

The Problems of Thailand's Deep South in a Southeast-Asian Context

Apichai Sunchindah

THE escalation of conflicts and violence in the southernmost provinces of Thailand over the past year and a half has been a wake-up call for citizens of the Thai kingdom and also among its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. The existence of conflicts is nothing new. Ever since the dawn of human history, conflicts have been part and parcel of human life. The challenge therefore is how to manage it in an appropriate and hopefully peaceful way. To have a proper understanding of how conflicts occur, it is important to analyze the underlying root causes. Conflicts often result when certain needs or threats, real or perceived, are not adequately addressed in a satisfactory manner. These could cover a whole range of factors: abject poverty, lack of access to basic resources, services and opportunities deemed necessary for decent livelihood, manifestation of gaps or divides between groups of people or among nations, oppression, injustices, alienation, insensitivity, intolerance and the like, suffered by the individuals themselves or their kinsfolk and friends, to name a few.

HUMAN SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

A little over ten years ago, the Human Development Report for 1994 published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) first introduced the concept of “*human security*” into the development lexicon. The basic idea is that security should be people-centered and as such it should take into account all forms of insecurities that human beings could be subjected to from physical to economic, socio-cultural, civil/political and mental/spiritual. Out of this came the twin notions of “*freedom from want*” and “*freedom from fear*”. In other words, if we are to have a truly secure society, nation and global community, then the people should by and large be *free from want and from fear*, in effect a removal of the various forms of threats to human security.

In September 2000, world leaders and representatives from 189 countries including Thailand met at the UN headquarters in New York and adopted the Millennium Declaration outlining

a broad range of measures that would be undertaken by the world community over the next couple of years to advance human development. This then gave rise to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) which are a set of time-bound and measurable goals for combating poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease, gender inequality, and environmental degradation and to forge a global partnership for development. All member states of the UN are therefore encouraged to prepare periodic national reports indicating their progress in achieving these universally adopted goals.

In fact, Thailand had launched its first MDG report in June 2004 which was endorsed by the Thai Cabinet and carried a Foreword from the Thai Prime Minister. The report essentially states that Thailand has already achieved or will soon meet the goals set by the world community, mostly with a timeline of 2015. In terms of the macro picture at the national level, Thailand is in effect on target or has even exceeded them in some cases. As a result, more ambitious targets called MDG+ (*plus*) have been set by the Thai authorities in various specific areas such as poverty, education, gender equality, child and maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS and other diseases and environmental sustainability, some of which, like on infant and maternal mortality, are targeting specific geographic localities like the three

southernmost provinces mentioned earlier.

The Thailand Millennium Development Goals Report 2004 indicated that while poverty levels have been declining steadily over the years both nationally and in the South, the proportion of poor people in those three southernmost provinces remains two to three times higher than the national average. Child and maternal mortality rates are also higher in these provinces than elsewhere in the country with factors such as gender, culture, religion and language affecting the provision of and access to primary health care services. According to the Thailand Human Development Report 2003, both Pattani and Narathiwat came out the lowest among all the southern provinces in the Human Achievement Index, a composite index measuring health, education, employment, income, housing and living conditions, family and community life, transportation and communications and public participation.

The Thai MDG report also pointed out that income distribution continued to be a problem for the country. The share of the national income by the poorest 20% of the people remained stagnant around 4% over the past decade of economic boom and bust while the share of the richest 20% continued to hover slightly above 50%, a rather uncomfortable level in terms of income inequality and therefore a cause for concern and need for concerted

action to correct it. Similar trends in income disparity also occur in most other ASEAN countries and Southeast Asia as a whole still faces many human development challenges despite respectable economic growth rates in recent years. One of the shortcomings of the MDG concept is that it mainly focused on aspects pertaining to “*freedom from want*” and very little at all on “*freedom from fear*”, both of which are actually included in the Millennium Declaration from which the goals are derived.

