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Guerrillas a Threat In South Thailand

Reuter

SONGKHLA, Thailand— Three separate guerrilla bands and a high incidence of common banditry pose a threat to government control of areas of southern Thailand.

Along the border with Malaysia, especially in the Betong salient which pushes a finger deep into Malaysian territory, about 1,200 guerrillas of the Malayan Communist Party are active.

In the southeast, along the Budo mountain chain that runs into Malaysia's northeastern state of Kelantan, some 600 guerrillas of the Moslem Pattani Liberation Front harass security forces.

Along the main mountain chain further north in the Malay peninsula, some 700 jungle fighters of the Communist Party of Thailand recruit youngsters in the lonely villages and attack isolated police posts.

As one source here put it: "It's a minor show compared with the guerrilla problems in the north and northeastern Thai border areas, but it's still serious."

He added: "Thai security forces consider the Malayan Communist Party as essentially a Malaysian problem."

The Pattani Liberation Front seeks autonomy for the states of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala, whose populations are largely Malays related to those in Kelantan.

The Thai authorities who refuse to acknowledge this insurgency as a genuine liberation movement, always refer to the Moslem guerrillas "bandits." "They see the Communist Party of Thailand in the mid-south as their main threat," the source added.

With more pressing problems on the borders with Laos and Cambodia, it is understandable that Thailand gives a lower priority to the allocation of security forces and finance to the south.

Police stations in many large villages are manned by as few as four men. This is grossly inadequate to the threat.

Haadyai, the fastest growing town in Thailand, dominates a district covering some 500 square miles with a population of 180,000 people, but its police strength is only 120 men.

A few hundred yards from the town's airport, workers refuse to tap rubber because of reprisal killings by the Communist guerrillas.

The clandestine communications network of the Communists in the area appears excellent, for although government forces have captured 40 Communist camps this year, very few guerrillas have been killed or captured.

The military commander of southern Thailand, Maj. Gen. Sant Chitpatima, has admitted that the kill rate has been low. But he said that the military operations have succeeded in disrupting the Communists by keeping the guerrillas on the move.

Both the Malayan and the Thai Communist parties have been able to declare certain remote areas "liberated," that is, subject to their authority alone.

"The M.C.P., for example, is virtually existing as a separate government in southern Thailand through taxation of the rural Chinese in Betong," the source said.

Though the Malaysian Communists operate almost exclusively along the border, members of the Thai party have been active in a border area opposite Malaysia's northwestern state of Kedah, home of a group of ethnic Thais as opposed to Thais of Chinese origin.

The Malaysian party also supports the Moslems through guerrilla training, though there is some resentment by the Pattani separatists at M.C.P. attempts to infiltrate their movement and take it over.

The lessons of the Communist insurgency in what was then Malaysia from 1948 to 1960 are not being adopted here. There is no food-stamp program or resettlement of the local population in fenced secure villages.

The Communists have no difficulty in obtaining rice, and they make money for arms and other essentials by taxing the rubber estates and charging protection for smugglers crossing the border.

The joint border operations headquarters staffed by Thais and Malaysians in this seaside town was shaken by the recent accidental shooting by Malaysian forces of six Thais, including two policemen, who had strayed across the border into an ambush.

"The unfortunate thing is that this has hurt relations at the working level and the Malaysian Communists are exploiting it," the source said.

Malaysia, having successfully stamped out the guerrilla movement on its own soil, obviously want more action against the M.C.P. to remove the threat once and for all.

But until Thailand is prepared to expend money and manpower or to permit Malaysian forces to operate freely against the guerrillas inside Thailand, the threat of a renewed insurgency spilling over into northern Malaysia seems likely to continue.