grouping" which, "through increasing contacts with extremists and fundamentalists in Middle Eastern countries, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, they have metamorphosed into a political entity of significance [sic]." [2] At the same time, Thai intelligence now speaks of the insurgency as being a "pondok [madrasas]-based" movement. [3] As the former commander of Thai forces in the south said, "There is no doubt that the basis for this new insurgency are the ustaz. This is something that has been in the making for a long time." [4] Beginning in December 2004, the Ministry of Justice's Special Investigations Department has launched a number of raids on five different madrasas, and arrested or issued warrants for Islamic teachers from the Thammawittaya Foundation School and the Samphan Wittaya School. [5] The evidence suggests that these schools, ustaz (Islamic teachers) and radical students hail from the old BRN organization and networks established in the 1970s.

The key question is whether there is any degree of coordination between these organizations and networks. Analysts in Thailand are divided over this question and based on my interviews I have come away with a sense that there is a limited degree of coordination, but that the centers of these organizations have little command, control, or resources to offer their cells. Attacks seem disjointed because the cell structure is so compartmentalized and autonomous from the leadership.

The most pressing question to date is whether the notorious terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is involved. The Thai government denies that there are links. As a Thai Foreign Ministry Spokesman said, "The causes of the situation [are] domestic. It's not part of any international terrorist network but of course we are concerned about the introduction of extremist ideologies among the youths. We are concerned about the possibility of extremist groups in the region connecting together and this could become a serious problem [sic]."

Evidence pointing to JI links is limited, but there are still at least five reasons to be suspicious. First and foremost, JI approached both the GMIP and Jemaah Salafi in 1999-2000 and invited them to a series of three meetings known as the Rabitatul Mujahideen, but it is unknown how deep or strong a relationship was forged. Hambali, JI's operational chief and a senior member of al-Qaeda, was of course captured in Thailand, along with his two lieutenants, Zubair Mohamad and Bashir bin Lap (Lillie) who were charged with perpetrating a major terrorist attack in Bangkok. Lillie was arrested along with a local Thai mujahid, Awang Ibrahim. Secondly, a Singaporean JI member, Arifin bin Ali, was captured in Thailand where he was allegedly plotting to hijack an Aeroflot jetliner to crash it into Singapore. Thirdly, several southern Thai militants were arrested in conjunction with a JI cell in Cambodia that was implicated in laundering money for al-Qaeda through the Om Al Qura Foundation. Fourthly, one of JI's leaders and a key planner of the October 2002 Bali bombing, Ali Ghufron (Mukhlas) was given refuge by Thailand's leading Wahhabi cleric, Ismail Lutfi. Moreover other JI members have sought refuge in southern Thailand. Thai security officials have acknowledged to me that the social links are there, but they were unable to detect anything more than passive support for JI. Fifthly, two Indonesians were killed in the April 2004 siege at the Krue Se mosque and an Indonesian employee of the charity Medical Emergency Relief Charity (MER-C), which was implicated in JI and support of JI-linked paramilitaries in the Malukus and Poso, Indonesia, was arrested and deported. Likewise, a Syrian is now wanted by the Thai authorities in connection with the Hat Yai bombings. There is also greater concern that Bangladesh's HuJI and the Rohinga Solidarity Organization are actively supporting the militants.

The central question surely revolves around the future course of the insurgency. The mood in Thailand is very pessimistic, and most agree that the insurgency is taking on a life of its own. Indeed there are several reasons to be pessimistic. First and foremost, no group has accepted any responsibility or listed any demands. This conspiracy of silence suggests that the insurgents support violence for the sake of it. As the government over-reacts to attacks, deploying more troops and engaging in more indiscriminant raids, it will promote an environment conducive to building the insurgents' organizations.

Moreover, despite little evidence of JI involvement there is always the concern that the notorious Indonesian organization will eventually inject itself into the conflict. This potential involvement becomes all too real when one considers that at some point the insurgents will require training and funding to ratchet up the conflict to the next level. Sectarian conflict is one of JI's key strategies in terms of recruitment, fundraising and propagandizing. Lateral violence creates a sense of victimization; a sense that Islam is under attack and that the secular state is not doing anything to defend fellow Muslims. The role JI played in the Malukus and Poso between 1998-2001 is particularly instructive; in neither case did they start the unrest, which had their own local causes, but JI was quick to take advantage of the conflicts. They not only sent their own operatives and established paramilitaries, but also assisted in the movement of a number of Arabs and Afghans, thus escalating the conflict. Moreover, JI is able to offer significant technical experience. This has been evident in the transfer of technology to Islamist groups in the Philippines, particularly in two instances in which JI members have or attempted to pass on the blueprints for a Bali-like truck bomb.

Furthermore the targeting of monks by the southern Thai insurgents is another worrying development. Three monks were killed in January-February 2004, while groups of monks were targeted twice in October 2004 and since February-March 2005 three more monks have been killed, thus raising the specter of greater sectarian conflict in southern Thailand.

Zachary Abuza is one of the leading scholars on terrorism in Southeast Asia. He is currently Director of the East Asian Studies Program and Assistant Professor for Political Science and International Relations at Simmons College.

Notes:

1. PULO and Bersatu's joint "Statement of Protest" issued on 31 October 2004, can be found at www.pulo.org/statement.htm. PULO and Bersatu did not take any responsibility for the unrest, but simply called on different international organizations to intervene. PULO also threatened in a separate posting on their website that they would reward Mujihidin who killed Thai police officers. Following the Tak Bai incident the PULO website issued the following warning: "Their capital will be burned to the ground like they did to our Pattani capital. Their blood will be shed into the earth and flood into the rivers, our weapons are fire and oil, fire and oil, fire and oil."

2. Cited in Shawn Crispin, "Strife Down South," FEER, 27 January 2004.

3. The Thai Ministry of Education has registered 214 Islamic schools, but acknowledges that there are hundreds of small, unregistered, privately-owned pondoks. "Muslim Teachers Extend Cautious Welcome to Aree," The Nation, September 2004.

4. Simon Elegant, "Southern Front," Time-Asia, 11 October 2004.

5. The school, which is one of the largest Islamic schools in Thailand, was founded in 1951 by Haji Muhamad Tohe Sulong, and has some 6,000 students, spread across four separate campuses. It has 196 ustadz, or Islamic teachers. The curriculum is mixed, however, and only 400 students solely study Islam.

Email this article to a friend