

Rebellion deepens in Thai Muslim south

AFP, Bangkok

Three years after a separatist insurgency erupted in Thailand's Muslim south, rebel attacks have grown more frequent and gruesome amid signs that young radical Islamists are taking a greater role.

Less than a week ago the charred corpses of two teachers were left near a school in Yala, where they were found by police shortly before children would have begun arriving for class.

It was part of an escalating saga of mutilations, shootings, bombings and arson despite significant peace-building moves by the new government, put in place after September's military coup.

Thursday is the third anniversary of a January 4, 2004 militant raid on a southern army base, which revived the long-running separatist insurgency in the region bordering Malaysia, resulting in more than 1,800 deaths since.

It comes as the country is still investigating who set off a deadly series of New Year's Eve bombs in Bangkok which prompted fears the southern conflict could be widening, although the government denies a link to the insurgency.

The military-backed government admits its initiatives have failed largely because it has yet to identify who is responsible for almost-daily attacks in the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala.

Older generations of fighters have expressed a readiness for dialogue, but it has done nothing to stop the violence, spearheaded by loosely organised groups of young fighters.

While analysts agree the struggle remains largely one for autonomy, Sunai Phasuk, Thailand representative for Human Rights Watch, has observed a more disturbing trend.

"Insurgent cells in Yala have demonstrated the inclination toward radical Islamic struggle to justify the attacks," he told AFP, adding that this small element wanted to drive

Buddhists out and would likely reject peace measures.

"(For) the radical cells, this is a matter of armed struggle to the end," he warned, saying the government must ensure it is making peace overtures to the right people.

Wan Kadir Che Wan, head of Bersatu, an umbrella organization for southern separatist groups, told Al Jazeera television in a recent interview that young fighters were unwilling to negotiate because they believed they were winning their fight for a separate state.

"This new generation of people, they are very young and they are very determined... the old generation can compromise but this new generation seems to still want independence," Wan Kadir said.

"Not only independence, but they want to establish an Islamic state of Pattani," he added.

Despite emerging signs of radical Islamists in Yala, the violence remains targetted at both Buddhist and Muslim civilians.

"It has been a steady deterioration since January 2004 and the main trends are civilians are being targeted," said Francesca Lawe-Davies, an analyst with International Crisis Group.

"There is a danger the government is not going to be able to follow with (its peace-building) policy if there are no tangible results, so it is a matter of persevering," she added.

Ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra's heavy-handed tactics were widely blamed for exacerbating unrest in the south, an autonomous Malay sultanate annexed by Buddhist Thailand in 1902 which has rebelled sporadically ever since.

Since the military junta led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, a Muslim, seized power, the government has reopened a key mediation centre, apologised to the Muslim community and offered to meet insurgent leaders -- but with little effect so far.



City Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) President Mir Hossain Akhter speaks at a representatives' meeting of city 14-party at JSD central office in the capital yesterday.

Saddam: From monster to martyr?

PATRICK COCKBURN, *The Independent*

It takes real genius to create a martyr out of Saddam Hussein. Here is a man dyed deep with the blood of his own people who refused to fight for him during the United States-led invasion three-and-a-half years ago. His tomb in his home village of Awja is already becoming a place of pilgrimage for the five million Sunni Arabs of Iraq who are at the core of the uprising.

During his trial, Saddam himself was clearly trying to position himself to be a martyr in the cause of Iraqi independence and unity and Arab nationalism. His manifest failure to do anything effective for these causes during the quarter of a century he misruled Iraq should have made his task difficult. But an execution which vied in barbarity with a sectarian lynching in the backstreets of Belfast 30 years ago is elevating him to heroic status in the eyes of the Sunni - the community to which most Arabs belong - across the Middle East.

The old nostrum of Winston Churchill that "grass may grow on the battlefield but never under the gallows" is likely to prove as true in Iraq as it has done so frequently in the rest of the world. Nor is the US likely to be successful in claiming that the execution was purely an Iraqi affair.

