



THAILAND

## “Targets of Both Sides”

Violence against Students, Teachers, and Schools  
in Thailand’s Southern Border Provinces

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# Summary

An armed Ranger walks through the school yard during a break between classes at Ban Klong Chang Elementary School, Pattani. A camp for 32 paramilitary Rangers has been established in the school compound.

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# “TARGETS OF BOTH SIDES”

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*“I am afraid of [the soldiers], because the soldiers are very touchy. They love to hold the children, and that’s okay for the boys, but for girls we can’t allow men to touch our body. And I am not happy when the soldiers ask whether I have any older sisters and ask for their phone numbers.”*

A 10-YEAR-OLD GIRL AT THE SCHOOL

*I had nothing against the soldiers when they were outside the school.... But when they moved into the school, I feared there would be an attack on the school, so ... I withdrew my children.... [I]f there was a hit on the grounds, the children would be hit.*

THE MOTHER OF TWO CHILDREN WHOSE SCHOOL WAS PARTIALLY OCCUPIED BY GOVERNMENT PARAMILITARY FORCES

*The frequency of the raids has disrupted the education and created a feeling of uncertainty for teachers and students because we don’t know when the soldiers will come next.... I feel insecure, and my students feel insecure.*

A TEACHER AT A PRIVATE ISLAMIC SCHOOL



Since separatist insurgents renewed regular attacks in 2004 in Thailand’s southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, students, teachers, and schools have been caught up in violence by both the insurgents and government security forces.



Students at Ban Klong Maning Elementary School, Pattani, wait outside their classroom as a soldier from a “Peace and Development” infantry unit guards the rooms on the ground floor that are occupied by his unit.



*I turned and found a gun pressed against my cheek. When the trigger was pulled, the impact of the bullet spun my body around, and I was shot on the other side of the head.... I tried to block [the shot] and the bullet went through a finger of my left hand and into my skull.... [My] students were affected the moment they learned that I was shot... [They] all broke out in tears, asking, "Who shot the teacher?" Many came to visit me in the hospital and cried when they saw I was shot.*

An ethnic Malay Muslim teacher at a government school, Nuriham S. was shot three times by insurgents. He lost one finger, his jaw was shattered, and his tongue was mutilated by the bullet to his face. He still has one bullet lodged in his skull. Prior to the attack, insurgents warned him that as a Muslim he should not be teaching at a government school.

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The insurgents, who view the educational system as a symbol of Thai Buddhist state oppression, have burned and bombed government schools, harassed and killed teachers, and spread terror among students and their parents. The vast majority of teachers killed have been ethnic Thai Buddhists, and their deaths are often intended as a warning to others. Yet Muslim teachers have not been spared; insurgents have also targeted Muslim teachers at government schools, and Islamic school administrators who resist insurgents' efforts to use classrooms for indoctrination and recruiting. In some areas, insurgents have also pressured Malay Muslim families not to send children to government schools.

The government faces the challenge of protecting children and teachers. Yet in some villages, government security forces have set up long-term military and paramilitary camps or bases in school buildings and on school grounds, interfering with education and student life and potentially attracting attacks as much as deterring them. When security forces have suspected that insurgents are using Islamic schools to hide or shelter, or that insurgents are seeking to indoctrinate school students into their separatist ideology and recruit new supporters and fighters, the government's response has included raids on schools, involving mass arbitrary arrests of students. Some raids have turned violent, endangering students and teachers. Such heavy-handed tactics may succeed in only further alienating the Muslim Malay community from the government.

The result is that students, teachers, and schools are caught in the untenable position of facing a risk of violence from both insurgents and government security forces. As the principal of an Islamic school told Human Rights Watch: "It is very difficult to stay in my position—in the middle.... [I]f you try and stay in the middle, you can become the targets of both sides."

Violations by both sides in the conflict disrupt access to a quality education for hundreds of thousands of children in the southern border provinces—Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim alike.





*“What scares me is the thought that the school could be attacked because the soldiers are at the school, but that students and teachers would be the ones that get hurt... . The school children and teachers could get caught in the middle.”*

A NINE-YEAR-OLD STUDENT

Students at Ban Klong Chang Elementary School, Pattani, hang out with a paramilitary Ranger manning a sandbagged guard post in front of the Ranger camp in a corner of the school compound. Approximately 30 Rangers currently live and work in a camp established in the school compound.

