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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Matthew Wheeler, most recently a RAND Corporation security and terrorism researcher, is studying relations among and between nations along the Mekong River.

Thailand and Terrorism After Bali

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

DECEMBER 1, 2002

BANGKOK, Thailand—The bombings that killed more than 190 people on the Indonesian island of Bali on October 12, 2002, cut short my hiatus from thinking about terrorism. Since leaving RAND in mid-September, I had enjoyed a break from a daily dose of political violence. Had the Bali attack occurred a month earlier, it would have been my job to file a report on the incident for RAND's terrorism database, noting the nature of the target, the number of killed and injured, and the weapons and tactics used in the attack. For more than a year I filed such reports on terrorist incidents in Southeast Asia, and I anticipated that the ICWA fellowship would bring a departure from regular engagement with terrorism. The Bali bombings delayed that departure.

News of the attack came when I was still in the United States, just days after my fiancée Ruang and I had visited the ICWA office in Hanover. I processed the news over coffee, with the detachment to which I had been conditioned by my previous work. The number of casualties was remarkable. Rarely does a terrorist bombing kill more than ten people. Recent bombings in Indonesia have generally been small-scale, often causing nothing more than property damage. The lethality of the Bali attack indicated a high degree of planning and competence on the part

About the Author

With a B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College, Matt did graduate work in Southeast Asian Studies and Vietnamese language at the University of Hawaii, the Vietnam National University and the Hanoi Foreign Languages College. He received a Master's in Asian Regional Studies from Harvard in 1999 and prepared for what has become a Mekong-River fellowship with a year of intensive Thai-language study under a Thomas Blakemore Fellowship in Bangkok.

Now based there, and newly married to Rueangsasithon Sangwarosakun ("Ruang", for short), Matt intends to "examine the process of regional integration in Southeast Asia's mainland, or what has come to be known as the Greater Mekong Subregion composed of Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and China's Yunnan Province... As a topic, 'Regional Development' is flexible yet circumscribed. It offers access to many aspects of change in the region, yet allows me to answer succinctly the question, 'What are you studying?'

"My intended *modus operandi* is to read as much as possible about the issues and problems I am examining, to speak to knowledgeable people, to see for myself the effects of change at all levels, and to report on what I find."



Matthew Wheeler

of the bombers. Now, I thought, Jakarta must take action against local terror networks.

For Ruang, the news prompted rather different thoughts. Some premonition caused her to call our friend Budsagorn, who had moved from Bangkok to Singapore six months before to live with her English boyfriend, Tim. Ruang reached Budsagorn half a world away and found her crying, inconsolable. Tim had gone to Bali with the Singapore Cricket Club rugby team as a last-minute substitute. He had called Budsagorn just hours before the attack, saying he was heading out to the bars with his teammates. She had not heard from him in the 24 hours since the bombing. Though Tim was listed as missing, Budsagorn felt certain that she would never see him again. We called her several times over the next week, offering encouragement with a waning sense of hope. Finally, we could offer only condolences.

Budsagorn learned from survivors that Tim and his teammates had been drinking at Paddy's Bar on Kuta

beach. It was later revealed that a suicide bomber had detonated a bomb at Paddy's Bar prior to the truck-bomb explosion that destroyed the Sari Club where most of the fatalities occurred. Tim had left Paddy's just before the suicide attack and was standing out in the street when the truck bomb exploded. Seven of Tim's teammates were also killed in the two bomb attacks.

Tim's death has worked on me in an unexpected way. I didn't know him well, so I feel no deep personal grief. Yet, I feel a sense of loss that is immediate and stupefying and I can't quite account for it. In 1993, I was working two blocks from the World Trade Center when al Qaeda first attacked it with a truck bomb. I saw the attack on the Pentagon on September 11 from the window of my office building. Now, they've killed an acquaintance on the other side of the world. Perhaps I am feeling the cumulative effect. Maybe it's just the realization that these events are becoming routine.

Above all, though, I am sorry for Budsagorn. She





Exercising power: Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra leads some 48,000 Thais in an attempt to break the world record for largest mass aerobics display, Bangkok, November 22, 2002.

loved Tim and hoped to marry him. Now she is a widow in every way except by law, the only way that might do her any good.

