

**ISS Risk Special Report:
Thailand Coordinated Bombings, 10-12 August, 2016: An
Escalation of the Southern Thai Insurgency?
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Overview

A series of attacks and attempted attacks took place across Thailand from the 10th to the 12th of August, with additional devices being discovered intermittently over the weekend in multiple locations. In total, four lives were lost and scores of locals and tourists were injured. The pre-planned campaign coincided with the three-day bank holiday weekend to celebrate the Thai Queen's Birthday / Mother's Day celebrations. The events were also a week short of the one-year anniversary of the Erawan Shrine bombing attack in Bangkok. Tourist destinations have clearly been the preferred target of this series of attacks thus far, with some targeting commercial properties as well. So far, the Thai military government are denying the attacks were terrorism.



Map of incidents

This state of denial is not surprising as it has existed in Thailand for some time. As with the Erawan Shrine bombing and aborted Sathorn pier bomb in August 2015, the authorities refuse to identify the incidents these past few days as 'terrorism'. The issue here is that by ignoring the obvious nature of the events, or reinventing them as non-terrorist, the authorities risk further threats from those behind the attacks. The combat indicators are clear. In our last report, we mentioned three scenarios (and an unlikely fourth) which could possibly explain these recent attacks in the country. In our initial flash report the evidence and analysis directed us towards the strong possibility for scenario two (a connection to the Southern Thai

insurgency and the insurgents reaching further north), but now having had more time to critically assess the evidence leading up to this series of incidents, it remains the only logical conclusion. That evidence will be presented later in this report.

Phuket, Patong beach	08/10/2016 18:30	2 IEDs defused	No casualties
Trang	8/11/2016 15:00	1 IED	1 dead, 6 wounded
Hua Hin	8/11/16 22:15-23:00	3 IEDs	1 dead, 21 wounded
Phuket, Patong beach	8/12/2016 7:45	1 IED	1 wounded
Surat Thani	8/12/2016 8:02	1 IED	1 dead, 3 wounded
Surat Thani	8/12/2016 8:30	1 IED	No casualties
Phuket, Patong beach	8/12/2016 8:45	1 IED	No casualties
Hua Hin	8/12/2016 9:00	2 IEDs	1 dead, 3 injured
Phang Nga	8/12/2016 9:00	2 IEDs	No casualties
In addition, 5 fires/arson attacks in Phang Nga, Krabi, Trang, Surat Thani and Nakorn SriTamarat were reported on 12 August between 02:15-08:00. Police are investigating whether these are straight up arson or incendiary IEDs, ie, designed for arson, not explosions.			

Timeline of incidents

Scenarios

There are three possible scenarios regarding this attack as we indicated in our initial report. The scenarios are laid out again below.

1. The first scenario that the attacks were politically motivated, therefore implying a domestic political dimension and related to the current political situation in the country. We rate this scenario as very unlikely.
2. **That the attacks are connected to the Southern Thai insurgency, and the insurgents are reaching north. If this is the case then it would be a game changer in the orientation of the insurgency and an indicator that there will be more attacks to come. This second scenario is a possibility worth considering when we return to a deeper analysis of the incident.**
3. That it is an external terrorist group seeking to target Thailand.

Scenario three can most certainly be ruled out, as can be a trans-regional possibility. Scenario two is the most credible, however, we are after all dealing with a state of denial

here and the military government are patently trying to present things in a different light. Statements on Friday by the police in Hua Hin support this assertion, for example:

“For sure we know the incidents are not linked directly to any kind of terrorism”, additionally we also have the deputy police spokesman Piyapan Pingmuang stating “I reaffirm that it was an act of local sabotage, not terrorism. We do not have terrorism in Thailand.”

Indeed, no terrorism in Thailand, a point we shall revisit later in this report and make a valiant attempt to challenge spokesman Pingmuang’s assertion. In the meantime, without getting into an exhaustive list of definitions on terrorism, we shall cut to the chase and simply say that in all probability the use of explosives and IED’s are likely well covered within said list of exhaustive definitions, at least in the real world they are.

Why does scenario two hold water over the other possibilities?

Islamic terrorism and international terrorism and trans-regional terrorism can most certainly be ruled out. All three share a common theme; they are about mass casualties and publicity. Had this been, for example, ISIS inspired, the fatalities and casualties would no doubt have been much greater. There is absolutely no connection to the events of last August at the Erawan Shrine, not the same at all, that incident was motivated by different logic, see [here](#) for detailed analysis of the incident. That assists in ruling out the trans-regional possibility. Therefore, that leaves domestically motivated political terrorism or Muslim separatists from the south. It is here the waters become somewhat muddied. The orientation of the campaign in Southern Thailand is Muslim nationalist separatism, but it is directed at the government, therefore must also be political. In essence, to summarise thinking on this, it is the use of terrorism to deliver a political message to the government and the military and the Thai people.

