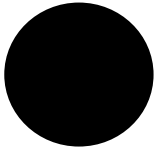


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## Thailand: A Fire This Time

Benjamin Pauker

For nearly two centuries, Thailand has been the exception to the Southeast Asian rule. Alone among its Asian neighbors, near and far, it avoided colonial bondage to a Western power—British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, or American. Its pragmatic, predominantly Buddhist population of 65 million has moved with the flow, accommodating to corrupt and sometimes ironhanded rule, weathering pestilence (nowadays AIDS), poverty, tsunamis, and the border conflicts endemic to a difficult region. Thailand has become much more than one of the world's great tourist destinations; it has recovered strongly from the recession of the late 1990s and is negotiating a free trade agreement with Washington. Through coups and inflation, its essential stability has been a given.

Yet this Asian tiger now has a bleeding, potentially disabling wound. In Thailand's southern provinces, a visitor encounters scenes more reminiscent of Iraq or Afghanistan: car bombs are detonated outside government buildings, officials are beheaded, schoolteachers gunned down, soldiers stabbed to death, and families massacred in their homes. Since January 2004, roughly 500 people—most of them Buddhist—have died at the hands of Islamic separatist insurgents, and nearly 700 Muslims have been killed by Thai security forces. According to Zachary Abuza, a Simmons College political scientist who monitors terrorism in Southeast Asia, only in Iraq were more Muslims killed in 2004. The Thai government blames criminals, terrorists, or “ban-

dit,” for the majority of the attacks, but officials candidly acknowledge that the insurgency is being waged by an alphabet soup of loosely coordinated insurgent groups, the three most active being the BRN-Coordinate (National Revolutionary Front), GMIP (Pattani Islamic Mujahidin Movement), and PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organization).

They are fighting for an autonomous state in southern Thailand, carrying on a decades-old struggle for independence and recognition. Since January 2004, however, the violence has exploded and the intensity of the conflict has shocked those familiar with Southeast Asian politics. Increasingly, the insurgents are using the rhetoric of jihad, recruiting disaffected Muslim youth by the thousands, muddying the line between regional separatism and global Islamic fundamentalism, and turning this quiet corner of Thailand into a powder keg.

Having previously lived and worked in Thailand in calmer years, I revisited Bangkok last November and made my way south to the C. S. Hotel in Pattani, recommended to me as a safe place to stay. It struck me as a Thai version of Saigon's Metropole as described by Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, only without any foreign journalists and no liquor. In Thailand, known for its active nightlife, the cities and villages of the south go eerily quiet as evening falls—when the majority of attacks occur. Stores and markets close early, restaurants empty, and the streets fill with motorcycles and mopeds as

people skittishly make their way home. In the dark courtyard of the C. S. Pattani, Thai television reporters broadcast live reviews of the day's events: bombings, assassinations, arrests. For Thailand's notoriously graphic tabloids, there's more than enough gore to fill a broadsheet.

Three weeks before I arrived, in a small village in Narathiwat province, ten young men dressed in T-shirts and sarongs, and armed with M-16s and machetes, emerged from the surrounding jungle and attacked a small, rural Buddhist temple. Pramaha Anouchatho, the head monk, was asleep at the time. "I heard them come in, and watched briefly from the window as they torched that building," he says, pointing to a muddy pile of ashes and charred wood, "then I hid." When he emerged later, he found the 78-year-old monk Luang Pra-keuw, his head almost entirely severed, and the bodies of two young novices riddled with bullet holes. Hence the posting of a half-dozen gun-toting Army Rangers in camouflage fatigues to patrol the monastery's courtyard.

There are soldiers wearing bulletproof vests stationed at temples, at schoolhouses, in sandbagged bunkers and checkpoints along country roads, and in pickup trucks with orders to detain or kill suspected Muslim militants or their collaborators.

The security crisis encompasses much of Thailand's "deep south," notably the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat along the Malaysian border at the bottom of the country's 800-mile isthmus. Within two years, violence has infected a region of rural villages, rubber plantations, and rolling jungle hills. The insurgency appears to be essentially homegrown, with only informal links to Jemaah Islamiya, the Indonesian terrorist group responsible for the Bali bombings. Only lately has an otherwise engaged Washington begun to pay attention. In the guarded words of a well-placed State Department official, "A confluence of factors makes the situation in southern

Thailand a volatile recipe, but for now we see this as a regional problem and an internal issue."