Bali Fallout

Since the Bali attack, stories about corruption scandals and Thailand's new tennis ace have had to compete for space in the newspapers with reports of foreign-travel advisories. Thailand's tourist-rich environs of Phuket and Pattaya appear to present attractive targets to terrorists bent on killing Westerners. By late October, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK had warned their citizens of a heightened possibility of terrorist attacks in Thailand. The U.S. State Department issued a travel advisory for all of South-

east Asia. After Bali, Thailand began to attract attention for the wrong reasons.

The Thai government's public response has been to discount the warnings and downplay the terrorist threat in Thailand. The message from the government is unambiguous: there are no international terrorists in the Kingdom. Reacting to the wave of foreign-travel advisories issued in the wake of the Bali bombings, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra declared, "I'm not afraid, you shouldn't be either. Trust me." The Thai Foreign Minister, meanwhile, complained that "[Foreign governments] issue travel advisories on the first information they receive, not on exclusive intelligence, which is causing panic among people."

The stakes for Thailand are high, and the government is anxious to reassure tourists, investors and the public that Thailand is safe. More than ten million tourists visited Thailand in 2001. According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, tourism brought in nearly nine billion dollars (US) in foreign-exchange receipts in 2001, accounting for ten percent of Thailand's gross domestic product.¹ As the high season begins, a significant decline in tourist arrivals could have serious consequences for the current government as well as the Thai economy.

Thailand has not been alone in decrying the warnings of a terrorist threat in Southeast Asia. Other countries in the region, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, face the same problems

of declining tourism revenue and investor confidence. Early in November, at the Eighth Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)² in Phnom Penh, the heads of state issued a "Declaration on Terrorism" aimed at projecting a strong stance against terrorism. One provision of the declaration pleads with the international community to "avoid indiscriminately advising their citizens to refrain from visiting or otherwise dealing with our countries, in the absence of established evidence to substantiate rumors of possible terrorist attacks, as such measures could only help to achieve the objectives of the terrorists." The ASEAN governments also complained of double standards, noting the presence of al Qaeda in the U.S. and Europe.

The November 7 edition of the *Asian Wall Street Jour-*

¹ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Indonesia – Assault on Bali," October 14, 2002; available at <http://home.aigonline.com/content/0,1109,13674-1537-cfo-cfo,00.html>.

² ASEAN includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—i.e., all Southeast Asian nations except East Timor.

nal (AWSJ) sabotaged the Thai government's efforts to portray the Kingdom as a safe destination, free of terrorists. An article by Jay Solomon and James Hookway reported that the Bali attack had been instigated at a January 2002 meeting of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah in southern Thailand. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is considered a Southeast Asian affiliate of al Qaeda. The group came to light in late December 2001 after Singaporean police arrested 13 of its members, disrupting a plot to bomb Western embassies and U.S. military targets in Singapore. The January meeting in Thailand appears to have been an effort by JI to regroup. Citing "Asia-based intelligence sources," the AWSJ story stated that a key Indonesian JI leader named Riduan Isamuddin, also known as

Hambali, had presided at a meeting of Arab and South-east Asian militants in southern Thailand at which a decision was taken to attack "soft targets" such as nightclubs, hotels and restaurants. This information was included in an FBI interrogation report of Mohammed Mansour Jabarah, a Kuwaiti-born Canadian who attended the meeting and was subsequently extradited to the U.S. after his arrest in Oman.

The report that the Bali bomb plot had been hatched in Thailand induced apoplexy in a government already embattled by the flood of foreign travel warnings. Now Thailand was not simply a probable target for international terrorists, it was a staging area for the deadliest terrorist attack since September 11, 2001. Thaksin denounced the report, calling it groundless and "crazy."

"Even the Indonesian government does not know for sure who masterminded the Bali attack," Thaksin said. "It just suspects that JI is behind it. So, it is ridiculous that the paper could report that a meeting for the Bali bombing was held in southern Thailand." A senior police officer, meanwhile, said he believed the report was "aimed at instigating unrest." Thailand's new Defense Minister, General Thammarak Isarangkura na Ayudhya, was even more vociferous in denying any role for Thailand in the Bali attack: "That newspaper made up the report. It came out of thin air. Nobody knows who was responsible for the Bali attacks, and how the hell could they know?" Calling the *Asian Wall Street Journal* "a tailless dog," Thammarak ordered an investigation to determine if the article violated Thai law by defaming the nation and the government.

