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# Interpreting 10 Years of Violence in Thailand's Deep South

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Around 5000 deaths and more than 8300 injuries are attributed to Thailand's ongoing "southern fire" (*fai tai*). A range of explanations for this violence in the southernmost provinces of Thailand have been offered by academics, journalists and other analysts. Terrorism, insurgency and gangsterism have all been introduced as labels for components of the violence. This article is motivated by the need to re-examine the empirical foundations of these explanations. We focus on two case study districts that illustrate some of the key trends, ambiguities and inconsistencies. We are particularly concerned to illuminate interactions between criminal violence, violence generated by personal disputes, and violence motivated by retribution. Based on the available evidence, our estimation is that a relatively modest proportion of the violence in Thailand's deep south over the past ten years can be directly linked to insurgent or terrorist activities. To conclude, we pose challenging questions about the nature of criminality, insurgency and politics not just in Thailand's deep south but in the country as a whole.

Thai security officials face awkward choices when they are asked to assess the violence in the country's three southernmost provinces—Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. Some officials insist that Thailand is battling an insurgency, fuelled by Islamist and separatist sentiments, which is working to fracture the precious unity of the kingdom. Others suggest that Thailand is embroiled in a costly and messy war, partly inspired by separatists, partly the result of opportunism and incompetence, and partly the outcome of the deadly suggestion that violence will bring profit to those who dare pick up a gun, knife or bomb. Others still are inclined to offer explanations that apportion more of the blame to parts of the Thai security forces, and to particular Thai political interests. Certain police, paramilitary and military units are criticised for their contributions to fuelling the ongoing bloodshed.

Each of these general explanations for the conflict helps to clarify aspects of the complex and ambiguous character of Thailand's "southern fire" (*fai tai*).<sup>2</sup> But the conflation of these various explanations can also lead to confusion. In response to that potential confusion we want to know why the situation in southern Thailand is apparently different, in some key respects, to other civil

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<sup>2</sup> *Fai tai* has become the standard Thai language description for the southern violence. This phrase implies a lack of "coolness" or of "calm" that is in keeping with how many Thais from other parts of the country view southerners. Southern Thais are, in the common stereotype, judged to be overly temperamental (*jai rom*) and, for Thais at least, unusually aggressive.

wars. The challenge, for us, is to consider the conflict in southern Thailand on the basis of what has been learned over the past ten years, from 2001-2011. This leads to some robust judgements about Thailand's security forces, and about the specific nexus of southern Thai criminal, political and commercial interests.

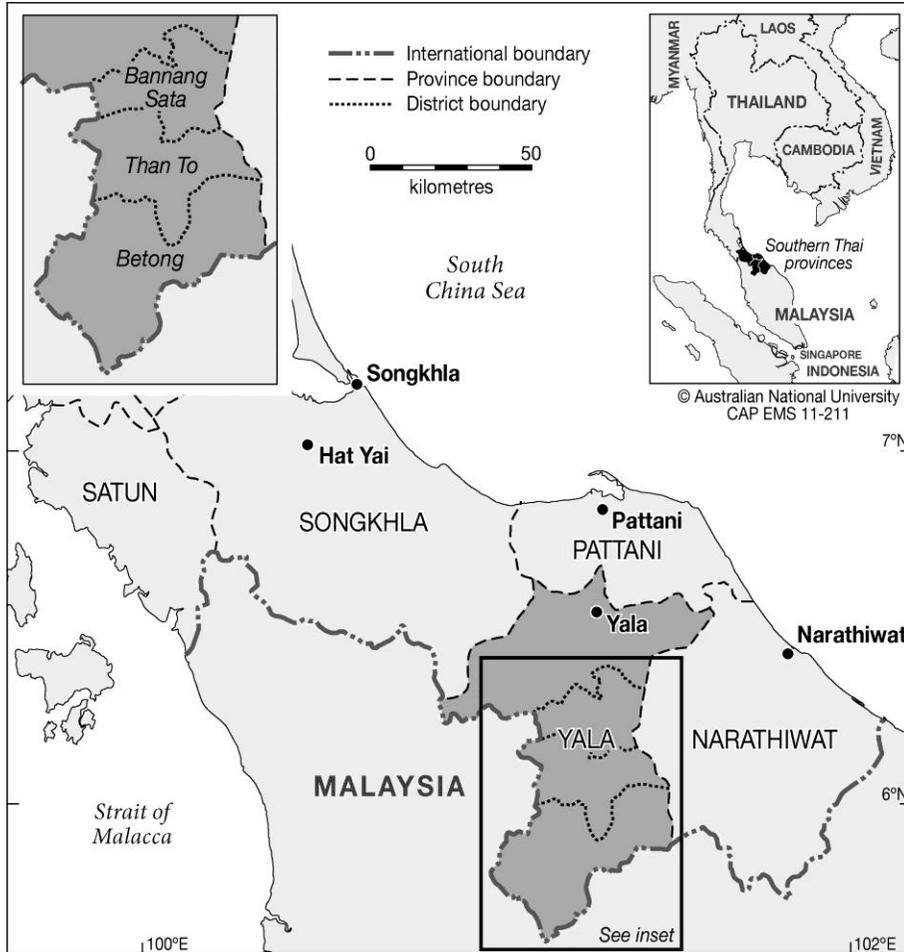


Figure 1. Southernmost Thailand

Our current, preliminary effort to determine the specific character of the decade-long conflict in southern Thailand is supported by various statistical summaries, by the analysis offered in earlier scholarly appraisals, and also

by a wide range of field-based and primary source qualitative evidence.<sup>3</sup> From these sources we know that around 5000 deaths and more than 8300 injuries are attributed to the violence from January 2004 to January 2012.<sup>4</sup> The categories of person affected by the violence are also well quantified. Through the efforts of Deep South Watch, which is based at Prince of Songkla University, it is possible to analyse many statistical aspects of the conflict and draw some striking conclusions. But in these numbers alone we do not find clear answers to questions about why the violence started or, far more importantly, why it continues on an almost daily basis. Questions about the spatial distribution of the violence, and its concentration in some areas, are also pertinent.

