

Security Concerns for Field School Students in Southern Thailand

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I have directed a field school in Southeast Asia for Simon Fraser University since 1993. The field school has taken students to a variety of locales in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Singapore. The portion of the field school that takes place in Thailand makes an effort to familiarize students with the different regions of Thailand. From 1993 until recently, an important part of the field school was a visit to the predominantly Moslem area of southern Thailand in association with the Pattani campus of Prince of Songkla University. Students normally spent about a week at the PSU Pattani campus. They were given lectures by university faculty on local history and culture, provided opportunities to meet and interact with PSU students, and taken on field trips to visit Moslem communities; sites of archaeological, historical, and religious significance; and a variety of government projects. When assessing the field school, students commonly viewed the trip to Pattani as one of the highlights of their three months in Southeast Asia. The field school also spent about a week at PSU's Hat Yai campus, where they were also exposed to southern Thailand, but it was the stay in Pattani that stood out the most in their minds, in large part because of the students that they met there and their brief exposure to the local Moslem society.



1998 Field School visits the Wadi Al-Hasen Mosque, Narathiwat Province, Southern Thailand

Southern Thailand has a relatively long history of political instability that in the not too distant past included a communist insurgency and Malay Moslem separatist movement. By 1993 the communist insurgency had been relegated to history and little remained of the separatist movement. The periodic acts of violence that the few remaining separatists carried out were cause for some concern, but I did not consider them important enough to warrant avoiding the area. I did my best to keep informed about the situation in the south and consulted with individuals from the Pattani and Hat Yai communities prior to taking the students to the region each time. The security situation was addressed during the orientation sessions that were held shortly after our arrival in Hat Yai and Pattani. At these sessions, students were informed of the current situation and told of what precautions they should take, if any. Reflecting the relative lack of violence, these precautions were simply those that were given to them about most areas: don't wander down dark alleys by yourself, watch your valuables in public places such as

bus stations, and the like. Before arriving in Pattani and during the orientation session, they were also told about appropriate behavior and dress in relation to the local Moslem society. The students responded well to what they were told. Despite my occasional worries over the years, I never found myself having to deal with any problems during our stay in southern Thailand. In fact, colleagues from PSU often made very favorable comments about the behavior of the students.

Shortly before the 2002 field school, there were a few violent incidents in southern Thailand, including the bombing of a hotel in Yala town. I expressed my concerns to colleagues at PSU and was assured that it would be safe for us to visit the area. Once again, we had no trouble and this proved to be perhaps the most successful visit to southern Thailand to date. During our stay in Pattani, we stopped to visit a Sakai community on the way to Betong near the border with Malaysia. This was a preliminary visit and it went so well that I discussed coming back for a longer time with the next field school in order for some of the Sakai to talk more about traditional medicines, which they gathered in the forest. The night after this visit there was an attack on a police station near Yala town, and a small girl was killed by a stray bullet. This appeared to be the result either of the police being targeted specifically by separatists, or of some local squabble involving smugglers. In discussions with local people, it was clear that there was no direct threat to the students, but it did highlight the risk of being in the wrong place and the wrong time.



2002 Field School visits Wat Chontharasinghe, Narathiwat Province, Southern Thailand

The 2004 field school was to be the first one to visit Singapore. Plans were for us to spend several days at the National University of Singapore campus and then take a bus to Hat Yai through Malaysia. We would then spend several days in Hat Yai and then go on to Pattani. There had been a spike in violence in southern Thailand prior to our departure from Canada in early May, and I contacted people in Hat Yai and Pattani about the situation. While they noted that the situation was certainly much worse than it had been in 2002, faculty and administrators from both campuses assured me that we would be safe and urged me not to cancel our visit. In Singapore, I had an opportunity to discuss the situation in southern Thailand with NUS faculty who were familiar with southern Thailand and with Pattani in particular. Again, while they noted that the security situation had deteriorated in the region they saw no reason for me to be overly worried.

Then, the day before we were to leave Singapore, I received an early morning telephone call from the director of international programs at Simon Fraser University telling me that Thai officials had been in touch with him and told him that we should cancel our visit to southern Thailand. This in part appeared to have been related to a visit to the region planned by the Thai prime minister during the time that we planned to visit, and their concerns that this might result in an escalation of violence. I promptly called off the bus trip, made arrangements for the students to remain in the NUS dormitories for a few more days, purchased airline tickets to Bangkok, and let the people in

Bangkok know that we were coming early and those in southern Thailand that we would not be coming at all.

Unfortunately, since then I have not been able to take students to southern Thailand. During the 2004 or 2006 field schools, Hat Yai was deemed safe to visit, but not the Pattani area. This has allowed the field school to spend more time in northeastern Thailand and Laos, but unfortunately not to have the exposure to Moslem society in southern Thailand.

It is difficult to think of any place in the world today that is entirely safe for university students. Yet the likelihood of violence against students taking place varies a great deal from place to place. Thus, although I have to worry about students being injured while crossing the street in Hanoi, it is not very likely that a field school will be subject to violent acts beyond robbery or a traffic accident in an authoritarian communist state such as Vietnam. On the other hand, after working on plans for a field school in what was then Irian Jaya and is now called Papua in eastern Indonesia in the mid-1990s, the security situation in that province made it clear that there was little possibility of taking students there in the foreseeable future. Despite some worries, Thailand generally falls closer to Vietnam than to Papua on a continuum of concerns about student safety. This remains true for other regions of Thailand with the exception of the south.

What lessons can be learned from the above experience in relation to southern Thailand? Prior to the need to cancel the field school's visit, the region was one that needed to be monitored, but that represented only a very minor risk. In fact, previously the situation can be said to have appeared much worse from the outside than it was on the ground. What is significant, however, is that from the late 1990s onward there was the potential for an escalation of violence in southern Thailand as the area came to be more closely caught up in the regional and global Moslem terrorist movements. That such terrorists may attempt to strike almost anywhere is demonstrated by thwarted plans to carry out terrorist attacks in Singapore, although this incident also demonstrated the effectiveness of local security forces in stopping would-be terrorists.

The situation in southern Thailand was clearly more difficult than Singapore and monitoring the situation carefully was increasingly necessary. Under present conditions southern Thailand is obviously not a suitable place to take students, but in May 2004 it had not quite reached that point. Perhaps it would have been best to skip southern Thailand at the first indication that things were getting worse, but I was loath to deprive the students of what promised to be an important part of the field school experience. It is possible and even likely that nothing would have happened had we visited the area, but the situation on the ground was unstable and extra caution was called for. What appears to have been most important in taking the decision to cancel the visit was maintaining frequent communication with a variety of relevant sources in order to assess the situation and to have been in a position to make alternative plans quickly.

I would hate to think that universities will no longer allow field schools to take place in all countries or regions where Moslem terrorists have been or are known to be even the least bit active. Nevertheless, given the potential for such terrorists to carry out acts of violence, more caution is now called for than was the case in the past. It is more important than ever that field school directors know the areas that they are visiting relatively well, and that they be in touch with a range of reliable informants about conditions in the area. They also need to be able to make alternative arrangements for the field school on short notice.