Thailand's Smart Move

Through efforts to boost incomes of impoverished Muslims the Thai government is trying to bring peace to a volatile southern region.

SHARIFUL ISLAM

A tin-roof structure with no wall around stands near a narrow concrete road that runs through the plain land between two small hills at a remote hamlet of Gettree district in Satun province of Thailand. Several Muslim women in traditional attire sit proudly at its entrance of the centre were displaying different types of home-made food items like cookies, coffee and many other products mostly made of coconuts, on a table.

These women have prepared these food items after receiving training from the centre housed in the structure. The women gathered from different nearby hamlets receive training on different subjects like farming of land, fishing etc. The Thai government has been facilitating such training to different other areas in the region on varied subjects so that the community people can sell their products among them and earn money for a better livelihood.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai Muslim villagers pray at a cemetery on the day of Eid ul-Fitr celebrations in Thailand.

The training centres operate under the government's direct patronage and assistance. This is one of many steps the government has taken to improve the lives of the people of five southern most provinces of Thailand. Many private and Islamic schools have been given sufficient allocation for the promotion of Islamic education. Moreover, there are some schools run under the Royal patronage to give modern education to the students of the region which is lagging behind comparing with other parts of Thailand in education.

Such steps have been taken alongside tight security measures as a solution to violence perpetrated in the five southern border provinces of Thailand that is known for its unique "Thai Malay Muslim" cultural identity. The provinces are: Narathiwat, Pattani,Yala, Songkhla and Satun where five million Muslims live.

Thai foreign ministry officials have said the government does not believe that military means is the solution.

"The Thai government believes that to communicate with people of different faiths dialogue is the best way," Mongkol Sinsomboon, director, office of Foreign Affairs of Southern Border Provinces Administrative Council (SBPAC), told a group of visiting journalists recently.

According to media reports, rebels in Thailand's Muslim-majority south recently called for the army to return to their bases over Ramadan in exchange for a ceasefire during the holy month, a condition swiftly rejected by the kingdom's government. More than 5,500 people have died in the near decade-long insurgency in Thailand's south but optimism for peace has flickered recently after talks between authorities and some rebel groups including the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Near-daily attacks on security forces and civilians have continued despite a successful round of talks on June 14, which saw both sides agree to work towards curbing violence over Ramadan.

The five Southern Border regions known for its unique "Thai Malay Muslim" cultural identity have been witnessing violence perpetrated by several insurgent groups since 2004, causing loss to lives and properties, besides the psychological trauma of the people in the affected area.

"This region is now threatened by instigators who