A Bangkok-based contributor to the offending article, Shawn Crispin of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, had been singled out for such special attention earlier this year. Crispin and his colleague Rodney Tasker were threatened with expulsion from the Kingdom in February for writing a brief article that acknowledged tension between Prime Minister Thaksin and King Bhumiphol Adulyadej, the country's revered monarch. The two journalists were accused of *lèse majesté* for pointing out that the King had publicly criticized the Prime Minister for being intolerant of criticism. The effort to blacklist the journalists served to reinforce the image of Thaksin as thin-skinned and dictatorial. The journalists



This picture, published in the business section of the Bangkok Post on November 27, 2002, presents an unusual local interpretation of the Western terror warnings. It shows a billboard, paid for by the nationalist Pitak Siam (Safeguard Siam) Group, attacking foreign financial institutions for opposing Bank of Thailand rules capping credit card interest rates at eighteen percent. It also exhorts Thais not to patronize foreign banks. A cartoon Uncle Sam, sans whiskers, holds in his fist a chain yoking the Thai people. The chain is marked with a tag reading "The Eleven Laws," a reference to eleven bills adopted by the previous government to satisfy conditions of an International Monetary Fund loan to Thailand at the height of the Asian economic crisis. The bills aimed to foster good governance but were opposed by many heavily indebted politicians and businessmen, who disparaged the laws as part of foreign plot to acquire Thai assets on the cheap and subjugate the Thai nation. Several Thai non-government organizations are currently engaged in a campaign to repeal the Eleven Laws.

What is interesting about this billboard, however, is that Uncle Sam oppresses Thai people not only with high interest rates and threats to block Thai imports, but with a threat to spread more rumors about terrorism in Thailand. Here, the terror warnings are portrayed as another means used by the U.S. to cow Thailand into submission. This interpretation of the terror warnings complements a popular view of the war against terrorism as a pretext for the U.S. to impose its will on the region. The billboard is also an indication that the nationalist and even xenophobic themes that surfaced during the darkest days of the economic crisis continue to be flogged by some quarters.

were allowed to remain in Thailand only after the *Review's* editor apologized for the misunderstanding. In the wake of the AWSJ report, the Defense Minister said, "If it's the same reporters [i.e., Crispin and Tasker], we'll take measures against them. If they love to attack Thailand, they should not stay here." On November 14, a government censorship committee determined that the AWSJ article had "violated Thailand's peace and honor under the printing law." This time, however, Crispin appears to have escaped with a warning to be more careful in reporting about Thailand. The AWSJ later published a correction explaining that sources for the article believe that the Bali bombing *may* have been planned in Thailand.

Even while the AWSJ controversy simmered, further reports of potential terrorist activity in Thailand added fuel to the fire. On November 17, Citibank's Hong Kong-based regional security office issued a travel warning that noted the presence in Thailand of an Islamic militant linked to al Qaeda who "might be involved in planning a terrorist attack to take place in Bangkok between the dates of November 17-21." The warning specifically mentioned the red-light districts of Patpong Road, Soi Cowboy, and Nana Plaza as likely targets. This report prompted Thaksin to ask how a bank comes to behave like an intelligence agency. That week *Time* magazine carried a report based on an interview with an Islamic militant in Malaysia who claimed to have received weapons and explosives training at a Thai military base in southern Thailand, in the presence of uniformed Thai soldiers.³ Given the outlandishness of the report, Thaksin mustered only a subdued reaction; the report, he said, "is close to fiction."

Southern Discomfort

The government's strategy of denying a terrorist threat appears all the more disconcerting in view of a series of violent incidents in Thailand's restive, Muslim-majority southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Satun, Songkhla and Yala. On October 28, even as the government insisted that Thailand was free of terrorism, arsonists set fire to four schools in Songkhla province while bombs exploded at a hotel and a Buddhist temple. On November 1, gunmen fired on a police vehicle in Pattani province, wounding three officers. On November 11, police in Satun defused a parcel bomb addressed to a woman's dormitory at a college in Yala. The following day, police in Yala discovered and detonated another parcel bomb.