### *The Roots of Discontent*

Though violence in Thailand's south is relatively recent, the region has long had its grievances with Bangkok, and the ethnic roots of the insurgency are deeper still. The south was once part of Pattani Darussalam, an independent Muslim sultanate that survived for six centuries and embraced Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, plus parts of Songkhla province to the north. As the Thai kingdom, then known as Siam, expanded, its rulers began to covet the Malay Peninsula. By 1789, the kingdom of Pattani had been conquered and forced to pay tribute to Bangkok, but the sultanate retained *sharia* courts and nominal independence. In 1902, after secret negotiations granted exclusive trading rights to British colonial officials in Malaysia, the Thai state formally annexed the Kingdom of Pattani and instituted programs of cultural and ethnic assimilation. Schools and *wats* (Buddhist temples) were built, and villagers from northern Thailand were transplanted southward.

But Thai culture never really took root. Ethnically and religiously, over 80 percent of the roughly 2 million people in the three southern provinces are Malay and Muslim. Southerners speak Yawi, a Malay dialect, and signs at restaurants and shops are in Arabic. Endemic poverty and a tradition of poor governance—the southern provinces are viewed in Bangkok as a distant hardship post for incompetents—only exacerbated the estrangement from the central Thai government.

The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of the first wave of an armed separatist resistance, with the formation of the Pattani United Liberation Organization, the Pattani National Liberation Front (known by its Malay initials, BNPP), and the National Revolution Front (BRN)—the predecessors of the modern militant groups. But violence was lim-

ited to a few high-profile incidents, and the insurgency lost local support as successive administrations in Bangkok took a hands-off approach to the region, establishing civil structures that allowed greater local self-government. All was quiet until the election of Thailand's current prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who in the view of many is partly to blame for the current violence, an unintended effect of myopic political tinkering.

Thaksin, a telecommunications magnate and former police officer, rose to power in 2000, at a moment when Thailand was still reeling from the 1997 Southeast

Asian financial collapse. Bangkok's skyline was marked by the empty shells and exposed girders of unfinished high-rises, abandoned as bank loans disappeared and investors fled. Thaksin founded a new party, Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais), and campaigned as a populist, promising 1 million baht (\$25,000) loans to each village, \$1 doctor visits, and strict law and order over brazen criminality and rampant drug trafficking. Elected by an overwhelming margin, he quickly began consolidating power in a country otherwise known for frequent coups and backroom plots. He installed his brother as army chief, bought out or threatened critical independent media, somehow managed to avoid charges of money laundering in the country's highest court, and cru-

cially, began to dismantle the local political structure of Thailand's south—a region that had voted strongly in favor of the opposition Democrat Party.

"For petty political gain, he has systematically dismantled the institutions that held these provinces together," says Duncan



Monks collecting alms in Pattani at daybreak are protected by soldiers with M-16s.

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McCargo, a professor at Leeds University now teaching in southern Thailand and coauthor of a book critical of the prime minister. "He summarily shut down the *aw baw tau*," he said, referring to the district administrative organizations that brought together military, civil, police, and religious leaders to govern the southern provinces, "and installed his own cronies." U.S. officials discreetly echo these criticisms, though they are loath to snipe openly at the head of a state recently designated a major non-NATO ally.

The prime minister's moves stoked local anger. "For generations, we tolerated the government imposing Thai ways upon us," said a resident of Yala sipping tea at a local café. "Their schools, pictures of the

king and queen everywhere, corrupt Buddhist police, but this was too much. People are angry.” Bangkok was entirely unprepared for what followed.

### *The Insurgency Ignites*

On the outskirts of Narathiwat, a small city of 40,000 in Thailand’s southernmost province, about 30 miles from the Malaysian border, sits the home of Najmuddin Umar. By local standards it is palatial. An ornate black-and-gold iron gate opens to reveal a large two-storied house. Peacocks prowl a well-manicured lawn, and a servant brings afternoon tea and cake to where we sit under a generous portico.