## INSURGENT ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

Attacks by separatist insurgents on government schools have become one of the most notorious aspects of the conflict in the southern border provinces. Between January 2004 and August 2010, arsonists made at least 327 attacks on government schools in the three provinces. Many insurgent attacks on schools are motivated by animosity toward the Thai educational system and the easy access to soft, high visibility targets. Some arson attacks on schools are also used to divert government forces into an ambush. In addition, at some schools, insurgents have set off bombs on school grounds to target security forces, damage infrastructure, or simply to generate fear.

Since mid-2007, the number of arson attacks on schools appears to have declined significantly, likely both because the government and local communities have improved its response and insurgents have simply shifted their target choice. However, in the absence of any public declaration by elders and commanders of the separatist movement that attacks on schools must cease entirely, some violence continues, to the great detriment of children seeking an education.

When Human Rights Watch visited Ban Ba Ngo Elementary School in Pattani's Mayo district, where all the students are

Muslim, a pile of books was still smoldering in the school library. Five days earlier, on the last day of the school term, a group of around 15 insurgents stormed the school, broke into classrooms and doused them with gasoline. The insurgents first set alight the library and the kindergarten room, using the books and the kindergarten's sleeping mattresses to fuel the fire. The flames soon spread to adjacent classrooms. A teacher told Human Rights Watch: "I was at home and I heard two gunshots, and when I came out, I saw that the school building was on fire.... I called the fire brigade, the army, and the police. But nobody came. They feared there would be a secondary attack or a roadside ambush.... It took about an hour to convince them to come."

The loss of school buildings disrupts children's access to a quality education, saps scarce school resources, and generates fear among teachers, children, and their parents. Students displaced from their classrooms often meet in crowded tents or other prefabricated units in the school playground. Teachers and students told Human Rights Watch that these temporary teaching conditions cause problems for the children, as they can be crowded and noisy, and in certain weather conditions, overly hot or wet. The impact is often felt beyond the targeted school, as neighboring schools are often temporarily shut down following an attack.



(above) Bullet holes on the inside of the wall of Ban Paka Cinoa Elementary School in Pattani. Paramilitary Rangers based in the school compound came under heavy attack by insurgents using gunfire, improvised explosive devices, and grenades in 2010.

(right) School children inspect the rubble at Ban Payo Elementary School, Pattani, which was set alight in January 2010. A seven-year-old student explained the problems for his studies after the fire: "We had to study outside. I didn't like studying outside ... it's hot and noisy. I couldn't concentrate."

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A teacher and students at Ban Klong Chang Elementary School, Pattani. A local resident told Human Rights Watch that approximately 80 students had left the school after paramilitary Rangers established a base at the school; approximately 90 students remain.



## INSURGENT ATTACKS ON TEACHERS

Insurgents have attacked and frequently killed teachers and other education personnel ranging from janitors to school administrators. Between January 2004 and the first week of September 2010, 108 government teachers and an additional 27 education personnel have been killed in the southern border provinces, and another 103 teachers and 19 education personnel have been injured. In the period between January and early September 2010 alone, 14 teachers—10 men and 4 women—were killed. While most of those attacked are ethnic Thai Buddhist, the insurgents have also attacked Malay Muslim teachers who work at government schools or who teach at Islamic schools but resist insurgents' attempts to use the schools for indoctrination or recruitment of students.

A Thai Buddhist who was a former teacher at a government school in a Muslim village described to Human Rights Watch an insurgent attack on her and four colleagues as they left school one day in a pickup truck: “[Our] truck was stopped by a gunman.... I can’t remember how many rounds he shot at the truck. Four of the teachers inside the truck were hit by the bullets.” The attack left the teacher paralyzed from the waist down. “I can’t even sit up by myself now.... I can’t go to the bathroom by myself,” she said. And she missed being a teacher: “I love teaching the children.... I had been teaching for over 30 years in that village.”

Another teacher told Human Rights Watch that insurgents had repeatedly warned him that as a Muslim, he should not be teaching at a government school. Local government security forces had likewise told him to “be careful,” which he took as a threat. An insurgent who came to kill him shot him first in the mouth, shattering his jaw and mutilating his tongue, and then a second time, leaving a bullet lodged in his skull.

