

Thai Premier Blamed For Muslim Massacre

HONG KONG, Oct. 27--An Asian human rights group criticized the Thai government on Wednesday for the deaths of 85 protesters, calling the tragedy utterly inexcusable and blaming a weakening of controls in the last two years, Reuters reported.

On Monday, six people were killed as security forces cracked down on a protest at a police station in the southern province of Narathiwat and 78 suffocated in army trucks after being detained.

The Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHC) criticized Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, saying he had provoked security forces to quell the demonstrations brutally.

"That so many people have been killed due to the use of live ammunition on crowds and the effects of tear gas and suffocation in trucks after arrest is most disturbing and utterly inexcusable," the AHC said in a statement.

It was the worst violence in the mainly Muslim tip of the otherwise Buddhist kingdom since April, when troops and police shot dead 106 protesters in a Muslim militant. "Thailand must hold an independent inquiry into the matter," AHC executives said.

Executive director Basil Fernando said. "Was there any concealment of what actually happened? The government must tell the truth."

The group said the latest deaths were a direct

consequence of the "intentional and dramatic weakening of controls over the police and armed forces" in the south in the past two years.

"The lack of resolute

action taken to deal with those responsible for the atrocities committed earlier has left the door wide open to further gross violations of human rights," the AHC said.



Thai soldiers apprehend hundreds of men after demonstrators clashed with police outside the Tak Bai station in Thailand's Narathiwat Province, south of Bangkok, October 25. (Reuters Photo)

AI:

US 'War on Terror' Mentality Leads to Torture

LONDON, Oct. 27--The United States is more concerned with getting around international laws which prohibit torture than with safeguarding human rights as it wages its "war on terror," AFP quoted Amnesty International as saying in a report Wednesday.

The report, a 200-page analysis of the practices and decisions that led to torture in Iraq, and alleged abuse in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, argues that Washington's "war mentality" led it down a slippery slope toward disregard for the rule of law.

"It is tragic that in the 'war on terror,' the USA has itself undermined the rule of law. Its selective disregard for the Geneva Conventions and international human rights law has contributed to torture and ill-treatment," it wrote.

"The torture and ill-treatment of Iraqi detainees by US agents in Abu Ghraib prison was--due to a failure of human rights leadership at the highest levels of government--sadly predictable," it continued.

The report comes just a week ahead of the US presidential election Tuesday between Republican incumbent George W. Bush and Democratic Senator John Kerry.

Photos depicting torture at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad, which first emerged in late April, shocked the world and left a lasting smear on the US reputation as a defender of human rights.

US government documents suggest that "far from ensuring that the 'war on terror' would be conducted without resort to human rights violations, the administration was discussing

ways in which its agents might avoid the international prohibition on torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment," the Amnesty report said.

"The war mentality the government has adopted has not been matched with a commitment to the laws of war," it added.

Instead, the strategy of the US government has been to deny detainees prisoner of war status

under the Geneva Conventions, and to restrict access to detainees citing military necessity--both of which have allowed abuse to go by unnoticed and largely unpunished, the group said.

Bush and his leadership also contribute to the slippery slope by refusing to use "torture" to describe Abu Ghraib, but only call events that took place there as "abuse," it said.

Majority Oppose UK Troops Near Baghdad

LONDON, Oct. 27--A majority in Britain oppose Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to deploy British troops in US-controlled parts of Iraq, suggests an opinion poll to be published Wednesday, AFP reported.

Sixty-one percent who responded to the ICM poll for the Guardian newspaper said they opposed sending Black Watch troops to key cities to the south of

Baghdad--about double the 30 percent who approved the move.

Even among supporters of Blair's governing Labour Party, 55 percent were against the deployment, compared with 40 percent who backed it.

The controversial deployment is intended to release US troops for an expected assault on the insurgent-held city of Fallujah prior to elections in Iraq in January. Overall opposition in

Britain to the Iraq war has declined, according to the ICM poll, with 46 percent saying that they thought the March 2003 US and British invasion was unjustified--a drop of 10 points since July.

In contrast, those who thought the war was justified has risen to 43 percent, a five point increase over the same period.

On the domestic political front, Labour stretched its overall lead

over the main opposition Conservatives to six points, with its support up one point on last month on 37 percent, the ICM poll indicated.

The Conservatives were down one point at 31 percent, while the Liberal Democrats were up one point on 23 percent.

ICM said its findings were based on a random sample of 1,001 adults, questioned by telephone last Friday through Sunday.

Russia, Ex-Soviet States Worst for Press Freedom

MOSCOW, Oct. 27--Russia and many other former Soviet republics are among the world's worst places to be a journalist, AFP quoted a respected media watchdog as saying Tuesday.