VALUING DIVERSITY

The southern provinces of Thailand and especially the three southernmost ones have rather distinct and unique features whether seen from the point of view of history, ethnicity, language, customs and religion. Much of the mistrust, misunderstanding and resulting problems that have occurred there over the years can be traced in one way or another to a failure to take into proper consideration some or all of the previously-mentioned factors. UNDP’s Human Development Report for 2004 focused on the theme of “Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World”. The front cover showing different colored handprints also carried the following statement:

“Accommodating people’s growing demands for their inclusion in society, for respect of their ethnicity,

religion and language, takes more than democracy and equitable growth. Also needed are multicultural policies that recognize differences, champion diversity and promote cultural freedoms, so that all people can choose to speak their language, practice their religion, and participate in shaping their culture—so that all people can choose to be who they are”.

A diverse society, while admittedly can often be a source of divisiveness, can however also be a source of tremendous strength and richness if these differing qualities can be properly tapped and harnessed. Educationists and linguists have found that mastering one’s mother tongue first in early childhood goes a long way in helping the student in learning other languages including the official one(s) as the case may be. This not only enables the student to have a better grasp of various languages and through that an easier comprehension of the other subjects taught, it actually helps people to have more appreciation of “otherness” and in turn facilitates integration in society. At the same time, the many ethnic dialects and associated cultural heritage, some of which are in danger of becoming extinct, would stand a better chance of being preserved due to more usage. Altogether, a win-win combination if properly pursued.

Interestingly, the national mottos of two of the largest democracies in this

world, one predominantly Christian and the other mostly Muslim, happen to revolve around the same theme of “Unity in Diversity” or “one out of many”:- “*E pluribus unum*” in the case of the United States and “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*” for Indonesia, a fellow Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member like Thailand. As expected, this is also one of the basic *modus operandi* for the 25-country European Union.

Granted, having such a lofty and utopian ideal is by no means a guarantee that completely harmonious and peaceful conditions will exist in this real and often messy world of ours. However, it does give due recognition and space for diversity and divergent views and provides a reference point to start from as well as a noble goal to strive for in the course of our daily lives. It would serve as a constant reminder that ours is a pluralistic society and world and in order to achieve genuine peace and security, then there has to be first acknowledgement, followed by acceptance of these differences and then interweaving these diverse strands and channeling the various energies into a powerful and unifying entity while at the same time reflecting the multifarious nature of the system.

A good illustration of this kind of “Unity-Diversity” phenomenon in the physical world is by examining the effect of directing sunlight through different intervening media onto a piece

of paper. If a magnifying glass is placed between the sun and paper, the observed result is the burning of the paper due to the focusing of intense energy from white/sunlight at one particular spot. However, if a prism is put in between the sun and paper, what we get is a rainbow of colors due to diffraction of white light into its various colorful components. In nature, the latter phenomenon can be observed when sunlight passes through raindrops creating a beautiful rainbow in the sky. The key here is to know the use of the appropriate intervening instrument for the desired purpose at the right time.

ASEAN EXPERIENCES IN DIVERSITY

The case of Indonesia can be very instructive in comprehending the nature of diversity. It is the largest archipelago in the world with about 14,000 islands stretching some 5,000 kilometers apart from east to west and 2,000 kilometers north to south and well-renown for its rich and diverse natural and cultural resources. It is a country with the world’s 4th largest population of over 200 million and which also happens to be the country with the largest number of Muslim inhabitants on this globe. Its people comprise more than 250 ethnic groups and many speak their own languages and dialects including the national language, “*Bahasa*” (equivalent to the

Thai word for language, "*phasa*") Indonesia.