As Aurel Croissant argued back in 2005, “[t]he current wave of political violence in Thailand is not a general phenomenon of the south”.<sup>5</sup> While comprehensive maps on exactly where violent incidents occur are difficult to generate there are overwhelming indications that only some provinces, districts, towns and villages are sites of significant violence.<sup>6</sup> The question is: why? The answers that we introduce to explain this situation refine the general explanations of violence in southern Thailand offered by Thai security officials. We point to crime, personal disputes, retribution, electoral politics and commercial imperatives as more specific explanations for proportions of the violence, and for its spatial distribution. To interpret the violence, we are particularly enthusiastic about a comparative methodology grounded in case-studies. As such, our overall interpretation may have implications not just for the three southernmost provinces but for Thailand as a whole, and for any country that is faced with persistent conflict that appears immune to the usual levers of counter-insurgency, law enforcement or nation-building.

## A Short History of Southern Thai Violence

The past decade is not the first time that Thailand's three southernmost provinces have experienced a sustained period of violence. As one of the country's distant peripheries, and as a region with a Malay-speaking Muslim majority population, it has never proven simple for Bangkok-based authorities to exercise their rule. Reflecting on this historical dimension,

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<sup>3</sup> An earlier analysis of the southern Thai insurgency that complements the arguments of this article is Joseph Chinyong Liow and Don Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts: Thailand's Shapeless Southern Insurgency* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> These figures are extrapolated from a government tally supplied in 2011. In early 2012 most newspapers began habitually invoking the figure of 5,000 deaths.

<sup>5</sup> Aurel Croissant, 'Unrest in South Thailand: Contours, Causes, and Consequences Since 2001', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1 (April 2005), p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> For reinforcing our judgement on this point we are grateful to Dr Anders Engvall. His unpublished maps of the spatial distribution of violence were helpful when we were thinking through this issue.

Patrick Jory calls what we see today “a centuries-old conflict”.<sup>7</sup> Differences in language, culture and religion, not to mention ties to Malaysia and the rest of Islamic Southeast Asia, are part of the challenge. These are historically potent ties. Back in 1975 M. Ladd Thomas noted that in southern Thailand “[e]ven where the Muslims have a command of the Thai language, a wide social gulf exists between them on the one hand and the Chinese and Thai Buddhists on the other”.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the southernmost provinces were among Thailand’s most unstable and were the site of both a Malay-Muslim separatist movement and a large-scale communist rebellion. Notwithstanding that history, the impression developed from the 1980s was that the catalysts for conflict had been rendered less significant as economic growth and greater national integration saw rapid changes in southern Thai society. New government institutions are often credited with providing the political and economic foundations for those years of relative peace. But any peace began to be undermined from around 2001 when attacks on government personnel in southern Thailand began again.<sup>9</sup> The violence escalated until 2004 when the new “southern fire” vaulted to national prominence.

It is since 2004, when this most recent period of conflict in southern Thailand received greater public attention, that scholars and other analysts have turned their attention to the precise character of the violence. Marc Askew, one of the most significant scholars of this region, has argued that “[t]he current multi-layered turbulence in the south represents one of the greatest challenges to be faced by the Thai state and society”.<sup>10</sup> For Askew, that challenge is complicated by the fact that the evidence is often inadequate. He has suggested that:

Numbers have featured conspicuously in assessments of conditions in the south and in arguments confirming or denying progress by governments, security agencies and their critics. However, calculations of events and casualties vary ... making unequivocal judgments problematic.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Jory, ‘From *Melayu Patani* to Thai Muslim: The Spectre of Ethnic Identity in Southern Thailand’, *South East Asia Research*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2007), p. 255.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, M. Ladd Thomas, *Political Violence in the Muslim Provinces of Southern Thailand*, Occasional Paper No. 28 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> As reported in Aurel Croissant, ‘Unrest in South Thailand: Contours, Causes, and Consequences Since 2001’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1 (April 2005), pp. 21-43.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Askew, ‘Thailand’s Intractable Southern War: Policy, Insurgency and Discourse’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 2 (August 2008), p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Askew, ‘Fighting with Ghosts: Confronting Thailand’s Enigmatic “Southern Fire”’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 32, no. 2 (August 2010), p. 142.

This is a theme that has also been examined by Duncan McCargo in his prize-winning monograph, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*. He argues that “[i]n the highly charged world of Thailand’s Malay-Muslim provinces, small details count”.<sup>12</sup> Deep South Watch is a repository of such details and its 2010 report put matters in stark terms. That report argues that the “violence has brought about 12,126 victims within 7 years [which] inevitably makes Thailand’s southernmost region one of the hotspot ... most sensitive areas in the world”.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Beginnings of the Wave, 2001-2004**

In the standard accounts the recent period of conflict in southern Thailand commenced on 4 January 2004 when a spectacular raid on a military arsenal in Narathiwat province saw perpetrators escape with ammunition and firearms. After the raid, violence increased dramatically. However, that is not when the violence started. As Aurel Croissant indicates:

[a] total of 1,975 violent incidents were recorded between 1993 and the end of November 2004. Of these, 21 per cent occurred before 2001, and the other 79 per cent of violent incidents took place from 2001 onwards.<sup>14</sup>

It is the spike in violence from 2001 onwards that we find particularly compelling. The most likely story is that it emerged from conflict between paramilitary Rangers and their counterparts in the police force. We must remember that on 6 January 2001 former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra won his first electoral victory bringing the Thai Rak Thai party to power. Thaksin’s electoral revolution impacted politics the length and breadth of the kingdom and ended, of course, in Thailand’s 2006 coup. But in the meantime he sought to radically reshape Thai politics. In the deep south, Thaksin failed in many respects and it is under his watch that the killings of police and soldiers (especially paramilitary Rangers) recommenced.<sup>15</sup> The level of violence then increased sharply again through 2002 and 2003, well before the re-ignition of the “southern fire” was given national-level attention.