With his round face and ready smile, Najmuddin does not look much like the terrorist mastermind the Thai government accuses him of being. This former elected member of parliament is currently on trial in the capital, accused of crimes ranging from treason to gangsterism. Principally, he is charged with coordinating a series of attacks on January 4, 2004, when a hundred armed Muslims torched twenty government-run schools in Narathiwat province and attacked a nearby Thai army camp, killing four soldiers and seizing some three hundred automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and machine guns. That same night, in neighboring Pattani and Yala provinces, militants detonated two bombs and raided a police post.

As his three young children return from school in matching blue-and-white uniforms, Najmuddin follows them into his living room, where a photograph of him and the prime minister in full parliamentary regalia is on display. “This is where the government accuses me of meeting to plan these attacks,” he says, “but on that day I was in up north in Chang Mai, taking my son to school.”

The Thai government’s response to the attacks was swift, if less than effective. Thaksin imposed martial law on the three southern provinces and deployed thousands

of additional troops to quell the unrest. Martial law was recently extended to Songkhla province to the north, and superseded in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat with an emergency decree that allows for summary detentions and grants troops immunity from prosecution for crimes committed in the line of duty.

Young soldiers sit in the hot sun, manning checkpoints or cooking lunch at makeshift canteens. “You’ve got 20,000 troops down there who are poorly trained for such a conflict,” says Anthony Davis, a respected Bangkok-based security analyst for *Jane’s Intelligence Review*. “It’s a real problem.” Though ostensibly deployed to prevent attacks, their presence is as much an irritant to the community as it is a target for the insurgents.

Imam Ali ben Mohamed, the religious leader of Abu Bakr Sidiq mosque in Medang, agrees to meet me in his home, a small concrete building that looks more like a garage than a house. He has a thin beard and wears a sarong, like many in the south. We sit on thin reed mats, and his wife brings cookies and orange soda, then disappears into a back room. He explains that he wanted to meet in the privacy of his home, rather than at the mosque, for fear that informants might say something to the police. “I don’t go out at night anymore, no one does,” he says. “We are afraid of the police and the army.”

Imam Ali tells me of a series of nightly raids in 2002–03, when unarmed “ninjas” dressed in black, their heads shaved and faces smeared with black paint—hence they came to be called “oilmen”—terrorized villagers with brazen thefts of money and ornaments. He says some were caught by villagers and turned over to the police. “All of them were Buddhist, government agents, meant to make us afraid,” he says, “and all were released.” (Well-informed sources confirmed that these nighttime raids had indeed taken place, but were more likely training and fundraising efforts by insur-

gents.) Nevertheless, rumors of government deceit abound in the deep south.

A recent International Crisis Group (ICG) report (*Thailand's Emergency Decree: No Solution*, November 18, 2005) notes "a breakdown of trust between the security forces and the Malay Muslim communities," and highlights the military's alleged role in "extra-judicial killings" and the roundup of suspects on police "blacklists." Villagers in the south talk of government death squads roaming the jungles and executing Muslim schoolteachers and suspected ringleaders. Meanwhile, the military blames the killings on insurgents, drug smugglers, and bandits. Most of the victims, however, are Muslim, and their deaths appear to be at the government's hand.

"On the twentieth of June, three young Muslim religious teachers in Pattani were shot dead in a house while saying afternoon prayers," a respected security analyst in Bangkok who closely monitors the conflict and refused to be identified tells me. "Silencers were used...and insurgents don't use silencers." The ICG report examines a similar incident that occurred last August, when Imam Satopa Yusoh of Narathiwat's Sungai Padi district was gunned down at dusk while returning to his home by motorcycle after leading the fifth daily prayer. Police officials immediately blamed insurgents for executing a civilian who, they claimed sympathized with the government cause, while noting that the killing was probably planned to look as if it was the work of army soldiers (with the intention of turning the villagers against the government). Waves of disinformation obscure the truth of the matter. In the end, distrustful locals formed a human barricade to prevent officials from entering the crime scene and buried the body before forensic work could be completed.

The Thai police and military are reluctant to seriously investigate most of these crimes; a prominent independent forensic specialist, Khunying Porntip Rojansunan,

has been stymied in her efforts to exhume and investigate bodies for signs of torture or ballistic evidence that might incriminate government forces. Thai officials seem hard-wired to blame virtually every killing on troublemakers or the insurgents. "This is largely the work of criminals," said Col. Samkuan Saengpataranet at the Southern Forces Peace Building Command headquarters, situated on a hill overlooking the city of Yala. "Bad people give amphetamines and narcotics to young boys and make them attack the people. Such a shame."