One can hardly find a place on this earth which is more diverse in all such aspects. At one point in its history, it was felt that only a charismatic leader and/or strongman could keep such a country together and that's what happened during the first fifty years since its independence with only two presidents at the helm. However things started to change following the Asian economic crisis of 1997 and the stepping down of former President Soeharto in May 1998. This resulted in a succession of 4 presidents over a period of only 6 years culminating in the presidential election in 2004 whereby the people were able to elect their leader directly for the first time, in addition to voting for the members of Parliament. The fact that the latest election was conducted in a rather fair and peaceful manner showed that Indonesia has turned the corner, so to speak, in terms of democratic governance and is on the path of gradual recovery and stability, both economically and politically. Moreover, it clearly demonstrated that Islam and democracy can co-exist reasonably well in such a diverse country.

What is also interesting to note is that recently, the Indonesian government has even declared Chinese New Year a public holiday. During the days of former President Soeharto, even the public display of Chinese character

was banned. Now, Chinese language newspapers and TV programs are allowed, ethnic Chinese political parties permitted and lion dances are on show during festive events. This truly represents a 180 degree turn around in terms of giving due recognition to an ethnic group which only not many years ago bore the brunt of much violence and suffering from rioting and looting during times of tumultuous changes in the country, not to mention the daily discrimination experienced in numerous ways.

The fact that ethnic Chinese Indonesians have been such targets in the past can be attributed in part to their disenfranchised status in the political arena and yet their ability to gain control of a good portion of the nation's economy and wealth and therefore became a source of envy and hatred by other less endowed groups. The rule of law has to remain paramount for any society to function properly. The challenge, of course, is allowing manifestation of diversity while also reducing the various forms of disparity and injustice. Indonesia is still beset by ethnic and religious strife and discrimination still exists but the symbolic goodwill gestures in recent years as described above are a hopeful sign and can serve as starting points for reconciliation and building of trust. These developments will certainly bode well for the creation of a genuine pluralistic society in the country.

The 2004 Human Development Report of UNDP states that “one way of assessing how diverse groups are recognized and accepted is by the way national holidays celebrate key moments in the history or religion of cultural groups in a country”. On this score, it is certainly revealing that the peninsular and insular countries of ASEAN where a significant number of Muslim population in Southeast Asia reside, (i.e., Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam) give due recognition to ethnic and religious diversity in their societies if measured by the number of such holidays that are officially declared in those countries. Even the Philippines, which is predominantly Christian, has recently declared Idul Fitri, the celebration of the end of the month-long fasting in the Muslim calendar, a public holiday through presidential proclamation.

On the other hand, the mainland ASEAN countries (Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam), which are influenced predominantly by Buddhist traditions, do not seem to attach the same degree of importance based on the type of holidays observed. The only ethnic/religious holidays in these countries, if any, are basically Buddhist ones with the exception of Myanmar where the new year of Karens, an ethnic group, Deepavali, a Hindu festival, Idul Fitri and Christmas Day are also recognized as official holidays.

In a diverse world that we live in today, one may ask how much space is our society willing to provide for the various ethnic/religious groups, citizens or not, that are living in the same land and allowing all to express themselves fully in their socio-cultural and religious traditions as well as to publicly accept such expressions. After all, does Buddhist philosophy not encourage tolerance, moderation and accommodation? Obviously, simply declaring ethnic and religious holidays are by no means an assurance of achieving harmony among the different population groups or that cultural and religious diversity would be respected. However, it is an important step in acknowledging and accepting pluralism in society.

TERRORISM ASSOCIATED THREATS TO HUMAN SECURITY

Since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and especially after the tragic events of 9/11, it has become evident that a major global challenge of at least the early part of the 21st century will be to win the hearts and minds of people who for one reason or another are inclined to choose the path of violence and terror. Invariably, the reasons for them taking up such causes can be traced to the fact that they could not see any better alternative offered to them and/or forced into such situations often out of desperat-

ion, ignorance or external influences. It is only natural that conditions of poverty, deprivation, polarization, and other inequities or injustices in a society anywhere around the world frequently lead to extremism and fanaticism of a militant nature with undesirable consequences.