In this period, there is no doubt that the official security organisations suffered from cumbersome organisational arrangements, blurred chains of command and the vagaries of bureaucratic politics. On the police side was Police Region 9 responsible for urban communities in the seven

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<sup>12</sup> Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Srisompob Jitpiromsri, ‘The Obvious Trend of Violence’s Intensification in the Deep South over 7 Years’, Deep South Watch, March 2011, <<http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/1603>> [Accessed May 2011].

<sup>14</sup> Croissant, ‘Unrest in South Thailand’, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> For detailed accounts of these killings see Desmond Ball and David Scott Mathieson, *Militia Redux: Or Sor and the Revival of Paramilitarism in Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007), pp. 213-74; and for some more context see Desmond Ball, *The Boys in Black: The Thahan Phran (Rangers), Thailand’s Para-military Border Guards* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2004), pp. 166-8, 177.

southernmost provinces; the Yala-based Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC), responsible for policing the villages; and the Border Patrol Police (BPP), whose 44th Division is based in Yala, with companies in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat Provinces looking after the border areas. The Region 4 Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) was responsible for oversight and direction of counter-terrorist operations. And the Yala-based Civilian-Police-Military (CPM) Command 43 was a combined staff of civilian officials, police and military officers, which controlled a force consisting, *inter alia*, of 800 Marines and the 900 Rangers from the 41st and 43rd Regiments.<sup>16</sup>

Back then, as now, there was no consensus among the authorities on who was responsible for the violence. McCargo summarises that “[t]he nature of the militant movement behind most of the violence in Thailand’s deep South remains a matter of dispute”.<sup>17</sup> The military was alone among the Thai security agencies in publicly attributing the violence to Muslim separatist groups. The 4th Army Region Headquarters and ISOC 4 believed that the Pattani Islamic Mujahideen Movement, a group with alleged links to Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, was responsible.<sup>18</sup> However, a fifty-page report by CPM 43 concluded that “local police were largely to blame for the troubles”, that “some police were tied in with influential figures and involved in illegal businesses such as drugs, contraband and prostitution”, and that police killings “stemmed from personal conflicts between the slain officers and local people”.<sup>19</sup> Back in 2002, Police General Sant Sarutanont, then national police chief, dismissed a suggestion that Patani United Liberation Organisation separatists might have been involved.<sup>20</sup>

In the same year the then Interior Minister, Purachai Piumsoy, warned that so-called Muslim separatists should not be made scapegoats, and said that the attacks were the work of “some groups of [dissatisfied] government officials. These groups tried to make it look like the work of [Muslim] separatists, but it’s not”.<sup>21</sup> The Police Region 9 commander, Police Lieutenant General Thawatchai Jongsukhon, argued that a military presence was unnecessary in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat provinces “since the separatist movements were scattered and no longer posed a threat”.<sup>22</sup> In March 2002, it was reported that the deputy chief of the national police was

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<sup>16</sup> Yuwadee Tunyasiri and Wassana Nanuam, ‘Violence in South: Police Challenged to Prove Their Claim’, *Bangkok Post*, 22 March 2002, p. 1; Wassana Nanuam, ‘Violence in South: Police to Blame for Troubles, Says Military Report’, *Bangkok Post*, 23 March 2002, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, p. 134.

<sup>18</sup> Wassana Nanuam, ‘Violence in South: Group Linked to al-Qaeda Under Watch’, *Bangkok Post*, 24 March 2002, p. 3; Wassana Nanuam and Waeda-o Harai, ‘South ISOC Links Unrest to Separatist Groups’, *Bangkok Post*, 24 June 2002, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Wassana, ‘Violence in South: Police to Blame for Troubles, Says Military Report’, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> ‘South: B50,000 Tag Put on Heads of Policemen’, *Bangkok Post*, 15 June 2002, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Police Seek Transfers’, *The Nation*, 19 March 2002, p. 6A.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Violence in South: Sanoh Wants Army Out, But Local MPs Say Police Need Help’, *Bangkok Post*, 24 March 2002, p. 1.

planning to ask Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to abolish CPM 43, and that he “would also seek the removal of two southern-based military ranger units for alleged involvement in the murders of the [police] officers”.<sup>23</sup>

While this all happened years ago, much of the underlying security situation failed to improve. In this case, the Civilian-Police-Military Command 43 was actually dissolved and its Combined Force disbanded on 1 May 2002, under a direct order from the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>24</sup> The 41st and 43rd Regiments were posted to another Army unit, Border Protection Unit 43, which was responsible for guarding the Thailand-Malaysia border.<sup>25</sup> Some, such as Aurel Croissant, have suggested that this was a crucial period in the evolution of the conflict and that it provided the political and economic conditions for the escalation in later years.<sup>26</sup>

### **Escalation, 2004-2007**

Since 2004 the level of violence has increased with regular killings, bombings and ambushes. Shadowy actors are blamed for portions of this violence and the authorities are unclear on exactly how much can be attributed to so-called “security related” (i.e. insurgent or terrorist) incidents. The amorphous character of much that drives the violence in southernmost Thailand guarantees that it can be very difficult for analysts to identify the most important patterns. The absence of any effective rule of law only further diminishes analytical clarity.