These latest attacks may be seen as part of an upsurge in violence that started on December 24, 2001, with simultaneous attacks on police outposts in Narathiwat,

Pattani, and Yala provinces that killed five police officers and a village defense volunteer. Since then, 21 police officers have been killed in similar ambush attacks in these southernmost provinces. There have also been several bomb attacks at hotels, rail stations and government offices as well as raids on government armories. On June 20, 2002, for example, gunmen stole 17 assault rifles, 16 shotguns and more than a thousand rounds of ammunition from the Bang Lang National Park in Yala.

The increase in violence over the past year appears to have the imprint of Muslim-separatist activity. Various Muslim separatist groups have operated in Thailand's deep south since the late 1960s, seeking autonomy or independence for the southern provinces.⁴ Malay Muslim separatists in southern Thailand have been inspired by the history of the kingdom of Patani,⁵ an independent state that was both a center of Islamic learning and a tributary of Buddhist Siamese kings to north. Although Bangkok brought Patani under direct administration in 1902, the central government's efforts to transfer the allegiance of Malay Muslims from their own community to the Thai state has been incomplete. The often heavy-handed assimilationist policies implemented by Bangkok during the last century served to accentuate ethnic differences, strengthening the consciousness of a Malay-Muslim identity. Bangkok attempted to displace Islamic law, traditional Islamic boarding schools and the Malay language with Thai-language education and government institutions directed and staffed by Thai outsiders. Malay Muslims responded to Bangkok's administration by avoiding Thai institutions, including schools. One result is that the mostly rural Malay Muslims are generally less educated and relatively poorer than Thai Buddhist city dwellers, and the south is economically disadvantaged compared to the rest of the country. These circumstances have nourished separatist ambitions among many Malay Muslims.

By the late-1990s, however, the once-formidable armed-separatist movement appeared to be a spent force, undone by factionalism, cross-border cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia and a greater tolerance for political and religious pluralism in Thailand. The government now portrays the remaining separatists as criminal gangs lacking popular support. However, alienation from Buddhist majority Thai society felt by many Malay Muslims has not entirely abated, and the potential for separatist violence remains. Indeed, after the coordinated Christmas-Eve attacks in 2001, some Thai officials speculated that separatists were seeking to attract funding from international terrorist groups by staging such a spectacular attack. Then-Minister of Defense (and current Deputy

³ See Andrew Perrin, "Thailand's Terror," *Time*, November 25, 2002; available at <http://www.time.com>.

⁴ Malay Muslims are ethnically and culturally distinct from the dominant central Thai society, and most speak a Malay dialect rather than Thai. Malay Muslims constitute 80 percent of the population in the south, but Muslims make up only four percent of Thailand's population of roughly sixty million. Indeed, southern Thailand marks a cultural frontier dividing the mostly Malay and Muslim world of archipelagic Southeast Asia from the largely Buddhist mainland.

⁵ 'Patani' is the Malay spelling. The English transliteration of the Thai province name uses two "t's, thus 'Pattani.'

Prime Minister) Chavalit Yongchaiyudh theorized that the killings were revenge for the death of a separatist leader at the hands of police during a recent gun battle.

In short order, however, the government dropped talk about separatists. Now, after every fresh attack in the south, the Prime Minister or members of his cabinet insist that the violence is criminal—not political—in nature. “They are not terrorists but bandits,” Thaksin said following a deadly assault on a police outpost in May.

Thaksin and his ministers describe the violence in vague terms. The attacks are cast as the work of “dark forces” engaged in “conflicts of interest” or opportunists seeking to create chaos for unspecified ends. When speaking more explicitly, they might refer to cliques of corrupt politicians, local officials, police, soldiers and former *mujahidin* recycled as hired guns, shooting it out for control over an illegal economy of smuggled consumer goods, oil, drugs, weapons and people. This past summer, national police chief General Sant Saturanond lectured the media: “Don’t call them separatists. Don’t make it out to be more than what it is. This is not an organized effort. Let’s just call them a group of people who are looking to destroy the lives of police officers to create a situation that appeared to be out of control so that they can benefit economically from the chaos.”