On the issue of insurgency, terrorist and separatist movements within countries, this is not a new problem, not only for Thailand but also for many other Southeast Asian nations as well. Indonesia and Philippines are the obvious ones that come to mind in recent times. In fact, the situation in the southern part of Mindanao province in the Philippines bears many resemblances to that in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. Both have predominantly Muslim population, are faced with insurgency/terrorist/separatist elements and the central governments have responded with military operations with mixed results. The Philippine government, with the assistance from Malaysia, had over the past few years been undertaking peace talks and negotiations with some of the insurgency/separatist groups operating in Mindanao province. While in no way suggesting that these two country cases are identical, there is probably enough in common to see if some lessons can be shared and information exchanged on what worked and what did not and why, in the spirit of ASEAN cooperation.

Another area worth studying closely in this context but through a human security/development lens is the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) comprising several southern provinces of Thailand including the three southernmost ones of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, a number of northern states in Peninsular Malaysia including Kelantan and almost all the provinces on the island of Sumatra including Aceh in Indonesia. The IMT-GT was initiated back in 1993 by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia primarily to uplift economic development in the triangular area through closer cooperation among the three ASEAN member countries. Over the years, it had received some assistance from the Asian Development Bank in the process.

The three Thai southernmost provinces—Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala— together with the state of Kelantan and the province of Aceh share certain common elements. They are all located at the extremities or boundaries with neighboring countries quite a distance from the respective capitals of the nations which they belong, have very strong ethnic/cultural roots as well as religious faiths/ideologies and are sort of against or different from the mainstream societies in their countries and even harbor separatist tendencies.

In a way, the people living there have been somewhat neglected or marginalized over time and/or experi-

enced lack of opportunities, inequities, injustices or other threats to their security. These common factors may have helped them develop a close affinity for each other and provided mutual sanctuary and assistance among themselves as a result. In short, this area could also be considered as a Triangle of Disaffected Groups (or TDG). It is therefore not surprising that terrorist and/or separatist networks have been operating in such a milieu with comparative ease and with sympathetic support. The problems have thus taken on a transboundary character and as such require close regional cooperation to deal with them effectively.

The challenge from a human security and development paradigm is to see how to better reach the common people by identifying the insecurities and threats facing areas like the TDG or even the southern Philippines and then finding the proper space and forum for constructive dialogue and addressing them in an appropriate and concerted manner by the governments of the countries concerned which are all members of ASEAN. In this day and age, genuine confidence-building and peaceful co-existence are key issues that we all need to constantly face and handle with care in the course of our daily lives. As stated in one of the provisions of the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

(UNESCO), "...That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

In this regard, it might be useful to recall the Communist insurgency or Red threat facing the Southeast Asian countries starting from forty or so years ago until the late 1980s. This was one of the driving forces for the then five founding members of ASEAN to form the regional grouping back in 1967 in order to serve as a bulwark to contain the spread of communism in the region and in effect counter the falling domino theory which was much touted at that time. The elements that made communism attractive during those days bear much similarity with those that attract people to be terrorists today—destitution, inequity, ideology and so forth.

Thus, the lessons of four decades ago are there to be learned and reflected upon in the present context. We must be able to offer people more security, justice and hope for a better tomorrow if there is any chance of winning the war on terrorism. The Secretary General of ASEAN, Ong Keng Yong, at a recent security conference touched on human security as the best deterrent to terrorism by saying that "We all know that terrorism cannot be eliminated through military and police action and financial safeguards alone. Deep-seated resentment arising

from social inequality, poverty and lack of opportunities serves as fuel to terrorist inclinations... We cannot use systems and technology alone in the counter-terrorist campaign. The support of the people is essential... the human factor is most important”.