Nonetheless we suggest that there are four main patterns of violence. First, there are those incidents that see locals, often teenagers and other young men, attacking government installations and personnel. This is the violence that is most readily attributed to the insurgency, to Islamists, or to separatists. The cultural, religious and social differences between the Thai Buddhists and the local Muslims, all reinforced by perceived economic and social inequalities, are generally identified as the fundamental drivers of this violence. It is the type of violence that fits, most neatly at least, into our understanding of what an insurgency should look like. Of course there are many reasons why young men might attack government forces. Perceived slights or offences can be blown out of proportion in situations where violence is relatively cheap. Both sides could be fighting over drugs or girls. They could be motivated by payments from shadowy paymasters. They just might be bored. Even after so many years, we do not know nearly enough about what motivates young men in southern Thailand to attack government forces.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The South: NSC Takes Over Security of Five Provinces From Today’, *Bangkok Post*, 1 May 2002, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Tunyasiri and Nanuam, ‘Violence in South: Police Challenged to Prove Their Claim’, p. 1; Nanuam, ‘Violence in South: Police to Blame for Troubles, Says Military Report’, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Croissant, ‘Unrest in South Thailand’, pp. 21-43.

Second, violence in southern Thailand is, in part, based on retribution. In one common form this means that the young men and women of the Thai security forces who do the dangerous patrolling and who risk their lives trying to police the southern provinces may seek to avenge the deaths on their side. This is partly explained by lack of institutional authority within security agencies, but is also a product of institutional strength, memory and prestige. We have evidence for how these dynamics work in practice. We should bear in mind the impunities and ambiguities that go hand-in-hand with this violence. “Black clad” men are often blamed for the most deadly attacks.

Third, there is violence that is apparently generated among those in southern Thailand who benefit economically from ongoing conflict. A region that has been long deprived now sees monumental infusions of funding from Thai government coffers. Those seemingly limitless budgets are attractive prizes for the government agencies that control them but also for those among the local population who can best manipulate their disbursement. Road construction contractors, hotel builders, caterers, wholesalers, everyone, is likely to get some cut of the government spend. There are also those economic actors that do especially well under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity. They may trade in the illegal gasoline or gambling markets, or make their money by trafficking the classic trio of guns, girls or ganja. According to Croissant, “[g]iven the ubiquity of organized and petty crime, small-arms trade, smuggling, and drug trafficking in the south, it would be naive to assume criminals and terrorists can be clearly distinguished”.<sup>27</sup> Adequately divorcing the conflated numbers of other dead and injured from the violence that goes with criminality has proven an impossible task.

Fourth, it is also impossible to ignore the reality that Thailand is a generally violent society where politics, and everything else, is sometimes accompanied by bloody settlements. In 2010 there were 3654 murders in the country, with a murder rate of 5.3 per 100,000 people.<sup>28</sup> The southernmost provinces suffer from this same general affliction.<sup>29</sup>

### **What is “Security Related”?**

As explained by Marc Askew, most accounts, including this one, habitually introduce the violence in the deep south by citing the total number of deaths and casualties, giving the impression that all are due to insurgent violence. In a careful analysis of this issue Askew argues that there is a problem with this: the official figures do not, in any consistent or meaningful way,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> UNODC, ‘Intentional Homicide, Count and TRate per 100,000 Population’, *UNODC Homicide Statistics*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, <<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html>> [Accessed 16 January 2012].

<sup>29</sup> The lack of consistent province-by-province breakdowns of crime statistics currently makes it difficult to offer overall comparisons of regional variations in violent incidents across Thailand.

disaggregate the various types of killings. According to Askew, internal police estimates “for the period January 2004 to late 2008, though problematic, suggest that so-called private killings may account for one quarter to a third of all violent deaths in the deep south since 2004”.<sup>30</sup> Askew goes on to describe how, for these years, police tallied 4296 shooting incidents, of which 950 (22 percent) were judged to arise from “personal disputes”, while 2344 (54.5 percent) were assessed as “security related” (thus pertaining, at least generally, to terrorism or the insurgency). Askew suggests it is significant that in a further 998 shooting incidents (23 percent) the police failed to identify cause or culprit. This means that the percentage of personal attacks, based on Askew’s numbers, may be even higher. He argues, and we agree, that “some of these unattributable shootings no doubt include cases of clandestine assassination by police and army hit-squads”.<sup>31</sup>

Askew goes on to make some other key observations. He argues that the proportion of what could be classified as personal killings may be even higher precisely “because official figures understate actual numbers for several reasons”. In his account, Askew states that local military and police officers—struggling to deal with the ambiguous political, criminal and security situation—may describe cases as “security-related” even though clear evidence is unavailable. Highlighting some of the incentives for proffering different official classifications, Askew suggests that

shooting cases initially determined as ‘private’ by the police are sometimes switched to the ‘security-related’ category following appeals from victim’s relatives seeking government compensation payment.<sup>32</sup>

Such payments are not available to those caught up in private killings. While it is only possible to make a tentative assessment, Askew reports that some officials suggest that the amorphous category of personal-political killings could account for 40 to 50 percent of total civilian deaths during the years of “insurgency”. He goes on to argue that

[i]nternal police analysis using a revised classification formula of events introduced late in 2009, proposed that in that year 34 per cent of violent events were a result of personal-political conflicts.<sup>33</sup>

Another official analysis suggests that only 11 percent of the 63,677 crimes reported in the south from 2004 to 2010 have been “insurgency-related”. According to Police General Adul Saengsingkaew, the security advisor to the Royal Thai Police, one of the reasons is that “imitation attacks” are designed

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<sup>30</sup> Askew, ‘Fighting with Ghosts’, p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. On the issue of clandestine official killings of insurgent suspects, see ‘Extrajudicial Killings are not an Achievement’, Issara News, 16 April 2010, <[http://www.isranews.org/isranews/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=291](http://www.isranews.org/isranews/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=291)> [Accessed April 2011].