Later, I meet the colonel at the Banang Satar police station in Narathiwat province, where local television news cameras are filming a triumphant press conference. Ziplock bags of bullet shells and knives are laid out on a table, behind which sit several high-ranking police and army officials. The previous evening, the police station had been raided by around 50 armed men who fired M-16s, lobbed Molotov cocktails, and fired mortars. Two insurgents were killed, including one with a million baht bounty on his head. As flashbulbs popped, the general handed a reward check to a smiling police captain. As the crowd filters out of the small room, the officers allow me to sift through the spent shells and to touch the bloodied clothing of the dead assailant, then proudly mention that 18 suspected militants were arrested following the attacks and have already admitted their guilt. It smells of a made-for-media charade, and the locals are not taken in. But what really feeds popular distrust of Thai military and security forces is the massacre at Tak Bai, which occurred just over a year ago but still inflames the disaffected Muslim population.

#### *What Happened at Tak Bai*

Mohammed Saelek waits in the narrow second-floor hallway of the Narathiwat courthouse, where he faces trial. Dressed in a T-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops, he looks younger than his 24 years. He was among

those who gathered before the police station at the village of Tak Bai on October 25, 2004, to protest the detention of six fellow villagers. "There were so many people," he says, "I just went to see what was going on." It was a hot day during Ramadan, the holy month when Muslims fast from daybreak to sunset, and eventually the protestors grew agitated. (Thai officials blame insurgents or bandits for rousing the crowd to a frenzy.) Soon rocks were thrown and jittery Thai forces fired into the crowd. Seven people were killed, but the worst was yet to come.

As many as 1,300 men were arrested at gunpoint, forced to lie down on their stomachs, and bunched and tied together by the dozens. Many were kicked and beaten, according to credible witnesses, before being piled six-deep in waiting trucks. The trucks headed to Pattani, but the usual 90-minute journey took five hours. Seventy-eight detainees died of asphyxiation or suffocation. "I was on the second level," says Mohammed. "There were many men on top of me. Eleven people died in my truck." He was imprisoned for two weeks, then charged with destroying public property, protesting, and possessing a gun.

A DVD recording of the massacre circulates widely across the three southern provinces, though its possession is illegal. The footage—shot from behind police lines—shows the edges of a restless crowd, then sporadic gunfire as police commanders casually stand about. The arrestees are bound and loaded onto trucks. The video then cuts to a mass funeral in a large field, where religious leaders pray over dozens of bodies, bound in sheets. The commander of the Narathiwat Marine task force, Traikwan Kraireuk, reportedly remarked, "I used the velvet glove. If I'd used the iron fist, they would all be dead." Prime Minister Thaksin hinted that so many had died because they were weak from fasting. To date, he has refused to publicly apologize for the government's role in the massacre.

"Tak Bai was organized by bandits and troublemakers," says the governor of Pattani province, Panu Uthairat, in the elaborate receiving room of the province's civil headquarters. "I think the people understand this." His statement suggests the enormous gulf between official pronouncements and the word on the street. "The situation has improved over the past six months," he assures me. "Whenever the government wants to investigate these misguided people, we invite them to come to the police station. But arrest them? Never." One has the sense that extravagant statements on all sides feed on each other.

Nevertheless, the governor struck a hopeful note. "We must win the hearts and minds of the people. Right now, education is the problem," he adds, defining what he sees as a central issue. "We need to be involved in the curriculum to make sure that they are not preaching against the government."

### *The School as Battlefield*

The subject of education is a minefield. In Yala, I visited the Ministry of Education building where, an hour before, a car bomb had savaged the parking lot. The acrid smell of charred rubber lingered. There were no casualties, but again, militants had targeted government educators as agents of Thai cultural imperialism. Twenty-five Buddhist teachers have been killed since January 2004, most of them gunned down in motorcycle drive-by shootings. The government has retaliated, assassinating dozens of *ustaz* (Muslim teachers) whom they blame for inciting violence and recruiting young militants. "There's no doubt that the basis for this new insurgency are the *ustaz*," the commander of the Army's Southern Fourth Division Gen. Pisarn Wattanawongkeeree remarked to *Time* magazine in October 2004.