BALANCED PERSPECTIVE AND MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

The barrage of criticisms and close scrutiny that Thailand and Thai people, either at home or abroad, received following the recent tragic incidents of Krue Se and Tak Bai in the country's Deep South leading to substantial casualties, while understandable, should also be examined in a logical and balanced perspective. Besides the apparent human rights-related violation, the furore or protest expressed is that Muslim Thais have again been unfairly targeted. It should also be reminded that many Thais of Buddhist or other faiths have already died over the past year and a half through innumerable terrorist-type killings. In fact, most communities in Thailand's Deep South have over the same period been gripped with fear and faced economic downturn, therefore clearly facing a human insecurity problem. Ways have to be found to swiftly stabilize the situation in the most sensible and peaceful fashion possible. The culture of violence and impunity has to be put to an end. Any injustice or violation committed anywhere should in principle elicit equal condemnation and receive

appropriate punishment irrespective of the place, time and person concerned.

The Thai authorities admittedly mishandled the situations in Krue Se and Tak Bai and have expressed remorse. Several panels have already conducted investigations on the incidents and their reports have been released to the public, albeit not completely. These two cases are painful yet valuable lessons learned and hopefully such incidents would not recur again. A National Reconciliation Commission has been established earlier this year to try to restore peace, trust and understanding to the troubled and restive parts of southern Thailand. This has been generally viewed as a positive development and a step in the right direction. There remains much to be done to ensure that human security needs across a broad spectrum of society are adequately met and protected.

In the spirit of being part of the ASEAN family, it would also be more constructive on the part of Thailand and its neighbors to offer or receive helpful assistance and useful advice rather than just have mere exchanges of criticism and condemnation. In fact, such cooperative initiatives have already taken place recently like in the case of exchange visits by leaders of Muslim religious organizations between Indonesia and Thailand to foster better understanding, dialogue and collaboration. The recent pledge made

by Malaysian authorities to help restore peace in Thailand's Deep South through joint cooperation on a range of concerned issues from security to education and religious understanding could also be seen as a good sign.

Just as some fellow ASEAN member countries have expressed interest and desire to know more about the Thai experiences in many aspects of economic development, perhaps Thailand can also learn from its ASEAN neighbors about conflict management mechanisms and ethnic relations schemes that could shed light on possible ways and means for peaceful resolutions to some of these tricky problems. We need to foster more the spirit of "*gotong royong*" or mutual self-help or assistance within the ASEAN family which would in turn strengthen the bonds of friendship, promote solidarity and enhance resilience.

To put things in proper perspective, Thailand over the years have been on the forefront of providing humanitarian assistance and a sanctuary especially in accepting millions of refugees from all walks of life from neighboring Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam as a result of the Indochina War and more recently refugees from Myanmar spilling over due to ethnic and other conflicts across the border and various other causes. This was done without Thailand being a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Thailand has also

been active in conflict/post-conflict situations in recent times in places like East Timor, Aceh, Afghanistan, Iraq and even Burundi. The key challenge for Thailand now is for it to channel the same kind of humanitarian spirit which it had demonstrated towards refugees, displaced persons and victims of conflict of neighboring or even far-away countries to its own residents in the Deep South.

ONE ASEAN AND ONE WORLD

Looking ahead, ASEAN leaders have recently held their annual summit in November 2004 in Vientiane. This particular caucus took on special significance due to the fact that the next 6-year plan in the roadmap to reach the goals stipulated in ASEAN Vision 2020 was adopted for implementation. It is hoped that the authorities will give due consideration to the various issues relating to human development and security facing the ASEAN peoples.

Today, the immediate threat or trouble spot may be southern Thailand; tomorrow the flashpoint could be any place within ASEAN. While the plight of the residents in southern Thailand are being highlighted recently, we should not forget that there are countless other people within the ASEAN region who are suffering from various forms of poverty, diseases, illiteracy, injustices and discrimination at the moment which can just as readily boil over into violence and tragedies if

preventive measures are not taken in time.