<sup>32</sup> Askew, ‘Fighting with Ghosts’, p. 122.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

to look like terrorist acts but that “not every bombing or shooting is the work of insurgents”.<sup>34</sup>

This complicates matters and may make *all* of the numbers appear somewhat suspect. What is even more interesting is that Askew further argues that

similar assessments on the role of local political conflict in providing momentum to local violence have been suggested ... by insurgents, Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) members in Malaysia, Muslim rights lawyers and local Muslim politicians: people who are hardly likely to have a vested interest in duplicating official representations.<sup>35</sup>

In a Wikileaks cable published in May 2011 by the *Malaysia Today* website, The Honorary Thai Consul in Langkawi, Malaysian businessman Shazryl Eskay Abdullah, “estimated that criminal gangs and Thai security services were responsible for 70 percent of the recent violence”.<sup>36</sup> He went on to say that “Malay separatists accounted for only 30 percent of attacks in the south with Thai army, policy and intelligence agency factions, along with criminal gangs, responsible for the balance”.

The Royal Thai Army, for its part, has calculated at different times since 2009 that only 22-26 percent of the violence can be attributed to insurgent or separatist actions. As an example, in November 2009, the Royal Thai Army’s 4th Army commander, Lieutenant General Pichet Wisajorn, who was the senior officer responsible for southern Thailand, said that only 26 percent of violent incidents were insurgency-related. According to a report in *Asia Times Online* “[i]f true, that means the majority of the nearly 4,000 murders committed over the past six years can be attributed to political disputes and criminal activity”.<sup>37</sup> In April 2011, 4th Army Area commander, Lieutenant General Udomchai Thammasarojrat, stated that “[v]iolence is based on the joint work of insurgents and rings running illegal businesses, including contraband petrol traders and drug dealers”.<sup>38</sup> He specifically suggested that gasoline smugglers have responded with violence to a clampdown on their illicit businesses.<sup>39</sup> On the same day, Deputy Interior Minister Thaworn Senneam stated that illicit businesses are funding the insurgency.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Southern crimes “mimic” insurgents’, *Bangkok Post*, 25 January 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Askew, ‘Fighting with Ghosts’, p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Subject: Honorary Consul Notes Malaysia as Safe Haven for Thai Insurgency, Relevance of Old Guard’, *Wikileaks*, 13 February 2007, <malaysia-today.net/mtcolums/40593-shazryl-eskay-abdullah-tells-the-us-that-malaysia-is-a-terrorist-safe-haven> [Accessed May 2011].

<sup>37</sup> Brian McCartan, ‘War Brings Profits to South Thailand’, *Asia Times Online*, 12 December 2009, <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/KL12Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/KL12Ae01.html)> [Accessed May 2011].

<sup>38</sup> The Nation, ‘Roadside Bomb in South Injures Five Rangers’, *The Nation*, 28 April 2011, p. 15A.

<sup>39</sup> Editorial, ‘Govt Clueless about the Spike in South Violence’, *The Nation*, 24 April 2011, p. 7A.

<sup>40</sup> Post reporters, ‘Five Soldiers Hurt in 5kg Bomb Blast’, *Bangkok Post*, 28 April 2011, p. 4.

Furthermore, a close reading of Deep South Watch statistics suggests that there are much higher proportions of killings in certain sectors of the population. Around half of the attacks are described as targeting “civilians”. The military absorbs 16 percent of attacks, and police 11 percent.<sup>41</sup> It is relevant that the category of person most likely to die in an attack is the “Islamic leader” (83.9 percent of the time) while military personnel are the least likely to die (17.7 percent).

### **Case Study Contradictions: Bannang Sata and Betong Districts, Yala**

To illustrate our fundamental point about how best to interpret violence in Thailand's southernmost provinces we offer two district level case-studies. In Thailand's system of political organisation the “district” (*amphoe*) is an intermediate level of bureaucratic organisation. The head of a district is a mid-ranking Interior Ministry official called a *Nai Amphoe*. They are often described in English as the “sheriff”. Below the district level there are sub-districts (*tambon*) and villages (*mu baan*). And above the district there are the provinces (*changwat*) which are overseen by governors (*phuwa rajakan changwat*). The two districts discussed here are Bannang Sata and Betong, both in the province of Yala.<sup>42</sup>

Bannang Sata has seen some of the most significant violence over the past ten years. Deep South Watch reports that

[a]ccording to monthly data, Tambon Bannang Sata in Yala and Tambon Rueso in Narathiwat took alternate turns at being the first and second place in the area of unrest from 2004-2007.<sup>43</sup>

By a small margin Bannang Sata remains the most violence-prone district in southern Thailand. Betong has experienced some of the least violence. As examples of the contrasting dynamics that lead to violence, and its avoidance, these are important case-studies.

### **VIOLENCE IN BANNANG SATA: RETRIBUTION DYNAMICS**

Bannang Sata is an almost constant security headache for Thai authorities. In the one district there are infantry, cavalry, Border Patrol Police, Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit, provincial police, paramilitary Rangers (*tahan phran*) and Volunteer Defence Corps personnel. In this discussion we focus on one of the most professional and disciplined units in the district: the Border Patrol Police who have deployed their elite Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU). We have also provided further details on their

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<sup>41</sup> Srisompob Jitpiromsri, ‘Sixth Year of the Southern Fire: Dynamics of Insurgency and Formation of the New Imagined Violence’ (Songkhla: Deep South Watch, Center for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity (CSCD), Prince of Songkhla University, 2010), p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> The potential for comparisons with Satun province also merit close consideration for those hoping to follow the line of argument presented here.