One version of the government theory maintains that the violence is the work of provocateurs, men in uniform threatened with the loss of their sinecures now that the separatists have been marginalized. In particular, a plan to dissolve the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center and the Civilian-Police-Military Command 43, coordinating mechanisms established more than 20 years ago to implement government-security programs in the south, was said to have angered military officers faced with losing illicit income. As former Interior Minister Purachai Piumsombun said in March this year, “Unrest and violence will not end in the South as long as senior officials continue to provide protection to criminal gangs in exchange for money.” In April, the government scrapped the coordinating bodies in an effort to rationalize security efforts in the south by giving the police sole authority. The violence did not stop, nor did the police and military desist from blaming each other. By mid-July, the Army had returned to its intelligence-gathering role in the south and the National Security Council announced new coordinating mechanisms that look very much like those that had been abolished.

There may be some truth to the government’s characterization of the southern violence as a turf war between criminal elements. The south certainly has its share of corrupt politicians and officials. A Western military attaché told me that Thai army officers in the south often supplement their income with “outside activities,” though corruption has decreased over the past decade. These days, he said, the police are more deeply involved in protection rackets. It is also true that bullets and bombs

are sometimes used to settle scores or simply to send a message to a business or political rival. (In Thailand, the distinction between business and politics is often superfluous.) Last month, driving with Ruang and her sister to visit their brother in Nakhon Pathom, we passed a state-run electric company. “Two cops were killed there a few weeks ago,” my sister-in-law said. “They were handling a bomb sent by an employee who had been fired for corruption. It exploded while they were showing it to some reporters.” Last December, a Tesco Lotus “superstore” in Bangkok was attacked with a rocket-propelled grenade in a dispute over the store’s motorcycle-taxi concession. It is likely that some of the violence in the south shares this criminal character.

Yet the government’s insistence that there is no political aspect to the rash of murdered police officers and arson attacks is not entirely convincing. Though government ministers often suggest that they know who is behind the violence, they have been unwilling to name names. The government maintains that separatists are not responsible, yet police cited “national security reasons” for shutting down a website run by the separatist Patani United Liberation Organization on November 4. The government has failed to articulate exactly how the attacks fit into a picture of organized crime or explain why perpetrators alleged to have links to the army or police would risk their lives to steal weapons. Moreover, corrupt officials and organized crime are not unique to southern Thailand; what is unique to the south is a pattern of bombings and 21 murdered policemen.

After the most recent attacks, Thaksin reiterated the view that the violence was not political, saying, “The situation is not that serious. No problem.” In a radio address late in October, Thaksin explained that, “There is a group of people who are not patriotic, who do not love our country and only want to seek gain from private interests and hurt fellow countrymen.”

The government’s new gloss on the most recent attacks is that they were aimed at discrediting the government after it had repeatedly denied any terrorist threat. In particular, the government contends, the attacks seek to undermine the new Interior Minister, Wan Muhamad Nor Matha, a Muslim from Yala province. The notion that the recent ambush, arson and bomb attacks were carried out with the intention of making the government look bad appears to be a reflection of the Prime Minister’s tendency to take everything personally. Yet this claim also suggests a domestic political subtext to the government’s position on the attacks. After becoming Thailand’s richest man (he made his millions in the telecommunications industry), Thaksin formed his own political party, Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) in 1999. By combining his personal wealth with such novelties as opinion polls, focus groups and a policy platform, Thaksin ushered Thai politics into the era of public relations. Soon, Thai Rak Thai became Thailand’s largest and most popular party, decisively defeating the incumbent Democrat adminis-

tration in the 2000 election. The Democrats, now the party of opposition, are the dominant party in the south, which forms their traditional base of support.⁶ When Thaksin suggests that local politicians and officials in the south are at the root of the violence, the implication is clear.

So, what is going on in the south? Is it a police-army turf war? Mafia violence? Secessionist *jihad*? Thai-style politics? “We don’t know,” says Dr. Surachart Bamrungsuk, a security expert at Chulalongkorn Univer-

edge of any links between Muslims in southern Thailand and al Qaeda or JI, but the conditions are certainly there. Let’s say you’ve got three million Muslims in the south. If only one percent is radicalized, then you’ve got thirty thousand radicals. Even if it’s only one percent of one percent, that’s still three hundred hard cases prepared to use violence for their cause.”

This kind of analysis points to a fundamental difficulty in assessing the southern violence. Is it political violence? Is it motivated by

profit? The observer is reduced to imputing motives for actions about which almost nothing is known except the general context and the results. The distinction between a common murder and a terrorist act hinges on what the gunmen (or their paymasters) intend to accomplish. Are they striking a blow against Siamese oppression or just getting paid?