The principal of a traditional Islamic school told Human Rights Watch that separatist militants had pressured him to allow indoctrination at his school, and he had received a leaflet warning him not to cooperate with the authorities. At the same time, government officials had called on him to ensure that his school did not become “radicalized” and fall under the influence of separatists. Several months after Human Rights Watch interviewed this principal, insurgents shot him three times in the back, killing him. The principal’s replacement told Human Rights Watch that he had learned a lesson from the assassination: “[We] should not be seen to be too close to the authorities. We won’t turn our back to the state, but we will keep our distance.”



(above) A convoy of teachers, escorted by the army, passes by students as they leave school.

(right) A teacher shows the gun he says he always carries, even when teaching, at Ban Klong Chang Elementary School, Pattani. The teacher said he had narrowly escaped two attacks by insurgents and that he was afraid for his life. Parents and students said teaching quality has decreased due to increased anxiety and security concerns of the teachers. “The teachers are not focusing on the teaching,” one mother said.

Beyond the tragic loss of life caused by attacks on teachers, children seeking an education also suffer. Schools often close for a period following an attack on teachers, and parents will transfer their children to other schools, often at great distance. The general insecurity causes frequent teacher turnover and leads to a generally distracted teaching staff, leading to poorer teaching quality for students.







## **OCCUPATION OF SCHOOLS BY GOVERNMENT SECURITY FORCES**

Government security forces—both the army and paramilitary Rangers—frequently establish bases or camps in school buildings or on school grounds, which disrupts children’s education. The security forces use these bases not as a short-term response to a direct threat on a specific school, but as accommodations and as a long-term presence in a convenient location in particularly unstable areas, often for many years. The result is that students—girls and boys—must try to get an education alongside large numbers of armed men.

At Ban Klong Chang School, in Pattani’s Mayo district, for example, about half of the school’s playing field had been occupied for two years by armed paramilitaries. A nine-year-old girl told Human Rights Watch: “I am scared.... What scares me is the thought that the school could be attacked because the soldiers are at the school, but that students and teachers would be the ones that get hurt.”

An army soldier plays with students at Ban Pakaluesong Elementary School, Pattani. Since November 2006, either army soldiers or paramilitary Rangers have lived in a camp established in the school compound. A local grandmother with six school-aged children told Human Rights Watch that they had all been moved from the school “because my grandchildren were scared of the soldiers.”

A 10-year-old girl at the same school said: “I am afraid of [the soldiers], because the soldiers are very touchy.... And I am not happy when the soldiers ask whether I have any older sisters and ask for their phone numbers.”

School occupations can be extremely disruptive to children’s education. When security forces arrive, a quick exodus of many students often follows, as children transfer elsewhere even at the cost of additional travel time or transportation expenses. Some leave because they are afraid of insurgent attacks, while others leave because they fear harassment.



Those students who remain in occupied schools often feel the quality of their education deteriorates. Parents and children complained to Human Rights Watch that teachers became distracted or neglected their duties because of increased tension from the military presence. Armed men can also create a destructive environment for education: Human Rights Watch received complaints from parents of soldiers drinking, gambling, and taking narcotics on school grounds.

A paramilitary Ranger with groceries walks by students at Pakaluesong Elementary School. About 30 Rangers live in a camp established in the school grounds.



A Royal Thai Army soldier who is part of an armed teachers' escort plays with students at Ban Pakalusong Elementary School, Pattani. Since November 2006, either army or paramilitary soldiers have lived in a camp established in the school compound.

*“I don’t want my children to study where there are soldiers. I fear that the presence of the soldiers will bring trouble to the school and ... will bring consequences for the children, including violence.”*

A LOCAL MOTHER TOLD HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH WHY SHE REFUSED TO SEND HER FOUR CHILDREN TO THE SCHOOL





A Thai Ranger tidies up a barrack in the compound of Ban Paka Cinoa Elementary School, Pattani. Approximately 25 Rangers from a “Peace and Development” unit are based on the school grounds.

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A bullet hole is visible in the door of a residential hut in a *pondok*, an Islamic school, in Yala. Paramilitary Rangers raided the *pondok* while looking for an insurgent.