However, it also delivered statements on several fronts, including *intent and a glimpse of capability and demonstration of physical reach*. Was it connected to the referendum as the government implies? Arguably, yes, but not in the way that it is being interpreted at the moment. The outcome of the referendum has been to essentially entrench the military’s role in politics, regardless of whether or not a future government is democratically elected. Arguably, that entrenchment would require a further constitutional change to revoke, which is unlikely given that the military rewrote the constitution. The Muslim separatists in the South have clearly been frustrated by the lack of movement, delays, and prevarication on peace

negotiations since the military seized power 2 years ago. The insurgents see the situation potentially remaining stagnant and deadlocked and thus decided to inject some momentum into it. Therefore, we see it is the most likely scenario that they have carried out these attacks to send a message in light of the military backed constitutional referendum being passed.

Target selection, placement, and capacity of IED's: What does it imply?

Were these targets selected in a mere few days after the result of the referendum was known? Were the devices and intelligence and preparations thrown together inside those few days? No, this is not how a coordinated attack of this magnitude is organised, it requires pre-planning and time. So in short, this was in the wings waiting for activation.

The selection of targets allowed several different messages to be conveyed. These messages fit extremely closely with the patterns of target selection of several of the Southern Thailand insurgent groups. Moreover, the broader message was clearly the targeting of the incredibly valuable and important 'tourism industry'.

The tactics employed here are what need to be examined. In short, several key points jump out immediately that are not being discussed at present. Firstly, given the obvious level of coordination behind the attacks, when you factor in the arson attacks and the previous devices on Wednesday 10 August in Phuket being found and defused, then that coordination was significant. What does not correlate to this degree of input is the level of rudimentary low tech devices employed. Why such effort at coordination with such low yielding devices, clearly not made for mass casualty attacks? Simple, it was sending a message. That message was delivered through attacks on symbols of tourism – locations, with casualties and fatalities, but it could have been much worse. So, the question is why was it not worse? Did a group that could organise multiple attacks across several days not have access to more powerful materials? Were they simply inept? Doubtful, it is much more probable they chose to minimise the capacity and yield so as to put the message across without a level of carnage that would draw a significant push back.

They wanted to send a limited message to the government that was a demonstration of capability (measured but evident), a clear indication of intent, and prove their geographical reach. Were tourists the medium to deliver this message? By default, yes. However, the primary target was the tourism industry, a core revenue generator for the country. The geographical spread and timing reinforced this message. What is most interesting though is

the use of low-tech devices. Islamist terrorists would have used mass casualty devices, while anti-government activists would have targeted government buildings and symbols more than tourism. The targeting of police posts, police stations, a marine police station were incorporated into the attacks in order to send the message directly to the military. Arguably, the catalyst for these attacks was actually what the government have implied, the referendum. Yet, what is being blatantly misrepresented here is who may have been behind it. The military are using a catch all terminology to describe the perpetrators as 'anti-government.' At risk of sounding sarcastic, that's somewhat stating the obvious.

The South was overwhelmingly opposed to the referendum, but the reasoning for being so opposed to it is what the government is seeking to casually brush under the debris of the past weekend. For example, there has been a steady escalation of terrorist attacks in the southern provinces for the past 7-8 months. In August alone there has been a significant further escalation in the number of incidents, to the point of 5 bombings per day on average, and that is just bombings. It does not include the use of weapons in shooting incidents.

The referendum was resolutely opposed in the South with ever increasing resentment against the military and the Thai state, and was always going to be rejected on several points. The increase in the military's power, the entrenchment of the military in the political arena regardless of future democratic developments, and the actual content of the constitution with a strong emphasis on the protection of Theravada Buddhism were several key points of contention in the south. Although, to what extent the insurgent movements have actually impacted collectively or independently the decision of voters or blocks of voters is unknown. It can be assumed that the latent networks of insurgents across each and every village in the south have had an impact on their voting preference. Add to these conditions the stalling of the peace negotiations, the prevarications of the military government, the intentionally unacceptable preconditions imposed, and the outcome is best described as intractable. In short, with the military drafting the constitution in the manner they did and boxing the insurgency leaders into a corner as they have, it has created a zero sum mindset and the brinkmanship conditions for an escalation of the southern insurgency.

