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## Strategy based on hopelessness

The violence in the South now has taken on the appearance of a normal state of affairs. Government security forces are locked into a struggle with disparate gangs, some of them extremely vicious and some using terrorist tactics. These two sides often give the appearance of the classical fight between blind men, neither of whom remembers why the fight began or just what is the goal. The so-called emergency decree is a case in point. The government never was able to explain why it needed the most draconian law in Thai history when it first passed the measure a year ago. Now, since it has made no difference to the southern tragedy and has failed to stop the violence, it is "necessary" to extend it for another three months.

The most serious tragedy, however, is not that the government continues to flail at groups it often cannot see and usually does not understand. Nor is it the calamity of small gangs misusing religion and ignoring history in attempts to construct a past that never existed through violent means. The worst tragedy in this exercise is the hundreds of entirely innocent bystanders killed, the hundreds more maimed, and the thousands of families upset, scarred for life or simply ruined by the violence. The true tragedy is the harm done to the people of the southernmost provinces, their economy and, thus, to the entire country.

The government has decided to extend its emergency decree for another three months. National Security Council secretary-general Winai Pathiyakul said the harshest law in history is crucial for military operations. This is a strange statement, because the details of the military operations in the South are actually unknown.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has changed southern tactics and goals many times, changed the entire southern command last month. He put Army commander Gen Sonthi Boonyaratglin "in charge", but as of today still has not decided how much authority Gen Sonthi will have, or in what specific fields.

The emergency decree was rushed into law by the cabinet last July, amid great controversy. It declared an emergency in Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani provinces, plus four districts of neighbouring Songkhla. Among other measures, it gave authorities the power to tap phones, search and arrest without warrant and censor news. There was wide support for the measures. An Abac poll showed that more than 72% of Bangkokians and 86% of people in the three southern border provinces felt strong measures would succeed in slowing, then ending the violence.

Of course, it has not. Insurgents have ruthlessly beheaded eight more southern people, only one of whom had any connection to security forces. Villagers have lynched two Marines and, in one of the most ruthless acts of the insurgency, abducted two female school teachers and beat one into a coma from which she has not recovered.

Ten percent of the 360,000 Buddhists of the three southern provinces have left, and the insurgents have managed to intimidate businesses in Yala to shut down on Fridays. State security forces have won no known support from frightened villagers, and have actually failed to protect schools and teachers, even though commanders knew attacks on them would increase two months ago.

The insurgency in the South revived spectacularly in a night of arson and a raid on an army arms depot in January of 2004. That is just 30 months ago. Yet the southern conflict has settled deeply into the rhythm of the government's life. The emergency decree, in some ways, is a symbol of this tragedy. It has led to no noticeable change, has brought no success at all, and has become another little detail in the daily working of the Thaksin government. Every three months, like clockwork, it is time to sign the routine papers to continue the emergency.

The prospect of a peaceful far South, working for the advantage of all the country, seems more distant today than when the emergency decree was passed last year. The violent attacks against the state are the root cause of the suffering.

But the lack of a coherent policy, the absence of leadership and even the latest appointment of the army to tackle the South all have contributed to the feeling the South has become a hopeless cause.