Muslim schools in the south have been hotbeds of antigovernment rhetoric and a recruiting center for militants. Sapaeng Basoe, the former *ulama* (headmaster) of

Thammawittaya school in Yala, is said to be head of BRN-Coordinate, commonly regarded as the biggest insurgent group, estimated at two- or three-thousand strong. His face, with its scraggly white beard and deep-set eyes, occupies the center position in “wanted” posters across the south. According to well-researched reports by the International Crisis Group and scholars like Zachary Abuza, radical clerics and *ustaz* trained in the Middle East have leadership positions in all the major insurgent groups. Though government forces are wise to keep an eye on educators who espouse hatred of the Thai state, Muslim civic leaders are adamant that the government has no business interfering in the classroom.

Near the end of a wide gravel road in Narathiwat province sits the home of Abdul Rahman Abdul Samad, the head of the Narathiwat Islamic Council. He is a small man with an intense gaze, solemn and severe. I instantly recognize him from the Tak Bai DVD where he is pictured leading the prayers over the victims’ bodies. His house is flanked by a two-story wooden building and a concrete mosque painted lime green. “This is my *pondok* (madrassa),” he boasts, pointing at the wooden building, “and that is where the students live.” He nods in the direction of a row of dilapidated shacks built from palm fronds, spare wood, and corrugated tin siding at the edge of the jungle. “And here,” he says, gesturing toward a large clearing, “is where I will build my new *pondok* for a thousand students.”

An amalgam of government-funded, government-supported, and independent schools educate the youth in the south. The Thai Buddhist schools are government-run, and their students are largely the children of the 300,000 Buddhists who remain in the southern provinces. Then there are the nominally state-supported Islamic schools, like Thammawittaya, which are in fact essentially private institutions, with little oversight. There are also Islamic private schools and *pondoks*, neither of which receive state fund-

ing. “I’ve been waiting for money from the government for 20 years,” says Rahman. “I asked Thaksin, he is my friend. He used to come here before the violence. He promises money but it never comes. So now, I have gone abroad to get the money. I have accepted a generous offer from Kuwait.” This is a common refrain from Muslim educators in the south. Islamic schools, mosques, and *pondoks* receive funding from abroad and, concomitantly, foreign ideas on religion, culture, and latterly, guerrilla warfare.

Middle Eastern influence pervades southern Thailand. Last year, roughly 11,000 southern Thais made *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca that must be undertaken once in a lifetime by devout Muslims, and many more study or work in places like Damascus, Cairo, or Karachi. Saudi money funds the construction of schools, mosques, and civic centers. Residents in the deep south are increasingly connected to the wider Arab world. With the growth of Thai satellite television, southerners are now able to pull in Malaysian and Indonesian channels that broadcast a steady stream of news from Afghanistan and Iraq.

As Rahman and I finish our tour, a convoy of two minivans and several pickup trucks approaches. A middle-aged Thai socialite bounds from one of the minivans, accompanied by a coterie of assistants and photographers. A squad of heavily armed, flak-jacketed Army Rangers serves as a lookout. Rahman gives her an abbreviated tour of his school before they sit down for small talk and to share some southern Thai desserts in his large waiting room. His guest, Thanpuying Viraya Javakul, is a well-connected member of Thailand’s elite who serves on the board of various major charities. She has come, she tells me, to lay the cornerstone for a new electronics factory in Narathiwat that she convinced a friend to build. It will be one of the few industrial concerns in a province that derives most of its revenue from rubber and fishing. As Rahman steps outside to take a

phone call, I ask her what she thinks of the *pondok* that will soon be constructed behind his house with Kuwaiti funds. "It's terrible," she says. "These children need a better education, not just Islamic schooling. But this factory we are building is good because you can use your hands," she says, pantomiming something vaguely resembling assembly work, and thus "you don't need to think."

The episode is emblematic of the gulf between Bangkok and the south, between an honest desire to help and the inability to understand that central to the mentality of an aggrieved colonized population is a simple desire to be left alone.

