

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background Information

The violence in the Thai southern border provinces, namely Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, continues without any hint of ending. The violence is believed to be an outcome of several sensitive and complex problems (The Government Public Relation Department, 2005). The violence has now affected not only the security of life and property of the local residents but also the stability and security of this region, and the relationships with neighboring countries and the Arab world (Ukrist Pathmanand, 2005; Gilquin, M., 2005). Many Thais are concerned that the situation will become worse since no measure or action has been effective enough to put the matter to rest.

The previous Taksin government had implemented all kinds of policies and measures to tackle the problems in the south, ranging from long-term planning in economic and social development to the much-opposed extreme measure of martial law which is normally used only in emergency situations. Along with the suppression of the violence through the existing military emergency decree, a large-scale measure toward a peaceful solution to the problem in the south was also initiated. For instance, the National Security Policy for the Southern Border Provinces (1999 -2003) encouraged the value of cultural diversity as a creative energy for Thai society and gave attention to the idea of “people in culture” for the people in the region to be able to “live as Muslims” in Thai society in peace and unity (Office of the National Security Council of Thailand, 1999). Additionally, the government launched psychological strategies, for example, the peace cranes campaign, inviting Thais across the country to fold paper cranes as an expression of their love and hopes to bring peace to the southern border provinces. Millions of peace cranes were dropped over the troubled provinces on December 5, 2004, His Majesty the King's birthday. Even with all these measures, the prevalent public mood is that the government has gone in the wrong direction in its efforts to tackle the problems in the deep south and

that the possibility to bring peace and harmony to this region is dimming. As the crisis in the south escalated, the Prime Minister's Office finally set up the National Reconciliation Commission chaired by Mr. Anan Panyarachun, a former Prime Minister, in October 2004. This organizational effort aims to create a better understanding about the situation in the south and to promote tolerance towards different ethnic and religious groups in the country (The Government Public Relation Department, 2004).

There are several issues raised in connection with the violence in the south. The first issue is related to historical background. The southern border provinces were incorporated into the Kingdom of Thailand under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty in the early twentieth century. Throughout the domination of Thai state there were rejections from the region's Muslims against the central Thai government because of incompatible and mishandled acts way such as restrictions on the use of the local Malay language and cultural dominated policy as well as limited access to government jobs and educational opportunities (Wattana Sugunnasil, 2005).

Another issue is that since 80 percent of the inhabitants in the southern border provinces are Muslims of Malay descent (Smith, 2004). The different culture and language of the south's Muslim people has caused it to have some obscure and distant relationship with the rest of the country (Ibrahim Syukre, 2005). Additionally, the news and horror scenarios in media fan the flames of hostility in people's perception by implying that Muslims (who in the past lived peacefully side by side with Buddhists and Christians) are pro-violence groups.

Moreover, the southern border provinces had not benefited from socioeconomic schemes that the government launched since 1960s to improve the economy and standard of living of people in every region of the country. Approximately about 470,000 (36%) of 1.3 million Muslims in the southern border provinces were living below the poverty line (Wattana Sugunnasil, 2005).

Another issue is deficiency of familiarity in problem solving. The unilateral approach policy in solving problem was used instead of multilateral approach with an encouragement of the public plurality (Chaiwat Satha-anand, 2004). Niti Aew-Sriwong (2004) stated that Thai society lacks alternatives and diversity in its problem solving approach, because of a lack of promotion and encouragement to arouse public concern for action. He believes that the more alternatives and diversity a society has in its problem solving system, the more the society will find solutions for its problems and conflicts. Kantathi Suphamongkhon, (2006) the previous Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, stated that interactions among the various cultures, religions and civilizations have led to the sharing of knowledge and ideas, providing the impetus for national progress and advancement. Turning existing contradictions and diversities into strengths will encourage the development of positive perceptions, positive feelings and positive emotions.

Besides historical background, ethnicity, inadequacy of economic reform measures, and deficiency of familiarity in problem solving, other factors required consideration, including the insensitivity of repressiveness of administrators such as abuse and brutal acts committed by the authorities and government official. According to the Chair Commission of NRC, Anand Panyarachun stated that more than 1,000 people were arrested by polices and disappeared. The operation of taking away suspects and making them disappeared as well as extrajudicial killings without pondering over the effects increased a risk factor which causing a conflict.