The political and security cooperation within ASEAN over the years have enabled relatively peaceful and stable conditions to take hold within the region. This has allowed economic growth, development and cooperation to take place in a fairly uninterrupted manner. The challenge now is to ensure that the benefits of such cooperation are shared equitably among the ASEAN peoples so that they become *free from want and from fear*. In principle, a human security threat at anytime in any country within ASEAN should be treated as a threat to the entire region and the problem addressed in an appropriate and timely manner.

As in practically all things in life, prevention is better than cure. Suitable pre-emptive and pro-active policies need to be devised and implemented if we are to make real and substantive progress on this crucial front. ASEAN has interfaced with external parties around the world called “Dialogue Partners” ever since its establishment almost four decades ago. The time has come to have more constructive dialogue and engagement with its own people in order to hopefully remove as much of the insecurities that its populace is facing. The dangers are usually more threatening from within than from without and can become potentially explosive when both are combined.

The ASEAN leaders who adopted the Vision 2020 statement back in 1997, outlining what they envisaged Southeast Asia to be like in the year 2020, made a pledge to their peoples of their determination and commitment to bringing this Vision into reality which included a whole range of issues pertaining to human development and security. Six years later, at the ASEAN Summit held in Bali in October 2003, the leaders issued the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II. It reaffirmed their commitment to the principles adopted in the earlier years and further elaborated on the goals of Vision 2020 to establish an ASEAN Community resting on the three pillars of ASEAN cooperation, namely, political/security, economic and socio-cultural dimensions.

Interestingly, the leaders once again pledged to their peoples of their resolution and commitment to bring the ASEAN Community into reality. The ASEAN peoples should therefore start making their leaders accountable to fulfill those pledges—now and towards 2020. In order to help ensure that such promises materialize, and as a demonstration of being true to the letter and spirit of such statements, there should perhaps be a cultivation of a greater sense of perception of inter-connectedness and the feeling of the “pulse” among all ASEAN peoples like what John Donne wrote almost four centuries ago, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man

is a piece of the continent, a part of the main....Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee".

The recent earthquake-induced tsunami disaster hitting a dozen nations across the Indian Ocean rim, including four ASEAN countries, within a span of a few hours is a case in point of an extreme event causing widespread damage and enormous casualties, thus creating a high degree of human insecurity throughout the affected areas and beyond, almost simultaneously. As a result, there has been a tremendous outpouring of sympathy from the world community coupled with offers of relief as well as other forms of assistance mobilized at a global scale. While in no way belittling the catastrophic nature of this particular incident, it should also be reminded that there are innumerable other lesser known and less dramatic events occurring almost everyday around the world and in even within Southeast Asia which nevertheless exhibit signs of misery and threats to human security.

It is also worthwhile to note that parts of the IMT-GT was the area within ASEAN that was most seriously hit by the tsunami, whereby some have even suggested that this would offer a window of opportunity for peace and reconciliation efforts to be

pursued in such places as the conflict-prone Indonesian province of Aceh, where the devastation and toll was the greatest. Peace talks have actually been undertaken recently between the concerned parties, this time brokered by a former Finnish prime minister. It is also worth noting that an IMT-GT Summit is scheduled to be held in Malaysia in December 2005. In this regard, it is sincerely hoped that human security/development issues could appear as important items for discussion on the meeting agenda.

As the title of the recently published report of the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change suggests, having a more secure world should indeed be a shared and collective responsibility of everyone. This is also echoed in the UN Secretary General's report "In Larger Freedom: Toward Development, Security and Human Rights" to be deliberated on when leaders and representatives of the world gather in New York in September this year to mark the UN's 60th anniversary. We are after all living in one diverse but interdependent community and somewhat unpredictable world, more so today than ever before. As Sharif Abdullah once said "I want to live in a world where wealth is measured by how much you share"—a simple yet profound statement in our common quest for a sustainable and equitable society, nationally, regionally and globally.