### *Bangkok Reacts*

Though Prime Minister Thaksin has dealt with the insurgency largely as a security issue, he responded to pressure from opposition politicians and set up a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), a multi-ethnic panel of politicians, academics, and religious and civic leaders tasked with surveying the unrest in the south and suggesting remedies. In the courtyard of the C. S. Pattani Hotel, I sat with Dr. Chaiwat Satha-Anand, a member of the commission and professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok, on the eve of a conference at which the NRC would be reviewing and debating its recommendations. A Thai Muslim, though not from the south, he is regarded as the intellectual heavyweight on the commission and the lead drafter of its soon-to-be-delivered judgments. "The NRC is unique in history, an experiment in whether it is possible to convene a commission without a cessation of violence. Though we are missing something that makes the job difficult—unlike South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission or Rwanda's Unity and Reconciliation Commission we are lacking a 'what,' a goal." Chaiwat sees the root problems as poverty and injustice, with religion providing a justification for violence. "But we are

quickly losing ground and the measure is whether a population is willing to trust the government."

At a nearby table is NRC chairman and former prime minister Anand Panyarachun. His long, black Volvo limousine, garlanded with flowers, waits at the hotel entrance; it has the telltale thick windows of an armored vehicle. "There has been mismanagement and a lack of sincerity toward Muslims in the south," he says, pausing to relight a cigar, "but Muslims in the south make up only 1.5 million out of 4.5 million Muslims in Thailand, so it's an ethnic issue as well." Asked whether he could envision a kind of autonomy for the restive provinces, he hesitated, "I have told the NRC members not to use the term 'autonomy,' but rather 'self-governing rule' or 'special zone' when talking of such matters. But I believe the Thai constitution is flexible enough to allow something like this." As for Thaksin? "Eventually, he'll have to come around."

Many experts differ, and view the south as Thaksin's Achilles heel. If he is perceived as too soft, they say, his foes will combine to destroy him. Rumors abound that Thaksin's enemies now number key figures in the elite, including the inner circle of the King Bhumibol Adulyadej's Privy Council. The king, 78, is revered in Thailand, and his rare intercessions into democratic governance throughout his 60-year reign have highlighted his recent public chastising of the prime minister. There are signs that Thaksin's popularity has sagged. A prominent opposition figure, Sondhi Limthongkul, has been holding Friday evening rallies in downtown Bangkok's Lumpini Park that draw tens of thousands; such civil unrest has preceded recent Thai coups. For a man who rose to power on a law-and-order platform, persistent violence in the south is especially wounding.

Thaksin has benefited from the insurgency's distance from the capital and his control of newspapers and television. Indeed, many with whom I spoke in Bangkok



did not appear to know what was actually going on in the south. A bomb in Bangkok or the tourist island of Phuket, however, would immediately bring the insurgency to the fore. Security analysts agree that it is unlikely that the current insurgent groups will escalate their violence beyond the regional level. But should Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiya, or al-Qaeda, view southern Thailand as a recruiting camp for global jihad, they might promote such provocations. For this very reason, Washington seems determined to stay as far from the conflict as possible.

### *The Stakes for Washington*

In the southern Philippines and in Indonesia, U.S. Special Forces and Army Rangers have helped local intelligence agencies and militaries to isolate and attack terrorist groups like Abu Sayyef and Jemaah Islamiya. Not so in southern Thailand, where U.S. officials fear any involvement, however passive, would be immediately misunderstood by the local Muslim population. In the south, many already see the hand of the CIA at work. Villagers speak of "Blackhawk helicopters" that have flown low over their homes, discharging soldiers in the gloom of night. More than once, local residents assured me that the shadowy "oilmen" they have spotted were U.S. agents. For the record, the United States no longer maintains a consulate in the south and, due to the violence, Fulbright scholars studying in Pattani were removed to Hat Yai, a major city two hours to the north.

Alone as the sole Westerner for most of my short stay in the south, I scanned the hotel's register for potential interviewees each night. One evening I was surprised to see two rooms assigned to U.S. embassy personnel. I sought out Bussabonglahwan Pattaro, a Thai national working as an information specialist at the embassy in Bangkok. She was there as part of a two-person advance team planning a press conference at which the embassy's deputy head of mission

and head of public affairs were to present several dozen sewing machines to local Muslim women. Neither officer spent the night. This is the extent of U.S. diplomacy in the region and, according to the National Reconciliation Commission chairman Anand, so much the better: "Tell them to stay the hell out of here," he told me.