Turkmenistan was the worst offender from the former Soviet Union in the third annual index of press freedom in 167 countries, published by the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

"No privately-owned media exist in Turkmenistan (164th)...whose people can only read, see or listen to government-controlled media dominated by official propaganda," the group said in a statement.

In all, seven of the Soviet Union's 15 republics were in the bottom 36 countries of the list.

In Russia (140th), the biased coverage of the tragic hostage crisis in Beslan, in North Ossetia, was a flagrant illustration of the total control exercised by the Kremlin over the national TV stations," RSF said.

After Turkmenistan, Belarus had the worst record,

coming in at 144. "President Alexander Lukashenko's regime tolerates no criticism and all methods are systematically used to reduce the few dissident voices to silence."

"In Uzbekistan (142nd), the sentencing of a journalist and human rights activist to a heavy prison sentence for 'homosexuality' is an example of the government's brutal repression of an independent press that is almost non-existent," it said.

Azerbaijan came in at 136, "the result of a decline in press freedom since the October 2003 presidential election." Its Caucasus neighbor Georgia came in at 94th "largely due to unrest in the autonomous republics (of Adjara and Abkhazia) which gave rise to press freedom violations."

By contrast, the former Baltic republics, which this year joined the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ranked among the top 20 best countries for press freedom.

BJP Keen on Temple Campaign

NEW DELHI, India, Oct. 27--Indian opposition leader Lal Krishna Advani said a controversial campaign to build a temple on the ruins of a destroyed mosque would continue despite his party's rout in May elections, AFP reported.

"Our commitment to the Ram temple in Ayodhya is intact and unwavering. The nation eagerly looks forward to the day" when the temple will be built, Advani told party workers in New Delhi on Wednesday.

Analysts said one of the reasons Advani's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was swept from power by the left-leaning Congress party in the parliamentary poll was its espousal of the temple cause at the cost of more pressing socio-economic issues.

The BJP had in the early 1990s garnered

massive support by campaigning to have a temple to the Hindu god Ram built on the site of the 16th century Babri mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya.

The campaign led to the demolition in 1992 by Hindu zealots of the mosque, sparking massive Hindu-Muslim riots across the country.

The issue is still in the courts and all attempts by BJP supporters to forcibly build a temple to Ram at the site have been thwarted by India's security forces.

Hindus believe the mosque was built after

Muslim rulers destroyed a shrine at the birthplace of their god Ram and they have since been pressing for the "reconstruction" of the Ram temple.

Advani Wednesday acknowledged the campaign had slowed but was adamant it would continue.

"At the same time we must be candid enough to recognize the Hindu anger that exploded on the streets in the early nineties has given way to a patient wait for the new temple whose construction, I feel is inevitable," he said.

WORLD News In Brief Constructive Role

HAGUE--The European Union on Wednesday lamented a widely followed boycott by ethnic Serbs of weekend elections in Kosovo and urged authorities in Belgrade to play a "constructive role" in the southern Serbian province dominated by ethnic Albanians.

New Appeal

SEOUL--The United States, Russia and South Korea urged North Korea Wednesday to return to stalled talks on its nuclear program by the end of this year, officials said.

More Delays

HAGUE--The defense lawyers imposed on former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic asked to be removed from his war crimes trial on Wednesday, a move observers said would inevitably lead to more delays in the mammoth case.

Kashmir Strike

SRINAGAR--Shops and businesses were shut and traffic was light in many parts of Indian Kashmir on Wednesday as separatists called a strike to mark the 57th anniversary of the start of New Delhi's rule over the region.

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1st floor, No. 166, Record Bldg., North Sohravardi Ave., Tehran/Iran, Postal Code 15577
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Press Release

Food Survey in Darfur

A serious food shortage is threatening people living in rural Darfur owing to the current insecurity and the insufficient rains in the region this year. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recently assessed the food supply in 20 selected villages in Northern, Western and Southern Darfur, where violence and rain shortfalls are directly undermining coping mechanisms that have normally ensured the survival of the communities living there.

Villagers have been able to sow only a third of the usual crops, and looting of seeds, tools and cattle has further worsened the situation. If people are able to reach their plots to harvest crops, the current food gap could narrow by November or December. In any event most of these limited staple-crop yields will be consumed by next January or February in Western Darfur and by March or April in Northern and Southern Darfur. The overall food shortage is likely to last until the following harvest in 2005.

In an effort to prevent further displacement to the camps, the ICRC will maintain its current assistance to the residents of rural areas. By distributing seed and tools for the next farming season (May-July 2005) the ICRC intends to help communities recover from the destruction suffered over the last year. However, this support can succeed only if the security situation improves.

The ICRC has been present in Sudan since 1978. Currently the organization has over 200 expatriates and 2,000 Sudanese staff working in its humanitarian operations throughout the country.

ICRC-Geneva