

Executive Memorandum

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Insurgency in Thailand: The U.S. Should Support the Government

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On April 28, 2004, machete-wielding ethnic Malay Muslim youths attacked Thai police and military posts in southern Thailand. In the ensuing melee, 107 of the attackers and five members of the security forces were killed. The worst fighting occurred when the security forces stormed Krue Se Mosque, killing 32 defenders. The recent increased violence—at least 75 people have been killed in separate incidents since January 2004—coupled with an alleged terrorist connection has raised concerns about regional stability. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has responded by sending additional security forces to the region and greatly increasing economic aid.

Congress and the Bush Administration should assist by increasing the funding of the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok and negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) with Thailand. An FTA would increase trade between the two countries, thereby improving the Thai economy and making additional resources available for use in southern Thailand.

The Problem. Separatist violence has been a feature of life in southern Thailand for centuries, but identifying who organized this attack and determining the causes of unrest are proving difficult. Prime Minister Thaksin blames Muslim separatists and criminal gangs. He also believes that reactionary pol-

iticians and security officials who are resisting efforts to end government corruption and professionalize the police and military may have contributed by provoking the radicals or by looking the other way as the violence got out of hand. Some ministers and military officials blame foreign terrorists.

There is evidence that members of terrorist groups—including Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and al-Qaeda—have traveled through southern Thailand: The letters “JI” were embroidered on the jacket of one of the dead militants. Nevertheless, little direct evidence suggests JI or al-Qaeda participation in the attack. The identity and affiliation of the leaders and possible outside agitators are still unknown and the Thai militants’ method of attack differed from al-Qaeda and JI tactics (e.g., suicide bombings against civilian targets).

Another challenge to assigning blame is rampant corruption in the security forces and their involvement in illicit activities—including drug

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- Congress and the Administration should increase funding to the International Law Enforcement Academy in Bangkok; and
 - Negotiate a free trade agreement with Thailand, which would increase trade and improve the Thai economy.
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smuggling and arms trafficking. In January, for example, 300 weapons were stolen from an army base in southern Thailand. The investigating police submitted a report to the prime minister accusing the army of stealing the weapons, selling them to insurgents in Indonesia, and then staging the raid to cover up the theft. The army denied the charges and instead blamed the raid on growing separatist violence in southern Thailand.

Local community leaders blame the unrest on the security forces' abusive tactics (e.g., beatings, unlawful abductions, and arbitrary searches). The Thai government's Human Rights Commission confirms the community leaders' accusations. Furthermore, the southern region is the least developed economically and ethnic Malays feel that they are discriminated against in educational opportunities and government jobs.

Thaksin's Choices. Faced with separatists, terrorists, feuding security agencies, and worries that the unrest in southern Thailand will affect investor confidence and scare away tourists, Thaksin is using a mix of soft and hard measures to calm the unrest.

Thaksin decided to continue martial law (declared in January 2004) through September of this year in the three affected provinces, including an increased army presence. He transferred General Panlop Pinmanee, who—against orders from the minister of defense—ordered the assault on Krue Se Mosque. Thaksin also dissolved the southern Thailand regional headquarters of Internal Security Operation Command and replaced it with a task force charged with developing the border provinces. The prime minister also established an independent commission to investigate the April 28 attack.

Thaksin toured the area only one week after the killings, visiting local mosques and family members of the militants who were killed. There was already an economic aid program in place to channel \$300 million to southern Thailand over five years. In the wake of the April 28 incident, the prime minister promised scholarships to the children of those slain and more investment in agriculture and tourism—mainstays of the south's economy.

The prime minister also visited Malaysia, reassuring Malaysians that Thai security forces were not singling out Malays. He gained a commitment

from Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to increase security on the Thai–Malaysian border to deter cross-border insurgent activity. Additionally, Malaysia promised to send Islamic clerics to southern Thailand to preach nonviolence and to discourage militancy. Thaksin hopes that moderate Malaysian clerics will balance some of the anti-Thai separatist teachings coming from southern Thailand's mosques and religious schools.

What the United States Should Do. Thailand is an established free-market democracy and a formal ally of the United States. Thaksin is popular, currently enjoying a 64.4 percent approval rating—up from 58.8 percent before the April 28 incident. Because Thaksin's new policies appear to address the underlying causes of the April 28 violence, American policymakers should support the prime minister by focusing on improving Thailand's economy and the Thai police force. Specifically, the Bush Administration and Congress should:

- **Negotiate a free trade agreement with Thailand.** Negotiations for an FTA between the United States and Thailand will begin in June 2004. Increased trade with the United States would improve Thailand's economy, in turn providing Bangkok with more resources for proposed economic aid to its southern provinces.
- **Increase funding for the International Law Enforcement Academy in Thailand.** Bangkok is the host to one of four ILEA campuses worldwide. ILEA Bangkok trains mid- to senior-level police from 12 countries on transnational crimes endemic to Southeast Asia. The ILEA's classes are popular in the region, but funding constraints (they were budgeted only \$14.5 million in 2004 for all four academies) allow training of only a small number of officers each year. Increased funding would permit ILEA to open more seats and teach more classes on civil and human rights, money laundering, anti-terrorism, bomb-blast investigation, and many other subjects that would contribute to the professionalization and effectiveness of police forces in the region.

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