## GOVERNMENT RAIDS ON ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

The government faces a difficult challenge in responding to separatist indoctrination and recruitment that occurs at a small number of Islamic private schools and also in traditional Islamic schools, known as *pondoks*. In recent years, army and paramilitary Ranger forces have conducted numerous raids and searches for materials or individuals at a number of Islamic private schools and *pondoks*. On some occasions, the government forces have made mass arbitrary arrests of students, or the raids have turned violent, endangering students and teachers.

During a raid at the Saengtham Islam Wittaya *pondok* in October 2009, the security forces arrested around 40 students, including two as young as 10 years old, and took

them to a local military camp for questioning. The school's teachers were not allowed to accompany the students, and their parents were not notified of their detention. All of the students were eventually released, and the search failed to uncover anything illegal or linking the school to the insurgency. "Twenty years of good deeds were ruined by that day," said the principal when asked about the raid's impact on his school's reputation.

Islamic schools are an enormous source of pride and cultural importance for the ethnic Malay Muslim community in Thailand. While some religious teachers have been involved in the insurgency and some Islamic schools have been used for indoctrination and occasionally recruitment, the vast majority of teachers and schools have no connection to the insurgents. Heavy-handed actions by the government, even to protect children from recruitment, may ultimately mainly serve to alienate young people and increase their resentment, which could eventually lead them to join the insurgency. Arrests, even when they do not lead to charges, can cast suspicion on students and can cause them problems at school or with members of their own communities who do not support the insurgents or their tactics.



A helmet sits on a sandbagged wall of the barracks housing 26 soldiers at Ban Samala Elementary School, Ban Samala.

## **BROADER CONTEXT: THE CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN THAILAND**

Since the renewal of the separatist Malay Muslim insurgency in January 2004, more than 4,100 people have been killed, and more than 7,100 have been injured in the southern border provinces. The vast majority of these deaths have been civilians killed by the insurgents.

At the same time, the government's response to the insurgency has included serious and widespread human rights violations against suspected militants and their supporters. State-sanctioned abuses have most clearly been evidenced by the Krue Se (April 28, 2004) and Tak Bai (October 25, 2004) killings. These incidents, along with numerous cases of arbitrary arrests, torture, "disappearances," and extrajudicial killings, have served to fuel and spread the insurgency. Abusive officials in the

southern border provinces have rarely been punished, even in well-documented and high-profile cases. This problem has worsened since the August 2005 enforcement of the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations ("Emergency Decree"), which effectively provides security personnel and government officials with immunity from criminal, civil, and disciplinary liability.

While insurgent attacks have grown ever more powerful and deadly, the Thai government has become less and less engaged in seeking solutions to the conflict. The recurring political turmoil on the streets of Bangkok between the anti-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) and the pro-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—unrest not specifically related to the conflict in the southern provinces—has divided the country and diverted both national and international attention away from the south. Moreover, the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, which depends upon military support to maintain power, has little motivation to contest the strategy and practices of the armed forces in the southern border provinces. The result has been increased militarization and reduced civilian oversight and control.