Whitewash: Thaksin counters reports of a terrorist threat. *The Bangkok Post*, Nov. 23, 2002

sity. “The situation in the South is very unclear.” Those who do know aren’t talking. No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, no demands have been issued and no one has been convicted of any crime.

Al Qaeda Connection?

Whatever its real character, the violence in the south is widely believed to be a local product. There is no evidence to suggest that the recent attacks are linked in any way to al Qaeda or its local affiliate, JI. On the other hand, such connections between local Islamic militants and foreign terrorist networks are not difficult to imagine. Some foreign terrorism experts insist that JI operates in Thailand, and that Thailand is at high risk of an attack. According to Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, a terrorism expert at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, “[Thai authorities] are making a fatal mistake. Jemaah Islamiah has infrastructure there, and there is no doubt that Phuket was considered on the list of targets before Bali. The Thais must act now or risk (having their own) Bali.”⁷ As a Western diplomat in Bangkok explained, “I have no knowl-

The official version of the incidents in the south removes Muslim separatism as a potential factor. This is meant to be reassuring. However, the government dismisses Muslim separatism as a cause only to replace it with general lawlessness instigated by local officials. Even if the government version is accurate, Thailand still has a serious problem. Those charged with ensuring law and order are instead subverting it. Terrorists find such circumstances inviting. Explaining Southeast Asia’s attraction for al Qaeda, Zachary Abuza writes:

“[S]outheast Asian states [are] what I term ‘countries of convenience’ for terrorists: with tourist-friendly and minimal visa requirements, lax financial oversights, well established informal remittance systems for overseas workers, porous borders, often weak central government control, endemic government corruption, and a vast supply of illicit arms.”⁸

Although the government is trying its best to erase any connection between Thailand and terrorism in the minds of potential visitors, Thai authorities have taken measures to improve Thailand’s capabilities to counter

⁶ Thaksin’s main antagonist is head of the Democrat Party, former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai. Chuan hails from the southern province of Trang. Thaksin is from Chiang Mai, the principal city of northern Thailand. Thaksin once attempted to score points with Muslim southerners by complaining that, as a Northerner, he also had difficulty with the Central Thai dialect, which explained why the press so often misunderstood him.

⁷ Quoted in Simon Elegant, “Unmasking Terror,” *Time*, November 11, 2002; available at <http://www.time.com>.

⁸ Zachary Abuza, “Introduction,” *Tentacles of Terror: Al Qaeda’s Southeast Asian Network* (Forthcoming from Lynne Rienner); available at <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s711740.htm>.

terrorism. The government knows that an attack on the scale of the Bali bombings will be far more damaging to the Thai economy than any decline in tourism stemming from the mere prospect of an attack. On October 3, 2002, Thailand signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Australia on counter-terrorism cooperation, addressing border control, identity fraud and traffic in weapons. After the Bali bombings, the National Security Council proposed to establish a hotline for taxi drivers to report information about potential terrorists. At the Eighth ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Thailand acceded to the "Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures" already signed by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. This agreement aims to facilitate greater coordination among these states in fighting transnational crime. Late in November, the government announced the establishment of a new domestic counter-terrorism unit combining police and army units. On November 27, Bangkok staged its first terrorism response exercise, simulating attacks on theaters and stadiums in the capital.

Late November also brought the first acknowledgement from a high-level Thai official that foreign terrorists had recently entered Thailand. The supreme commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, General Surayud Chulanont, said, "We have had some intelligence reports indicating that foreign militants either sneaked in or entered the Kingdom as tourists. However, they just used our country for transit." Surayud maintained that these militants had no role in planning the Bali bombing. It is worth noting that Malaysia had asked Thailand to be on the lookout for eight al-Qaeda suspects as recently as October 26, 2002. Of course, it's no surprise that terrorists have passed through Thailand. Surayud's acknowledgement is important not as a revelation, but as an indication that—in spite of the public relations campaign—the threat of international terrorism is not being entirely discounted by Thai authorities.⁹

Indeed, international terrorists have targeted Bangkok before. In March 1994, a plot to bomb the Israeli Embassy was foiled at the last moment by Bangkok's notorious traffic. A truck loaded with a massive bomb struck a motorcycle a short distance from the Israeli Embassy. When a crowd started to form, the panicked terrorist fled on foot, leaving police to discover the bomb along with the body of the murdered driver. Police said the bomb was similar to the device used in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. The terrorist, an Iranian citizen, was

arrested several months later. He had been in Malaysia, and was apprehended after crossing the border into southern Thailand.