In Thailand, as elsewhere, the ongoing war in Iraq has affected public opinion. In the south, Washington is widely viewed with cynicism and outright anger. At the embassy in Bangkok, it was suggested that I should not disclose my citizenship. "Maybe say that you're Canadian," a friend there suggested. It would be unfair to say that Iraq has in any way been a cause of the region's violence, but Washington's eagerness to tie its sail to Thaksin's mast has had a decidedly negative effect. The United States has turned a blind eye to Thaksin's authoritarian tendencies, administrative corruption, judicial intimidation, curbs on independent media, and shady business dealings.

Before his election, Thaksin's company, Shin Corp., had become the sole provider of satellite and cellular communications in Myanmar. As prime minister, Thaksin has proven unwilling to reprimand Myanmar's governing junta for its myriad human rights violations, even going so far as to defend the imprisonment of dissident activist Aung Sang Suu Kyi. He also closed the decades-old camps along Thailand's eastern border with Myanmar to new refugees. The latter was a popular, if not a principled, decision. When Thaksin assumed office, the country was still mired in recession and high unemployment, and Thailand had long struggled to accommodate immigrants from its less stable neighbors. But Thaksin's policies with respect to Myanmar have only solidified the impression in the south that the prime minister—and Washington, as his supporter—is no great defender of human rights.

Thailand's underreported drug war of 2002–03 claimed, officially, some 2,500

lives. In declaring open season on traffickers, Thaksin unleashed the police and army on the country's opiate and methamphetamine trade. To the delight of Thailand's gory tabloids, police gunned down users and dealers alike on the streets of Bangkok and in rural villages under shoot-to-kill orders. Human Rights Watch issued numerous reports detailing detentions and disappearances. Washington said little in protest of these abuses, so long as they were perceived as effective. But now, the same tactics are being employed in the southern provinces, where extrajudicial killings have become the norm. In one well-publicized incident last year, prominent Muslim human-rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit, who had accused police of torturing clients to extract confessions, was kidnapped and likely murdered while in police custody. Six officers are now on trial for his disappearance.

Though Washington is not responsible for Bangkok's security excesses, its tacit approval of Thaksin's heavy-handed governance has undermined its right of complaint. Apart from the creation of the National Reconciliation Commission, there seems little to commend in the Thai government's response to the insurgency. Should the separatist's jihadist rhetoric grow, a new front in the war on terror could result. "I am sure within Washington corridors there is a quiet concern that things in the Thai south seem to be getting worse," said Karen Brooks, former National Security Council director for Asian Affairs at the White House, to Agence France Press. But there remains a wishful air about U.S. pronouncements. "As a strong economic partner and major non-NATO ally, of course we are concerned about the violence in southern Thailand," says a high-ranking State De-

partment official, "but as for a tangible U.S. role, we are lending moral support and hoping for a resolution."

There seems little chance of that. The insurgency is increasingly well-organized: on the first anniversary of the Tak Bai massacre last fall, there were 66 separate but coordinated attacks across the three provinces. "These were obviously a dry run for a much bigger event," says Anthony Davis. Militants are also more adept at playing the diplomatic game: on August 30, 131 Muslim Thais crossed into Malaysia seeking asylum and refugee status. It is likely they were encouraged to do so by an insurgent group seeking to chill relations between Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. As of this writing, they remain in custody in Kelantan, Malaysia, and diplomatic efforts to repatriate the 131 have failed. Complicating matters, Thaksin has extended the emergency decree that gives near immunity to the army and police, doing so without asking the advice of—or even notifying—the National Reconciliation Commission. Even Chairman Anand evinces a weary fatalism: "The NRC is not going to change anything, but maybe we can be a catalyst for change."

In the Narathiwat provincial courthouse, Mohammed Saelek is even less optimistic about a quick end to this conflict. "I like the National Reconciliation Commission," he says. "They have asked that my case be thrown out. But they have no power at all. If the government says 'no,' they can do nothing." At a break in the courtroom proceedings, he vented his frustration. "I am angry, burning inside. But it's impossible to speak out now against the government. If I had a weapon, I would shoot. If insurgents asked me to fight, I would go," he said, "but only for justice." ●