

# Massacre of Muslims in Thailand --- I

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The senseless slaughter of the human beings, regardless of the number, cause, time or place, is reprehensible. But the incidents leading to and following the Thailand's most recent experiment in manslaughter somewhat dwarf the issue of deaths per se. The way a peaceful protest of 1500 villagers in Narathiwat was trapped in a tight army cordon, then each and every one of them was flogged with batons, every one was arrested, everybody was stripped naked in public, his hands tied at the back and then made the punching box for the troops who kicked and slapped each defenseless man.

Each of these actions was condemnable in its own right, even before the men were stuffed on military trucks to be taken away to a military base hours away where the people met their deaths due to suffocation. Equally shameful has been the aftermath in which the Prime Minister Thaksin has betrayed astounding disregard to the value of human life and dignity, when he attributed the deaths to the dead themselves, first saying they were enfeebled by the Ramadan fasting, then somersaulting to allege that all were under the influence of drugs. Little wonder, the Thai press has attributed this incident to the Prime Minister's known contempt for human rights.

The Bangkok junta has always treated the people of its impoverished South like how the European settlers in America had treated the indigenous Red Indians. A passing policeman in the South Thailand is dreaded more than a tiger run loose from a jungle. The present incident was sparked by the arrest of six villagers taken away in Police-terror spree; fearing torture related deaths, the whole local community came for a peaceful protest outside the police station to demand release.

This gave the authorities a direly needed alibi to inflict a collective punishment on the whole village. Since the crowd was peaceful and did not

threaten the police station, itself, the local police bought time and called troops from a nearby base which took six hours. And the rest is now history.

When one first saw the pictures in the papers showing hundreds of semi-naked humans lay face down on the roads, one on another, with hands tied at back with ropes, and policemen brandishing

treated them was gentle, then the lexicon would require new meanings for the words torture, brutality and humiliation. The criminal silence of the world community on earlier excesses by the Thai military had made this type of incidents a foregone conclusion. Since an ambush on Thai military patrol in the same region early this year, where the troops retaliated by massacring the Muslims

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*The Floor*

whips, stamping feet on them, it was such a nauseating spectacle that one was at a loss of words to write a column on it. The news of the following day of the whole scale deaths made one absolutely wordless. I do not know how a Western columnist would have reacted to such treatment meted out on a peaceful demonstration in the Washington DC, for instance.

But I do know that after such massacre, the US leadership could not have survived calling this extent of brutality as "gentle measures", which Thaksin thinks the army has employed. If the way army

worshippers performing evening prayers in a nearby 1578-built historic Krue Se Mosque in Pattani, and then going on to gun down the local football team and displaying the bodies as terrorists. If an independent inquiry is not pushed through by the world community, there would be more to come.

The question is whether the State has a monopoly on terror while the label of terrorism is reserved for political dissidents even when it is the latter who are victims of terror. Can a peaceful sit-in be rechristened as "violent protest", when the only violence initiated, manip-

ulated and perpetrated is the one by the State? If every protester was so dangerous a terrorist that the need to transport him for "questioning" (read: punitive torture) in military bases hours away, why did they come themselves outside a police station.

Although the discontent was simmering in South Thailand for quite a time now, the present massacre is likely to be as seminal as the Sharpeville massacre of the Apartheid era in South Africa. By far, this death toll by government forces in a protest demonstration is the highest so far in the new century and can conveniently be compared to the most brutal police firing incidents of the last century by the British Police in colonial India, French troops in Algeria and even Israeli brutalities in Palestine. The most inhuman manner, in which scores of young men were suffocated to death, is reminiscent of the Black Hole tragedy in Calcutta in mid-18th century; only that the toll in the latter incident was hardly a third of what happened this time.

If the US President Bush enunciates a preemptive doctrine after terror attacks, or the Russian leader Putin does so after the Beslan school hostage crisis, and even when the Israeli Prime Minister Bagon had invoked this theory years earlier, the world shows a remarkable understanding. But when the Thailand's southerners would find their only defense by terror-against-terror and the guerilla attacks on Thai forces would increase in frequency and intensity, the civilized world would start hiring experts to research why the things are going wrong.

Thailand's Muslims are largely concentrated in the four southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla and Yala. The area is less prosperous than central Thailand, and many of the region's inhabitants complain they are at a disadvantage compared to the country's Buddhist majority.

(To be Continued)