No Good but No Problem

It's unfortunate for Thaksin that his constituency in the campaign to minimize the terrorist threat is not the Thai people, but foreign governments and tourists. The Thais with whom I've spoken are largely unperturbed by the warnings of a terrorist threat to Thailand.

* * *

On a Saturday night, Bangkok's famous backpacker ghetto, Khao San Road, is crowded with mostly young, mostly Western tourists. Here, in the Bangkok equivalent of Bali's Kuta, there is no apparent drop-off in tourists and the mood is relaxed. I speak to a woman selling rubber head-masks of monsters and superheroes. Also on offer is a latex likeness of Osama bin Laden. "It's selling pretty well," she tells me. "Who is buying it?" "Farang," she says, Western foreigners. Who else would wear a rubber mask in Thailand's heat for the dubious drollery of impersonating bin Laden?

The staff at Suzie Pub are unmoved by the terror warnings. "I guess it could happen," says a young bartender with a shrug. He has no interest in contemplating a truck bomb outside his place of employment. Rather, he wants to know what I can tell him about the latest American scholarship on the lost city of Atlantis.

At the Banglumpu police station, around the corner from Khao San Road, a beat cop tells me that orders came down after the Bali bombing to step up security in the district. The only visible signs of enhanced security are the portable metal barriers at either end of Khao San Road, blocking entrance to any vehicle larger than a motorcycle. There are more explosive-sniffing dogs, the officer tells me, and more plainclothes police mixing with the tourists. Too many uniformed police would be unnerving for the foreigners, he says. He is confident that there will be no attack on Khao San Road.

Across town, on Soi Cowboy (Cowboy Alley), one of three small enclaves in Bangkok catering to Western sex tourists, the bar girls are bored. Given the rich symbolic value of the name, Soi Cowboy seems a top contender for a terrorist attack. "No good!" said one worker when asked about the effect of the Bali bombing. "No customers. Look around, there's no one here." Security had been

⁹ It stands to reason that General Surayud should be the one official willing to acknowledge that Thailand is not immune to international terrorism. Surayud was appointed Chief of the Army by the previous Democrat administration and earned a reputation as a professional soldier who kept the Army out of politics. However, Surayud has been at odds with the Thaksin administration over policy toward Burma. Surayud's tough stance against drug traffickers along the border irritated the Burmese military government, undermining Thaksin's placatory approach to Rangoon. In October this year, in a military reshuffle engineered by Thaksin, Surayud was "promoted" to the largely ceremonial post of Supreme Commander and replaced by a general known to be more receptive to a conciliatory Burma policy.



Hot item: Bin Laden mask for sale, Khao San Road, Bangkok

stepped up after Bali, but the workers are not universally happy about it. In practice, enhanced security just means more police arriving at 2 AM to enforce the legal closing time. Otherwise, the police keep a low profile. “*Farang* don’t want to see police when they’re out at the bars,” says one woman.

The residents of Soi Cowboy are concerned about terrorism, but most are not frightened. They speak of a possible attack with a kind of resignation that seems to encompass more than just the prospect of terrorism. “I’m a little scared, but there’s nothing I can do about it,” says one woman in front of a bar called The Long Gun as she hugs her daughter. “Terrorism is the least of our worries right now,” says another woman, manager of a neighboring bar. “Drugs are the biggest problem.” Echoing the hopeful logic of the Prime Minister, one young woman explains, “Thailand is at peace with the world. We Thais have no enemies, so I don’t think terrorists will attack us.” Her friend disagrees. She had been reading about Jemaah Islamiah on the Internet and is worried about an attack. “It’s a dangerous world,” she says. “I only went to school for six years, but I like to know what’s going on.” At an open-air bar around the corner from Soi Cowboy, a young woman explains that the threat of a terrorist attack wouldn’t keep her from her work. “Soi Cowboy is way over there,” she says, indicating a point 30 feet away. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **THAILAND**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of freshwater supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net

Fax: (603) 643-9599

Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications: Ellen Kozak

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