Ukrist Pathmanand (2005) stated that misunderstandings between groups often lead to conflict. Cultural and religious conflicts require time and understanding from society for resolution. People in the center of a conflict have strong, hardened opinions that make understanding the opposite side difficult because the violence is happening around them. Understanding across a cultural divide in the midst of conflict requires enormous efforts. To genuinely solve the problem demands effective resources with a comprehensive understanding about culture, beliefs, attitudes, and situations.

Owing to the view that the violence in the south has a regional, political, and religious connection, there are mixed feelings about the situation. While most Thais may feel apathy, some feel animosity particularly because of the association with the shocking event of September 11, 2001.

However, one positive thing that has come out of the US terrorist attacks is an effort of the world to understand Islam and its adherents. Such an effort originates from the belief and goodwill that if we understand each other properly, we can use our common interests to find affirmative reconciliation in order to reduce and avoid conflict. An example of a gesture of good-will toward the south by an individual is an activist-cum-academic and amateur photographer, Prinya Thaewanarumikul, who expresses his values and beliefs through his artistic creations of pictures. Mr. Thaewanarumikul, a former student leader during the 1992 Black May protest and a current lecturer in public law and vice-rector for student affairs at Thammasat University, has been interested in photography for over two decades. He has a strong desire to show the gentle side of people living the restive south, who are now viewed as prone to violence. He feels that the southern culture is fascinating. He likes the beauty of the south – its nature, people and culture. So, he wants to show another side of the south to let people see that there is so much beauty in the midst of hardship. In his interview with the Bangkok Post (October, 2005), he said, “I want my photographs to serve as a door to a new perception. And, hopefully, my work can somehow help return love, reconciliation and peace back to the south.”

It has been shown that a large part of the southern problem arises from lack of proper knowledge and understanding about the Muslim people. It would, therefore, be justifiable to conduct a study on the Muslim people in other communities to get a perspective outlook towards the problems and explore ideas about possible solutions through Muslims’ eyes who have insight and understanding of the essence of the Muslim identity themselves. The Muslim community in the north, namely the Muslim community in Chiang Mai, is considered worthy of study. First of all, the Muslims in Chiang Mai community are indirect victims of the suspicion, mistrust, and resentment from the non-Muslim Thais. Secondly, being far from the center of the

conflict, they do not have vested interest in the southern situation. The idea that learning to accept otherness and ethnic diversity is a vital factor that allow people from various background to integrate to live harmoniously with others (Gilquin, M., 2005) provides another good reason for such a study. The Muslims in Chiang Mai belong to a heterogeneous community in which various ethnic groups live together in a predominantly Buddhist culture but have no problems living peacefully and productively. Through a study of attitudes towards the problems in the southern border provinces and viewpoints about solutions to the problems among Muslim Thais in Chiang Mai, it is hoped that attitudes and viewpoints about the Muslim community as a whole will generate a better understanding and more positive outlook on the religious beliefs and culture of the Thai Muslims in the south. It is also hoped that the study will provide a supporting base for any efforts of organization or the government in seeking direction to bring peace and security to the troubled region.

Purposes of the Study

1. To examine the attitudes of Muslim Thais in Muang Chiang Mai District, towards the problems in the southern border provinces.
2. To explore points of views of Muslim Thais in Muang Chiang Mai District, about solutions to the problems in the southern border provinces.

Research Question

What are the attitudes towards and ideas about solutions to the problems in the southern border provinces among Muslim Thais in Muang Chiang Mai District?

Scope of the Study

This study aimed to examine the attitudes towards the problems in the southern border provinces among Muslim Thais in Mueang Chiang Mai District and explore their ideas about solutions. The study focused on the problems in the southern border provinces that had happened from January 2004 – December 2006.

Definition of Terms

Attitude is a combination of beliefs evaluated and analyzed based on a person's experiences and knowledge. Attitudes are learned through direct and indirect knowledge and experience. This means that people are not born with attitudes. Attitudes are formed and organized continuously via the socialization process and biased towards major reference groups.

Problems in the southern border provinces in this study refers to the social, political, and economical problems, and the violent incidents that happened between January 2004 and December 2005.

Muslim Thais in Mueang Chiang Mai District, refers to Thais who are Muslim and live in one of the four Muslim communities in the sub-districts of Chiang Mai city – two in Chang-Klarn, and one each in San Pah Koy, and Chang Puak.