<sup>43</sup> Srisompob, ‘Sixth Year of the Southern Fire’, p. 9.

involvement in a range of violent incidents in Table 1. There is a stark pattern of retribution for anybody who cares to look closely.<sup>44</sup>

Where to begin? On 1 February 2004, Sergeant Prawes Wongsuwat, from the 445<sup>th</sup> Company of the Border Patrol Police, was stabbed to death at Nikhom Pitak Rasadorn School in Tambon Ban Rae in Yala's Than To District, which lies between Bannang Sata and Betong districts. He was one of eight Border Patrol Police teachers at the school, and was alone on guard duty when he was attacked by four or five assailants, who took his 9-mm pistol. In an effort to catch the perpetrators, three men were arrested by police the next day. They were released after questioning, but were "abducted by men in black just hours after they were freed", and were presumably murdered.<sup>45</sup>

Later in 2004, on 28 April, eight people on motorcycles attacked the Border Patrol Police post at Ban Bacho in Bannang Sata District. All the attackers were shot dead, while four police were wounded. Then in November 2006, a Border Patrol Police unit was forced by a group of some 300 angry villagers to leave their temporary base in Ban Bacho. This unit caused popular consternation when some of the villagers believed that its officers might have been involved in the murder of a local named Isman Sama.<sup>46</sup> In the same area on 29 September 2007, Border Patrol Police Captain Thoranit Srisuk from the elite PARU was shot dead. He was leading a fourteen-man patrol between Ban Sai Surat and Ban Phakdee in Tambon Bang Lang Dam in Yala's Bannang Sata District.

A 9-mm pistol belonging to Captain Thoranit was taken by the assailants. In June 2009, when four militants who were said to have "committed a wave of violence in Yala" were killed in a clash with security authorities in Bannang Sata District, Captain Thoranit's gun was found on one of the men.<sup>47</sup> On 20 June 2008 Border Patrol Police Sub-Lieutenant Krittikhun Bunlue, also a PARU officer, was killed in Bannang Sata on his twenty-fourth birthday. Four others were wounded in that engagement. *Thai Rath* reported seven days after his death that "six [local villagers] were extra-judicially executed, upon knowing that they have engaged in an ambush that killed [Krittikhun]".<sup>48</sup> Krittikhun was a popular blogger, calling himself Pol. Lt. Tee, who posted

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<sup>44</sup> It has been suggested that responses by militants to anniversaries of major events (such as Tak Bai or Kru Se) offer scope to expand this argument about retribution. Such expansion is certainly a worthwhile research task.

<sup>45</sup> 'Officer's Death: Three in Yala Questioned by Police', *The Nation*, 3 February 2004, p. 8A; Muhamad Ayub Pathan, 'Violence in the South: Murder Suspects Abducted After Being Freed by Police', *Bangkok Post*, 3 February 2004, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> 'School Unit Withdrawn After Crowd Surrounds Yala School', *The Nation*, 6 November 2006; 'Teachers Feel Unsafe After Officers Forced Out', *Bangkok Post*, 7 November 2006, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> 'Lab Tests Clear Officials of Mosque Attack', *Bangkok Post*, 20 June 2009, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> '6 Dead! Fierce Confrontation with Southern Criminals', *Thai Rath*, 24 June 2008, pp. 1, 9. See also 'Reprisal: Extra-judicial Killing in the Deep South and Blogs', 4 July 2008, <<http://meawgyver.wordpress.com/tag/deep-south/>> [Accessed May 2011].

patriotic blogs (at polize.diaryis.com) about working for the good of the nation. Some of his colleagues wrote on his blog after his killing that they would “get” those responsible. In June 2009, when four militants were killed in Bannang Sata District, the police said that they were involved in the killings of both Sub-Lieutenant Kritikhun and Captain Thoranit.<sup>49</sup>

Then on 22 April 2009, two PARU officers, Lieutenant Rungarun Klinklun and Sub-Lieutenant Surachai Chaisongkram, died after their pick-up truck was hit by a road-side bomb in Bannang Sata District. One died on the way to hospital and the other the next day. Sergeant Udom Pumpuang was badly wounded.<sup>50</sup>

On 4 August 2009 a Border Patrol Police officer was seriously injured in an ambush in Tambon Taling Chan in Bannang Sata District.<sup>51</sup> Soon after, on 4 September 2009, a PARU trooper based in Bannang Sata was killed when a car bomb detonated next to his vehicle on the way to get supplies in Muang Yala.

Later, on 12 March 2010, Police Colonel Somphian Eksomya, chief superintendant Banang Sata District Police Station, was killed. On 23 June 2008, he had led forces which had killed two “insurgents” following the killing of Kritikhun Bunlue.<sup>52</sup> The alleged killer of Colonel Somphian, a “militant” named Ma-ae Aphibaibae, was also killed in May 2011. One of the reports of his death noted that he was ranked number 43 on the blacklist of gunmen and was “wanted for many cases, including the murder of Colonel Somphien”.<sup>53</sup> Then in July, villagers in Bannang Sata complained to the Justice Ministry about the disappearance of two local men last seen entering a Border Patrol Police base.<sup>54</sup> And so it continues.

The pattern of retribution is clear. It helps to explain why Bannang Sata is so violent compared to some other areas. It also helps to explain why, as Duncan McCargo suggests, “[s]ome officers insisted that after several months of working in a given area they were fully aware of the identities of the militants. Most militant activity was targeted and specific”.<sup>55</sup> Of one militant, McCargo writes that “[a]fter each operation he escaped into the

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<sup>49</sup> ‘Lab Tests Clear Officials of Mosque Attack’, *Bangkok Post*, 20 June 2009, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> National News Bureau of Thailand, Public Relations Department, ‘Border Patrol Police Ambushed in Yala Bomb Attack’, 22 April 2009, <<http://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news.php?id=255204230021>> [Accessed April 2011]; ‘Two Border Policemen Killed in South’, *Bangkok Post*, 23 April 2009; ‘Two Police Killed in Thailand’s South: Officials’, *Geo Television Network*, 23 April 2009, <<http://www.geo.tv/4-23-2009/40502.htm>> [Accessed January 2011].

<sup>51</sup> ‘BPP Officer Injured in Yala Ambush’, *The Nation*, 4 August 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Chaiyarong Maneepiluk, ‘Background and Biography of Pol. Col. Somphian Ek-somya: A Tragedy of the Royal Thai Police’, *Deep South*, 15 March 2010, <<http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/735>> [Accessed June 2010].