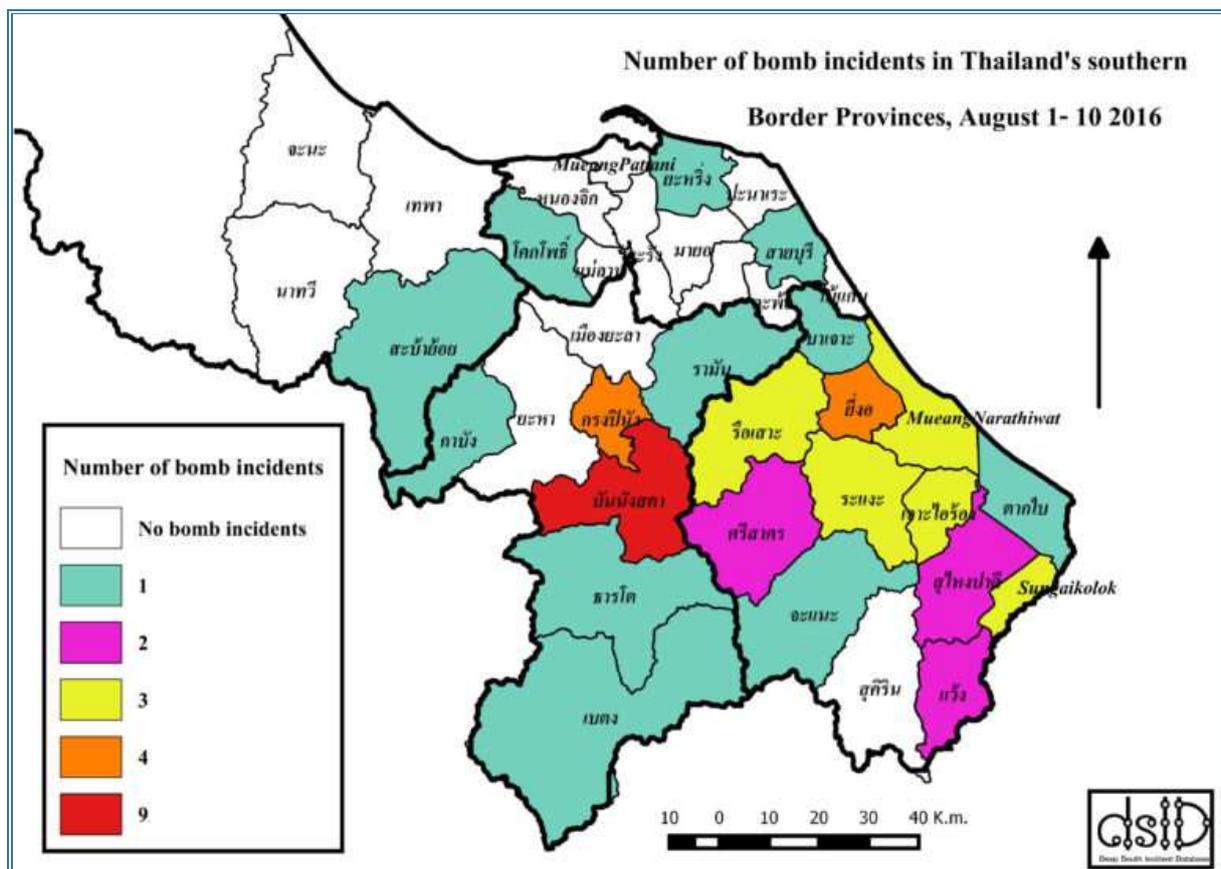
The prevalence of increasing combat indicators

The heat map below, borrowed from Deep South Watch, demonstrates the obvious upward trend and trajectory of terrorist incidents (bombings in this case) in the south for the first 10 days of August 2016.

There were 49 definable bombing incidents during these first 10 days of August 2016. Add to

that the incidents starting in Phuket on the 10th and running through to the 12th, the incendiary devices and then further devices discovered over the past 48 hours and we have a staggering 75 incidents not even half way through the month. This puts August as the most active month for the year already. (*Note – these additional incidents include incendiary devices and defused IED's).

The sheer number of increasing incidents, conveniently not covered in mainstream media, should have been taken as a warning that all was not good in the southern hinterlands and an obvious push back or push out was already in motion.



Acknowledgement - <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org>

The potential Southern Thai insurgency push out

Did it catch the country by surprise? Yes and no. It caught the general populace by surprise, but the security services have indicated they knew an attack was likely. They were just not sure where and when it would occur. This is obviously where the security services have been caught off guard. Regardless of what is being implied by the government now that it is not terrorism, it is local agitators, local sabotage, 'anti-government elements,' or whatever else they care to label it, it was the use of violence to intimidate, to coerce, to instil fear. There are far too many definitions of terrorism to try and resort to. Terrorism is quite simply

to terrorise. Random and targeted bombs terrorise – simple as that.

By selecting the targets that were selected – tourist locations, commercial centers, police and government symbols, the distance between them, the specific and deliberate use of low-tech and low yield devices, the differential in timings of detonations – it is clear the objective was to send a strong message to the military government. The government needs to start taking these peace talks seriously, as we have just demonstrated what lies ahead should this warning not be heeded. The military government's decision to dress matters as they are doing runs the serious risk of further, more deliberate and resounding messages being delivered. The delivery mechanism, you can be sure, will be IED's, terrorism... resolute fear if you like.

This is the first real push out into the country proper that the Southern insurgents have executed. It is the largest coordinated spate of attacks outside the southern provinces in the history of the insurgency. It should be read as such and understood within the context of the message. The potential for growing political and security instability to spread further across the country is here and has just been highlighted to a broad audience in a very visible manner. The military government's response will determine to what extent additional messages will be delivered.