



## **The Changing Face of Terrorism in Southeast Asia**

by Eric Teo Chu Cheow

Southeast Asian terrorism is rearing its ugly head again. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is reorganizing itself, after some 30 of its operatives were arrested in Indonesia, 75 in Malaysia, and 30 in Singapore over the past year. After the recent bomb blast at the Marriott in central Jakarta, Indonesia and Southeast Asia are bracing for more terrorist attacks along the lines of the Bali attack in October 2002, given the similarities in style and modus operandi between the Bali and Marriott bombs, and as the Bali and Abu Bakar Bashir trials continue in Indonesia.

In fact, after the Bali bombing, Indonesia and its ASEAN neighbors undertook serious action in containing indigenous and international terrorist threats through tougher antiterrorist enforcement and better regional coordination. Terrorist threats then calmed down considerably. Governmental vigilance and the horrors of Bali also helped curb radical Muslim movements in Indonesia and Malaysia. Moreover, these governments vocally opposed the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq in order to "contain" both their moderate and radical Muslim populations from spilling into the streets. After a government offensive in Mindanao, southern Philippines, a truce was called and both the Manila authorities and MILF rebels accepted Malaysia as mediator in peace talks, thus calming a regional foyer of Muslim dissent and rebellion.

With the war in Iraq rapidly won by Washington, fears are also emerging of revenge terrorist strikes against the U.S. In fact, Washington had in May issued a warning of possible terrorist attacks emanating from Sabah, Malaysia, and southern Philippines. Terrorist elements in these areas are also reputed to have links to al-Qaeda, which is believed to be reactivating operations worldwide, especially after a call for a jihad (holy war) by Osama bin Laden's righthand man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, against the U.S. and its allies in May. Since then, two devastating bombs have exploded in Casablanca, Morocco and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; in Southeast Asia; three Thai Muslims were arrested in Southern Thailand in early June, as well as two Cambodian Muslims in late May, all suspected to be JI-linked terrorists.

But a new development has sprung up in Southeast Asian terrorism, just as the latest attack in Jakarta could once again - as in after the Bali attacks - encourage moderate Muslims to spurn radical political Islam and help "marginalize" terror groups. (The latest congress of the Mujahideen Council of Indonesia (MMI) in Solo, in central Java, was shunned by many mainstream Islamic leaders.) Away from mainstream Islamic developments in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the southern

Philippines, a new foyer of Islamic militancy and impetus may be emerging in southern Thailand. Long denied for reasons of "protecting" both Thailand's tourism industry, as well as incoming foreign investments, southern (Muslim) Thailand's involvement in arms trafficking, smuggling, and terrorism was openly admitted by Thai Premier Thaksin Shinawatra during his working visit to Washington in June.

Southern Thailand could have been for some time the "weak underbelly" of Southeast Asia's fight against terrorism, thanks to its tranquil and remote nature, and its purported distance from the mainstream of regional Muslim activities. It could have become a discreet hub of terrorist activities, logistics, and occult financing, involving the "entire chain of terror activities," from drug smuggling and arms trafficking (to finance terrorism) to the logistics and planning of bomb attacks, especially when Malaysian, Indonesian, Bruneian, Singaporean, and Filipino authorities had closed in on their own nationals in their fight against terrorism. In fact, many Muslims escaped and sought refuge in Thailand to begin planning bomb attacks back home from there. For example, JI elements met twice in southern Thailand to plan the Bali bomb blasts, and possibly other bomb attacks in Indonesia. Thai Muslims in southern Thailand could have been discreetly "plugged" into the JI network, and are reportedly entertaining close links to the! MILF rebels and the more deadly Abu Sayyaf terrorists in southern Philippines, notorious for kidnappings, beheading of captives, ransom, and extortion.

There are five reasons for southern Thailand's involvement in terror activities. First, the region is already known as the "underbelly" of the Thai economy, as development and growth have not effectively reached and trickled down to this predominantly Muslim region of almost 6 million Thais; poverty and underdevelopment could help spawn terrorism.

Second, there is cause for concern as many young Thai Muslims have been schooled in pendoks (Muslim religious schools) in the last three decades and embraced the more fiery brand of Wahabism from Saudi Arabia, thanks to generous Saudi funding for mosques and schools. Some young Thai Muslims have presumably been trained in military operations in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Third, this region has been engaged in a subtle war of attrition and hit-and-run operations against "symbols of central authorities" (policemen, government officials, and soldiers) for years. Some southern Thais in these five Muslim provinces

have tried to secede from Buddhist Bangkok to create a Muslim state to the north of Malaysia; in fact, the Pattani United Liberation Front or PULO was very active in this region in the 1970s against Bangkok.

Fourth, Thaksin has been fighting a relentless war against drugs in Thailand; death threats have even been made against the prime minister by drug kingpins. It is conceivable that part of this drug trade and smuggling is linked to the financing of terrorist activities, creating a relationship between terrorists and drug groups operating out of southern Thailand.

Finally, there are sensitivities with neighboring Islamic Malaysia, with whom Thailand has a sensitive border to maintain, especially with the Malaysian states of Kelantan and Kedah, where the fundamentalist opposition party PAS is clearly building up Muslim strongholds. A joint Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline, which is supposed to run through this crucial border region, is mired in popular controversies. As a result, the open pursuit of Muslim terrorists in southern Thailand by the Buddhist government in Bangkok is difficult, both in terms of domestic Thai politics and Thai-Malaysian relations, as the June arrest of three suspected Thai Muslim JI members made plain.

Nevertheless, alarmed by the resurgence of terrorist threats in the region (including in southern Thailand), and determined to take action ahead of the APEC Leaders' Meeting in Bangkok in October, the Thaksin government has issued two executive decrees on Aug. 11 to "toughen" the 2003 Criminal Code (to facilitate the prosecution of terrorist acts) and the Anti-Money Laundering Act amid concerns from civil society and human rights groups.

Southern Thailand was once known for its beautiful beaches and tolerance of a swinging "Western" lifestyle at such famous places as Phuket, Krabi, or Kor Samui, all well-known gems in Thailand's booming tourist trade. Today, however, the focus is on southern Thailand's role and links to terrorism.

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