use cultural difference to claim legitimacy in using violence to further their cause," says Mongkol.

The violence has been eroding investigators' confidence and leaving its devastating repercussion on the local economy and society, affecting people's life and education, all of which lead to more social problems, he adds.

He says the Thai government recognises that the root cause of the problem lies in the Southern Border Provinces' (SBPs) unique history and cultural identity, and the grievances of the local population on the perceived social and economic injustices, poverty and most importantly, a desire for respect and for a better understanding of local traditions and way of life and culture.

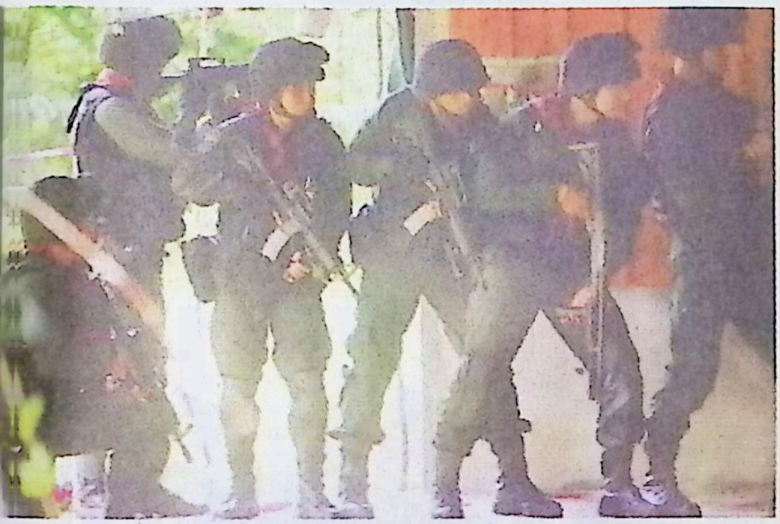


PHOTO: AFP

Police stand guard during a suspected attack by insurgents at a military base in Southern Thailand. The government is now trying to opt for more diplomatic solutions to stop the violence.

"The situation is neither a religious nor an intercommunal conflict," said Mongkol at a briefing of the foreign journalists on SBPs situation at Satun city hall on June 27.

Journalists from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, Qatar, Bahrain, Morocco and Senegal visited Thailand from June 23 to 30. The trip labelled 'Muslim media familiarisation trip to Thailand' was arranged by the Thai Foreign Ministry.

Thailand's constitutional guarantee of religious freedom is a practical reality; and there is no legal basis for religious discrimination. In fact, Thai Muslims elsewhere in the country live in harmony with the Thais of other faiths. The government provides regular support for Thai Muslims, such as facilitating the annual Hajj pilgrimage and supporting other Islamic activities, students, teachers and other Muslims.

"The violence in SBPs perpetrated by a small group of people is to create social divisions where none have previously existed," Mongkol Sinsomboon said.

To date, no group has claimed responsibility for any of the attacks, nor have they made their demands known publicly, he added.

For centuries Thailand has been known for its diverse culture. Today Thailand is a modern nation, where all Thais, regardless of their ethnicity or religious faith live in peace, harmony and equality in a vibrant parliamentary democracy.

"The area is the poorest part of the country. Local people believe that the previous government did not show proper attention for which no substantial industrial and economic development could take place there," Vijavat Isarabhakdi, deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, told the visiting journalists.

"The government's approach is peaceful, with full participation of the people in resolving the problem," Mongkol Sinsomboon claimed.

He further said the approach focuses on, firstly improving the quality of life by accelerating development efforts, ensuring fairness and justice and secondly, ensuring the safety and security of the people in the SBPs by reinforcing security presence and measures, which are necessary as long as the situation so requires.

The government has a clear policy to promote the cultures and traditions of local communities, including the Thai Malay Muslim culture.

As demanded by local community, the government has been facilitating use of local Yawi language in the SBPs providing interpreters. Since March 2010, 150 Thai-Malay interpreters were appointed in state hospitals, district offices, police stations.

There have been other measures taken by the government to promote interfaith tolerance. It has provided support for Islamic Studies in all educational and religious institutions. Registered private Islamic Schools receive subsidies to students of lower and upper secondary levels per year, support for textbooks, equipment and learning materials. Religious instructors also receive honorariums from the state.

Moreover, 'Pondok' (Islamic schools) and Tadikas (Islamic Schools attached to mosques) also receive similar facilities. There are around 373 registered 'pondoks' in the SBPs.

State schools generally give students no less than two hours per week of Islamic institution. Around 303 state schools opt for a more focused mode of religious instruction, and these give no less than 10 hours per week of Islamic instruction.

The writer is Deputy Chief Reporter, The Daily Star