

Title : Mounting fears of foreign influence in Thai insurgency

By :

Date : 14 June 2007 1331 hrs (SST)

URL : http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/282136/1/.html

BANGKOK : Attacks in Thailand's Muslim south are becoming deadlier and more sophisticated, fuelling fears that the insurgents have established links to international extremists, analysts say.

The shadowy insurgency along Thailand's southern border has escalated sharply in the eight months since the military seized power in a coup, with nine beheadings and 723 attacks just in the first three months of the year.

More than 2,200 people have been killed since the unrest erupted more than three years ago, but this year the attacks are becoming both more frequent and more brutal.

"There is concern that the increased brutality is being influenced from abroad," Zachary Abuza, associate professor for political science at Simmons College in Boston, told AFP.

Insurgent attacks this year "have been very provocative," with attacks on royal entourages, brutal machete slayings and increasingly, the mutilation of corpses, Abuza said.

A Buddhist man was abducted Tuesday and decapitated, his body dumped by a bridge and his head dropped about 300 metres (yards) away.

Two female teachers were shot dead Monday inside a primary school library in a brazen daylight attack.

Some 10 soldiers were killed in a powerful bomb attack and ambush on May 31, while five others were shot dead inside a mosque.

Although some government officials and experts still say the insurgency is entirely domestic, surging violence and new evidence have caused some to suggest possible foreign influence.

"A handful of militants could have improved their organisational abilities and sought better training either in their own territory or in the Philippines or Indonesia," said Arabinda Acharya, a researcher at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Just last month, army spokesman Colonel Akara Thiprote said that detained suspects had confessed under interrogation to receiving foreign training, particularly in beheadings.

"You really have to know particular bones in the neck to decapitate someone, and Thais don't know how to do this. You need a person who's been trained abroad or a foreign trainer to come here to teach the methods," he said.

The arrest of a former Indonesian separatist leader also rekindled fears that extremists from the nearby Muslim nation were training Thai insurgents.

General Watanachai Chaimuanwong, a senior security adviser to the Thai prime minister, has also pointed to links with extremists in Cambodia and Indonesia -- claims that Phnom Penh has flatly rejected.

The new concerns about foreign influence come as the government's peace initiatives in the region are floundering.

Since taking power, army-installed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont has apologised for past excesses, offered to open talks with rebels and revived a key regional mediation body.

But the apology has produced little tangible goodwill.

Talks have failed to get off the ground because the government is still uncertain who is behind the violence.

Previous generations of separatist leaders appear to have little control over fighters on the ground, and officials have yet to identify the new leadership.

The mediation body's work has failed to get moving because the government can't recruit enough officials to staff the organization.

Despite its peace efforts, the government is still focusing too narrowly on law enforcement and not enough on addressing local political complaints, said Srisompob Jitpiromsri, a professor at Thailand's Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani.

Improving the justice system is among the top concerns among residents in the region, he added, since hardly any militants have been prosecuted over the violence while security forces have been granted immunity.

"Right now the government is only focused on going after militants, but they should focus more on local community issues like fairness and social justice to really win the hearts and minds of the people," Srisompob said.

- AFP/ir

Copyright © 2006 MCN International Pte Ltd

[-<< back to channelnewsasia.com](http://www.channelnewsasia.com)