<sup>53</sup> The Nation, ‘Key “Militant” Among 4 Shot Dead in South’, *The Nation*, 22 May 2011.

<sup>54</sup> King-oua Laohong, ‘Justice Gets Complaint of Missing Men’, *Bangkok Post*, 26 July 2011.

<sup>55</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, p. 105.

jungle for a while to avoid arrest or extra-judicial killing”.<sup>56</sup> McCargo also describes how

[t]he sexual behaviour of soldiers was the focus of many rumors and considerable tension. Some prominent leaders consistently argued that Buddhist soldiers were becoming sexually involved with Muslim women, a serious moral, cultural, and religious violation.<sup>57</sup>

Sex is the subject of our next case-study.

### **SEXUAL SERVICES IN BETONG**

One area that has avoided almost all of the violence experienced by Bannang Sata is Betong District, also in the province of Yala. It is a four-hour drive from the provincial capital, down a windy road, right through Bannang Sata, to the Malaysian border. Its security is managed by the provincial police from Region 9, augmented by Border Patrol Police units who guard the international frontier. There are no other security forces stationed there. So compared to Bannang Sata it is a relatively simple security situation with clear lines of command, and fewer opportunities for the complicated political-security-economic dynamics which appear to be so important elsewhere. But not everything else is so simple. The district has, to be clear, become a lucrative sexual services hub for tourists from Malaysia and Singapore, but also for all sides of the local conflict. According to Askew,

[t]he sex-trade infrastructure of the lower south incorporates a range of inter-connected services including transport, accommodation, eating establishments, and entertainment venues centered in Sino-Thai dominated settlements.<sup>58</sup>

Right back in 2001-2002 Askew estimated that Betong had 71 “tourist-related commercial sex services” venues, making it one of the largest sites for sexual tourism in the deep south. It now has many more.

What is remarkable about Betong District is that there have, in stark contrast to Bannang Sata, been no killings of security authorities, including Border Patrol Police. The district has even been called an “[o]asis of peace and harmony”.<sup>59</sup> One explanation is that Betong District welcomes more than a million, short-term male tourists each year. To illustrate, the recently opened Grand Mandarin Betong Hotel is a 25-floor, 500-room hotel, which towers above the rest of the town. This luxurious, new hotel is a special draw for the tourists who come from across the Malaysian border. The Mandarin and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>58</sup> Marc Askew, ‘Sex and the Sacred: Sojourners and Visitors in the Making of the Southern Thai Borderland’, in Alexander Horstmann and Reed L. Wadley, *Centering the Margin: Agency and Narrative in Southeast Asian Borderlands* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), pp. 193-4.

<sup>59</sup> Marwaan Macan-Marker, ‘Border Town Enjoys Peace Amid Insurgency’, 24 August 2009, <<http://www.globalissues.org/news/2009/08/24/2590>> [Accessed April 2011].

the 250-room Garden View, another new hotel, have boosted Betong's hotel room capacity to 3800. Our estimate of the income cross-border tourists could bring in is around \$1 billion per annum, much more than the annual income Betong makes from its other money spinner, exporting agricultural products from the plantations that cover the nearby hills. The sex workers who cater to the visitors come from China, Russia and Indonesia, and from northern Thai cities like Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. It is a huge contrast to Bannang Sata; but only a short drive away.

Notably, other districts in southern Thailand have also emerged as sexual services hubs for visitors from Malaysia and Singapore. One town called Ban Dan Nok has developed what has been called "an almost exclusively sex trade-centered economy".<sup>60</sup> By the end of 2001 it hosted more than 140 sex-related establishments with more than 2000 sex workers. In 2012 Dan Nok has more than 200 premises that provide sexual services and based on well-informed local estimates there are now "more than 4,000 girls" working in in the town. This number suggests that the commercial sex industry continues to expand rapidly in parts of southern Thailand. Dan Nok is, like Bannang Sata, one of the safest areas in southernmost Thailand.

### **Conclusions on Money, Sex and Power**

What can we learn about violence in southern Thailand from the intimate, sexual services economy of Betong and the retribution, "security related" economy of Bannang Sata? Clearly the economic status of Betong means that it offers substantial protection to its main businesses. Because it has experienced far less violence it is also still under the sole control of the provincial police. On a recent field visit to the town it was observed that many police officers spend their time relaxing in the local coffee shops and bars. They are able to keep an eye on the comings-and-goings, but also on the status of any investments they, or their superiors, may have. Betong illustrates the reason why violence in southern Thailand is inconsistently distributed. It hard to determine the causation but violence *has* tended to become correlated with those areas where the government forces are heavily concentrated and where different government agencies are present. This probably generates a significant level of competition among them and also blurs any communication that particular security forces enjoy with local gangsters or insurgents. One further issue that is definitely relevant is that Betong, as an example, has significantly more Buddhist and Chinese residents (around 48 percent) than Bannang Sata, which is predominately (82.2 percent) Muslim.<sup>61</sup> Such demographics cannot be ignored in analysis

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<sup>60</sup> Askew, 'Sex and the Sacred', p. 194.

<sup>61</sup> "Amphoe Betong", Yala Provincial Administration, <<http://www.yala.go.th/webyala/8amphur/p6.html>> [Accessed January 2012]; "Ampoe Bannang Sata", Yala Provincial Administration, <<http://www.yala.go.th/webyala/8amphur/p5.html>> [Accessed January 2012].

of conflict dynamics. There is no question that the two districts present very different pictures.