Many Iraqis recall that the announcement of the verdict on Saddam sentencing him to death was conveniently switched last year to 5 November, the last daily news cycle before the US mid-term elections. The US largely orchestrated the trial from behind the scenes. Yesterday the Iraqi government arrested an official who supervised the execution for making the mobile-phone video that has stirred so much controversy.

The Iraqi Shia and Kurds are overwhelmingly delighted that Saddam is in his grave. But the timing of his death at the start of the Eid al-Adha feast makes his killing appear like a deliberate affront to the Sunni community. The execution of his half-brother Barzan in the next few days will confirm it in its sense that it is the target of an assault by the majority Shia.

Why was the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki so keen to kill Saddam Hussein? First, there is the entirely understandable desire for revenge. Members of the old opposition to Saddam Hussein are often blamed for their past ineffectiveness but most lost family members to his torture chambers and execution squads. Every family in Iraq lost a member to his disastrous wars or his savage repressions.

There is also a fear among Shia leaders that the US might suddenly change sides. This is not as outlandish as it might at first appear. The US has been cultivating the Sunni in Iraq for the past 18 months. It has sought talks with the insurgents. It has tried to reverse the de-Baathification campaign. US commentators and politicians blithely talk about eliminating the anti-American Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and fighting his militia, the Mehdi Army. No wonder Shias feel that it is better to get Saddam under the ground just as quickly as possible. Americans may have forgotten that they were once allied to him but Iraqis have not.

When Saddam fell Iraqis expected life to get better. They hoped to live like Saudis and Kuwaitis. They knew he had ruined his country by hot and cold wars. When he came to power as president in 1979, Iraq had large oil revenues, vast oil reserves, a well-educated people and a competent administration. By invading Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990, he reduced his nation to poverty. This was made worse by the economic siege imposed by 13 years of UN sanctions.

But life did not get better after 2003. Face-to-face interviews with 2,000 Iraqi adults by the Iraq Centre for Research and Strategic Studies in November revealed that 90 per cent of them said the situation in their country had been better before the US-led invasion. Only 5 per cent of people said it was better today. The survey was carried out in Baghdad, in the wholly Sunni Anbar province and the entirely Shia Najaf province. It does not include the Kurds, who remain favourable to the occupation.

This does not mean that Iraqis

want Saddam back. But it is clearly true that the chances of dying violently in Iraq are far greater today everywhere in the country outside the three Kurdish provinces than they were in 2002. The myth put about by Republican neoconservatives that large parts of Iraq enjoyed pastoral calm post-war but were ignored by the liberal media was always a fiction. None of the neocons who claim that the good news from Iraq was being suppressed ever made any effort to visit those Iraqi provinces which they claimed were at peace.

Saddam should not have been a hard act to follow. It was not inevitable that the country should revert to Hobbesian anarchy. At first the US and Britain did not care what Iraqis thought. Their victory over the Iraqi army - and earlier over the Taliban in Afghanistan - had been too easy. They installed a semi-colonial regime. By the time they realised that the guerrilla war was serious it was too late.

It could get worse yet. The so-called "surge" in US troop levels by 20,000 to 30,000 men on top of the 145,000 soldiers already in the country is unlikely to produce many dividends. It seems primarily designed so that President George Bush does not have to admit defeat or take hard choices about talking to Iran and Syria. But these reinforcements might tempt the US to assault the Mehdi Army.

Somehow many senior US officials have convinced themselves that it is Sadr, revered by millions of Shia, who is the obstacle to a moderate Iraqi government. In fact his legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Shia Iraqis, the great majority of the population, is far greater than the "moderate" politicians whom the US has in its pocket and who seldom venture out of the Green Zone. Sadr is a supporter of Maliki, whose relations with Washington are ambivalent.

An attack on the Shia militia men of the Mehdi Army could finally lead to the collapse of Iraq into total anarchy. Saddam must already be laughing in his grave.

Gene test may help lung cancer patients

AP, Washington

Scientists in Taiwan have developed a simple, five-gene test aimed at showing which lung cancer patients most need chemotherapy, as similar tests now do for people with breast cancer and lymphoma.

