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THAILAND: More violence in restive south

In Thailand's restive south police say they found the mutilated body of a Muslim defence volunteer early on Monday. It's estimated that over 1,400 people have died in Thailand's south since the latest violence started in early 2004. And often, the violence is said to be linked to international terrorism. But linking the violence in Thailand's south to terrorism could be making the problem worse.

Presenter/Interviewer: Zulfikar Abbany

Speakers: Virginie Andre, Monash University's Global Terrorism Research Unit

ANDRE: I think the security forces in Thailand and the Thai government in general although they've been making recently a lot of efforts to try to understand why this is happening in the south, they don't have very much knowledge and understanding of what is actually the root cause of the problem in southern Thailand. And this is linked to my own research where I'm looking at how the war on international terrorism has had an impact on Thai policy making, and how they're addressing the violence in southern Thailand. It definitely has an impact on the way they're addressing the violence. They've been adopting a military hardline approach to address the violence, which in return has just increased further the violence and the response from the insurgents.

ABBANY: So is the government defining the violence in southern Thailand as terrorism rather than ethnic violence, ethnic troubles?

ANDRE: Well there's international terrorism, there's terrorism and then there's a local conflict. When you're talking about international terrorism I will link it up with movements like al Qaeda or more regional movement like Jemaah Islamiah. When you're talking about terrorism as such I think it's important to make a distinction between an act of terrorism and secularism. Of course insurgent groups do commit acts of terrorism but as we say one terrorist is another's freedom fighter. I think in the case of southern Thailand it would be very dangerous to define the insurgency as terrorism as we understand it today as international terrorism. It's more related to ethnic conflict.

ABBANY: So what do you see as the root cause?

ANDRE: Well of course I think that the southerners, not only the insurgents but also the local population does feel alienated. I mean the Thai state has been denying the fact that there was a Muslim minority in southern Thailand, and you can see that through their, like precisely their policies, asking people to basically not speak their own language, not wear their own local traditional dress, and singing to the national

anthem. And there is a problem with the identification from the southerners to a wider country that is Thailand.

ABBANY: Do you think though that if the trouble in southern Thailand is linked to terrorism that it would attract terrorists from other parts in neighbouring countries?

ANDRE: Well possibly, this is actually one of my worries and this is also one of the reasons if not the main reason why I started working on southern Thailand, because of their hardline approach the Thai state is taking to address the violence in the region. There are further alienating the population, violence has become part of the daily life of the southerners, and I'm worried about it because basically it might, people are just tired of insecurity, tired of the violence, and could possibly end up supporting the insurgents most likely, and of course international terrorism. So it could become a fertile ground for international terrorism.

ABBANY: Of course you've just come back from Thailand; you've spoken to policy makers and other people in the country about this very issue. Do you think that there is a fear that perhaps if the Thai government continues to be out of step with what's happening in southern Thailand that perhaps southern Thais could in fact redirect their anger against the government?

ANDRE: Well basically this is what is happening. If you look throughout history and the different phase of violence in southern Thailand of course the insurgents will target whoever is representing Thai authority in southern Thailand. And so far the conflict has not spread out of the region; it has remained in southern Thailand in the three border provinces. But now there is a worry that the conflict could spread out into the country and yes, possibly target the capital.