A student at Ban Samala Elementary School, Pattani.  
A unit from the army has set up base in part of the  
main school building and on the school grounds.  
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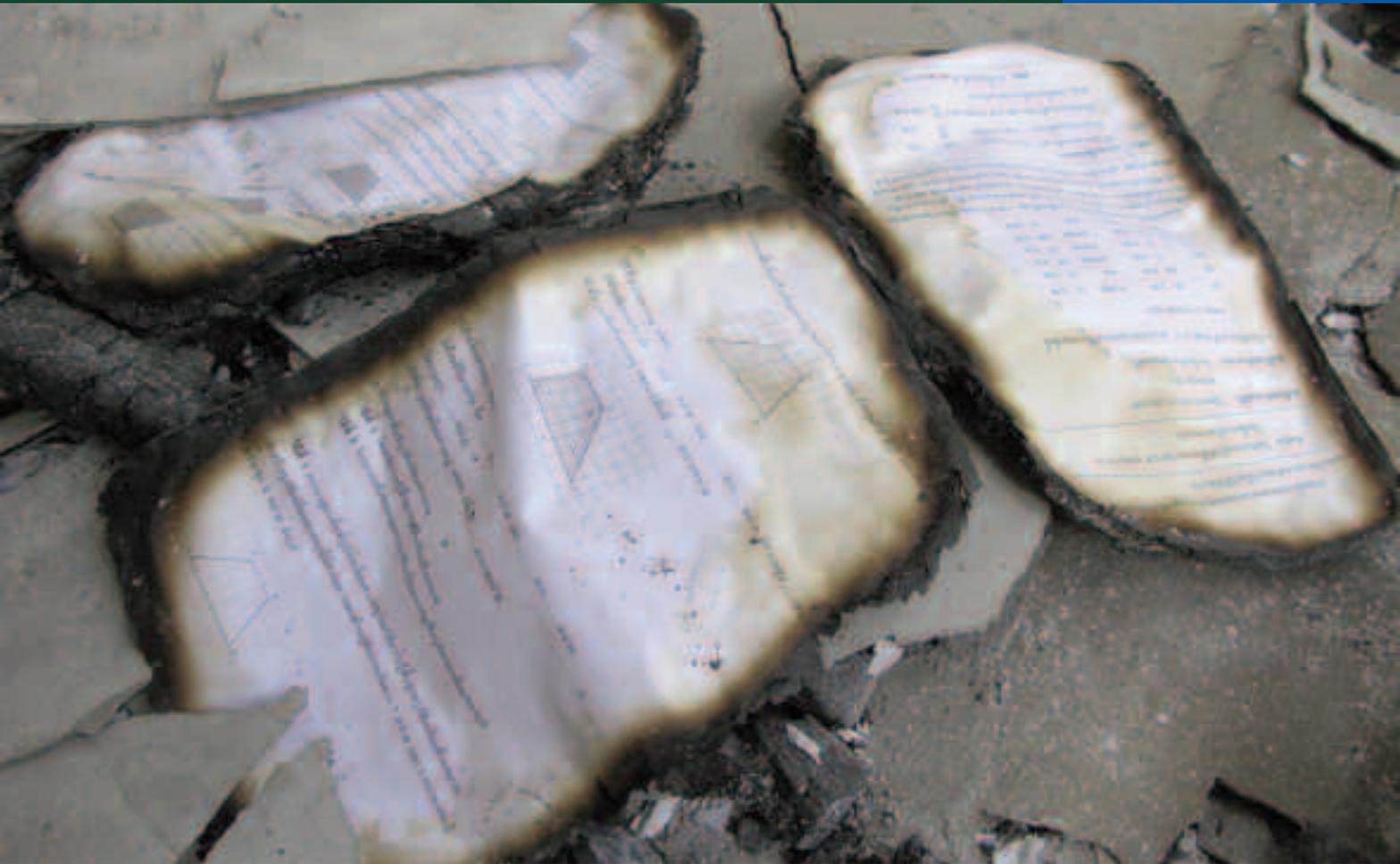
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*“I had nothing against the soldiers when they were outside the school... . But when they moved into the school, I feared there would be an attack on the school so that is the reason I withdrew my children.”*

THE MOTHER OF A STUDENT AT BAN KLONG CHANG  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, PATTANI

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## “Targets of Both Sides”

### Violence against Students, Teachers, and Schools in Thailand’s Southern Border Provinces

Students, teachers, and schools have all been caught in the middle of the conflict in Thailand’s southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Separatist insurgents have threatened and killed teachers, including both ethnic Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims; bombed and burned government schools and teachers’ housing facilities; and recruited children into their ranks from schools. Government military and paramilitary forces occupied school buildings and school grounds for use as bases and have carried out disruptive searches and raids on Islamic schools. Based on extensive field research, this report documents how such violations by both sides to the conflict have impeded the access to a quality education sought by hundreds of thousands of children in the southern border provinces – Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim alike.

*(front cover) A student at Ban Klong Chang Elementary School, Pattani, waits as a paramilitary Ranger looks through his homework. Approximately 30 Rangers have established a camp in the back of the school compound. Local parents told us that they had removed their children from the school due to safety concerns caused by the arrival of the Rangers.*

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*(above) Scorched pages from a school textbook litter a floor in Ban Ba Ngo Elementary School, Pattani, set alight by insurgents on March 19, 2010.*

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