The experimental test needs to be validated in larger groups of patients, so widespread use is perhaps a few years away. However, it's already winning praise for its possible use in everyday hospital settings instead of in limited situations by people with special genetics training.

"This has the potential to be extremely helpful," said Dr. David Johnson, a lung cancer expert at Vanderbilt University and former president of the American Society of Clinical Oncology, the world's largest group of cancer specialists.

"It's further proof that understanding genetic signatures may be helpful in how we treat patients. It may even allow us to avoid treating some patients," or to pinpoint those who may not respond to current drugs and would be better off trying an experimental therapy, he said.

Johnson had no role in the research, which was reported in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine. The Taiwan test is much simpler than a different one involving dozens of genes described by Duke University researchers in the same medical journal last August.

Lung cancer is the world's top cancer killer. About 175,000 new cases and 162,000 deaths from it

occur in the United States each year.

Most tumours are diagnosed after they have already spread beyond the lung. For the 20 percent or so of patients whose cancers are found in an early stage, chemotherapy after surgery to remove the tumour can improve survival.

However, some of these early-stage patients have such a low risk of recurrence that chemo gives them only slightly better odds. Others turn out to have very aggressive tumours that prove fatal even though they are very small when detected. Right now, there's no good way to tell these groups of patients apart size alone doesn't do it.

"The staging system pretty much needs to be trashed. It's imprecise, and it tells us nothing close to what the genomic, genetic material tells us" in terms of risk of recurrence and death, said Dr. Anil Potti, a scientist working on Duke's gene signature test.

The test devised by Hsuan-Yu Chen and colleagues at Taiwan University aims to give a better way to sort low- and high-risk patients.

The scientists analysed 125 patients' tumour samples from patients with all stages of lung cancer and found 16 genes that seemed to raise or lower the odds of recurrence or death. Further analysis narrowed this down to five genes that formed a signature of risk.

They tested this signature on half of the samples and found a strong correlation to how well the

patients actually fared. Median survival was 40 months for the lowest-risk group and 20 months for the highest-risk according to the strength of activity of the five genes. The median time until relapse also was significantly longer - 29 months versus 13 months - for the lowest-risk group.

Results were validated in another set of 60 patients. Doctors also tested the genes' prediction powers with information on 86 tumours that University of Michigan researchers used to try to develop their own gene profiling test. The Michigan researchers posted their information on the Internet, allowing the Taiwan scientists to test results in a largely Caucasian population in addition to their Asian one.

Researchers now must test more patients, assign chemotherapy based on the resulting risk scores, and track survival, Dr Roy Herbst of the University of Texas' M.D. Anderson Cancer Center writes in an editorial accompanying the study in the medical journal.

"In breast cancer now, patients are being selected for chemotherapy based on studies like this," he noted. "We have to move to the next step" with lung cancer, he said.

The study was paid for by the National Science Council of the Republic of China and Advpharma, a Taiwan company, and one of the study authors is an employee.

Japanese student arrested for dismembering his sister

AFP, Tokyo

A 21-year-old Japanese pre-college student was arrested here yesterday over the death of his younger sister whose naked body was found cut into a dozen pieces at their home, police said.

Yuki Muto was held on initial charges of mutilating a body, the Metropolitan Police Department said.

He was expected to be also investigated on suspicion of murder.

The body of his sister Azumi, a 20-year-old junior college student, was discovered by her mother on Wednesday wrapped in three plastic bags in a closet.

The siblings lived with their father, a 62-year-old dentist, their mother, 57, and their older brother at a three-story building whose ground level is used as a dental clinic.

Yuki told police that he had been angered by his sister's remarks that "You have no dreams," the Fuji television network reported.

News of the murder dominated local media as the family was known as amicable and well-to-do with two luxurious foreign cars in a neighbourhood dotted with condominiums near the commercial hubs of Shibuya and Shinjuku.

Police said the parents and the older brother, a 23-year-old dental college student, returned home late Tuesday from a three-day trip to relatives in northern Japan.

Yuki was initially thought to have been away on a pre-college cramming programme since December 31.