But one factor they have in common is that Thailand's illegal economy amounts to about 20 percent of its Gross National Product. The proportion in the south is higher. Some of the commodities that are most often traded in this illegal market are narcotics, timber, guns, people, and fuel. A survey in November 2010 found that residents of the southernmost provinces regarded "the drug trade as the most urgent problem in the region".<sup>62</sup> Three provinces in the deep south (Songkhla, Pattani and Narathiwat) are in the top eight through which diesel oil is smuggled into Thailand.<sup>63</sup> In terms of proportion of households affected, levels of bribery are higher in the south are higher than in any other region according to the report of a nation-wide survey conducted in 2000 for the World Bank.<sup>64</sup>

So when solutions or approaches to the southern Thai conflict are proposed we feel that they tend to miss the point of a large proportion of the violence. Current proposals that privilege autonomy or self-determination are misdirected at problems which may only be one small fraction of the much wider story of southern violence. For a setting like Bannang Sata, impunity and personal pride are far more significant drivers of violence. Think about it this way. Could an elite unit, such as the Border Patrol Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit, fail to take drastic action when attacked? Do we consider their pride and their personal and unit reputation? And what about the young Malay Muslim men who are caught up in the retribution dynamics? What are their options, especially in terms of economic activity? Is there a feasible alternative to gangsterism and its rewards? And can they feasibly step away from a fight after so many of their friends and relatives have already died?

This is a very sensitive set of issues but it requires significant attention from Thai authorities before it is too late. According to one report, a

well-placed source alleged that profits are high enough that some police and government officials lobby to get placements in Thailand's southern-most region. This has fostered a belief among many in the south that the insurgency will not end because of the profit opportunities the lawlessness and conflict provide.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> 'Three Muslims Slain in Drive-by Shooting in Southern Thailand', *Deutsche Presse Agentur [DPA]*, 24 November 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit, Sungsidh Piriyaarhgsan and Nualnoi Treerat, *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand's Illegal Economy and Public Policy* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1998), p. 117.

<sup>64</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit, Nualnoi Treerat, Yongyuth Chaiyapong and Chris Baker, 'Corruption in the Public Sector in Thailand: Perceptions and Experience of Households' (Bangkok: Political Economy Centre, Chulalongkorn University, 2000), <[http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/18481/thailand\\_30aug2000.pdf](http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/18481/thailand_30aug2000.pdf)> [Accessed April 2011], pp. 50, 95.

<sup>65</sup> Brian McCartan, 'War Brings Profits to South Thailand', *Asia Times Online*, 12 December 2009, <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/KL12Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/KL12Ae01.html)> [Accessed May 2011].

These are clearly conditions where, after ten years, many see no advantage in stopping the violence. Military, police and paramilitaries continue their deployments and budgetary allocations, and by doing so they become more deeply enmeshed in the problematic social, political and economic relations that exist in the deep south. There is no end in sight for as long as the Thai authorities continue to invest in this counter-insurgency while also, through the criminality of government forces, fuelling pockets of local violence and local dissatisfaction.

**Table 1. Bannang Sata and Than To Districts—Border Patrol Police Retribution**

1 February 2004	Sgt Prawes Wongsawat, BPP 445 <sup>th</sup> Company, killed at Nikhom Pitak Rat School, Tambon Ban Rai, Than To District.
2 February 2004	<i>Three suspects in Prawes killing 'disappeared'.</i>
28 April 2004	Eight young men killed by Border Patrol Police (BPP) at Ban Bacho, Bannang Sata District.
3 May 2004	<i>BPP base in Ban Lae, Than To District, attacked; no casualties.</i>
7 July 2004	Former Sgt Tawil Keawwichit, former BPP NCO, killed in Ban Ha, Than To District.
3 July 2006	<i>BPP base in Bannang Sata attacked, no fatalities.</i>
3 October 2006	Female Lance Corporal Siriporn Sangkhaharat wounded at Nikhom Pitak Rat School, Tambon Ban Rai, Than To District.
6 November 2006	<i>BPP unit in Ban Bacho, Bannang Sata District, forced to leave their base by some 300 angry villagers.</i>
29 September 2007	PARU Captain Thoranit Srisuk killed in Tambon Bang Lang, Bannang Sata District. (His 9-mm pistol taken, found on the body of a 'militant' killed in June 2009).
11 February 2008	Four BPP wounded, Than To District.
20 June 2008	PARU Sub-Lieutenant Krittikhun Bunlue killed, Ban Santi, Bannang Sata District.
23-24 June 2008	<i>Six villagers extra-judicially executed for suspected involvement in killing of Krittikhun Bunlue.</i>
5 September 2008	Sub-Lieutenant Arthit Intachai, head-master of BPP Nikhom Pitak Rat School, Tambon Ban Rai, Than To District, ambushed but survived.
22 April 2009	Two PARU officers, Lieutenant Rungarun Klinklun and Sub-Lieutenant Surachai Chaisongkram, killed by a road-side bomb in Bannang Sata District.
June 2009	<i>Four 'militants' killed. Police said they had been involved in the killings of Thoranit Srisuk and Krittikhun Bunlue.</i>
4 August 2009	A BPP officer was seriously injured in an ambush in Ban Hadsai, Tambon Taling Chan in Bannang Sata District.
4 September 2009	Police Lance Corporal Jarupong Lamjantuek, a PARU trooper from Kai Naresuan based in Bannang Sata district, was killed by a car bomb during a trip to Yala to buy supplies for his unit.
12 March 2010	Police Colonel Somphian Eksomya, chief of Bannang Sata District Police Station, was killed. He had led forces which killed two 'insurgents' on 23 June 2008 following the killing of Krittikhun Bunlue.
20 May 2011	<i>Ma-Ae Aphibalbae killed. Suspected of leading the group which killed Colonel Somphian Eksomya.</i>
26 July 2011	<i>Complaint from Bannang Sata villagers that two men, Ibroheng Kahong and Dulhami Marae, went missing after entering the local Border Patrol Police base.</i>
2 November 2011	Six members of the 44 <sup>th</sup> Border Patrol Police Division are wounded

	by a bomb while escorting teachers in Bannang Sata District.
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