

**The Brewing Terror Threat in Thailand**  
**By Didi Kirsten Tatlow**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> February 2013**

BEIJING — Islamic terrorism never went away, though it seemed perhaps to have quieted down after the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011. But is it back now, stronger, as the crisis in Mali shows? And is southern Thailand a next crisis zone?

According to the Global Terrorism Index issued by the [Institute for Economics and Peace](#), the countries suffering the most from the impact of terrorism include familiar places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia. But here's a surprise, perhaps: Thailand ranked No. 8, even though many people associate it with holiday-making in the sun and not the carnage of war. According to the index, issued last December by the institute, a nonprofit group that works for world peace, in 2011 [Thailand had 173 terrorist incidents](#) that resulted in 142 fatalities (Iraq topped the index with 1,228 incidents and 1,798 fatalities.)

In the excellent interactive graphic, Mali ranked 43d out of the 158 countries studied, something which will presumably change following [the jihadist thrust](#) there that has led to the military intervention of France and African nations, supported by the United States. As this Reuters article explains, "The aim of the intervention is to prevent northern Mali from becoming a launchpad for international attacks by al Qaeda and its local allies in North and West Africa."

In Thailand, the decades-old [Muslim insurgency is growing and changing in character](#) – and foreigners, as well as Thais, should beware, reports [Asia Sentinel](#), an online platform for Asian issues. The conflict is already very bloody. More than 5,000 people have been killed since 2001 and about 11,000 severely injured, according to statistics kept by Deep South Watch, a monitoring organization in southern Thailand. [The Council on Foreign Relations Web site](#) said this makes Thailand "the deadliest war zone in East Asia."

Last year, the insurgency in Thailand's south began taking on "a worrying new direction," the article in Asia Sentinel said.

"Buddhist monks and teachers have been regularly singled out as targets. More than 300 schools closed recently as teachers went on strike over the worsening security situation. In September 2012, militants threatened to kill anyone not respecting Friday as the Muslim Sabbath, which forced many businesses to close and many people to remain indoors for the day," the article said. "Creeping Islamization is changing the nature of this previously low-level conflict."

"Further complicating the nature of the rebellion are deep links to local criminal gangs, especially those centered on drug and people trafficking. Conflict in the Deep South is an extremely profitable business," it said.

As the article on the Council's Web site reported, an attack on Sept. 21 killed six in Pattani province in Thailand's south, just a few hundred kilometers from the tourist beaches of Phuket and Thailand's west coast.

"These types of brutal attacks have become routine in this province," it said. "On a daily basis, groups of heavily armed men attack local officials, police, soldiers, teachers and any Muslim they believe is not adhering strictly enough to Islamic values. The insurgents explode homemade bombs, climb onto school buses and strafe children with gunfire. Those believed to sympathize with the national government are sometimes decapitated, their headless bodies left in public places, along with warnings to obey a strict form of Islam."

Thailand's deputy prime minister, Chalerm Yoobamrung, who is also the country's "security boss," as the Bangkok newspaper, The Nation, described him, has said that the institute's high ranking on the list was actually a misunderstanding.

Chalerm's response was pilloried early this month by the newspaper, which accused him of [sweeping the problem under the carpet](#) and hoping nobody would notice.

Just as the Islamist push in North Africa appears to have taken a new turn with the killing of local and foreign hostages in Algeria, some are worried the same will happen in Thailand, unless the problem is dealt with.

"Current travel warnings for Thailand continue to understate the risk," said the Asia Sentinel.

“Remarkably, the Thai insurgency has never veered near the coastal enclaves that are packed both with wealthy tourists and westerners who own beach properties in Phuket and other areas.” But, “There is precedent for caution,” the Sentinel said. “In 2001, an Abu Sayyaf raid kidnapped about 20 people from Dos Palmas, an expensive resort north of Puerto Princesa City on the island of Palawan in the Philippines, which had been considered completely safe.” A Peruvian-American tourist was beheaded by the kidnappers and an American missionary was killed in a shootout between them and security forces.

© The New York Times 2013.