

The path to peace in Thailand's restive southern provinces starts with children

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HAT YAI, Songkhla, Thailand, January 2009 – The large, colorful drawing shows a monk, an Imam and Buddhist and Muslim citizens holding hands in a loving community where a mosque and a temple stand side by side. Beside them are Buddhists and Muslims praying for peace in Thailand's violence-ridden southern border provinces.



“A group of Muslim children from Pattani present a drawing which represents their hope to an end to violence to local security forces, government officials, academics and human rights activists from the deep south during a three-day Youth Consultation in Hat Yai”.

The drawing, created by a group of Muslim children living in the restive south, represents their hope for an end to the violence in Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala and Songkhla provinces that has claimed the lives of more than 3,000 people since early 2004.

The drawing was made during a 13-15 December Youth Consultation organized by UNICEF Thailand for children from the four provinces. The three-day consultation brought together 53 Muslim and Buddhist children to share their hopes and fears with an audience that included local security forces, government officials, academics and human rights activists from the deep south.

“We lack love and peace,” said a 14-year-old participant from Pattani, who helped create the drawing. “But no matter how bad the situation is, if everyone comes together regardless of religion, sex and age, we can bring peace back to our lives.”

During the consultation, the children, who ranged in age from 11 to 18, also created plays and music that reflected the reality of their daily lives. Some of the children cried when the performances touched upon issues such as domestic violence, physical punishment in schools and drugs in communities.

“Children living in these border provinces have been deeply affected by the violence,” said Tomoo Hozumi, the UNICEF Representative in Thailand. “But there has not been enough attention paid to the impact it is having on them or what can be done to help them deal with it.”



Most of the children said the Youth Consultation was their first opportunity to speak out about the unrest to someone other than a member of their family or close friends.

“I feel relieved,” said Komareeyah Tohya, a 14-year-old girl from Pattani whose school has been bombed. “It is different than the kind of relief I get from talking to my family, because I have the hope that people here will be able to help us.”

The children taking part in the Youth Consultation said their lives have been radically changed by the violence. They never go outside after dark. They no longer speak to strangers. They mingle less with their friends and neighbors due to growing mistrust among people in their communities.

“Children play in the rubble of a school that was destroyed by arson in Yala. Hundreds of schools in Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala and Songkhla have been severely damaged or destroyed due to the unrest”.

According to a UNICEF Thailand-supported study – *Everyday Fears: Children’s perception of living in the southern border of Thailand* – which was launched a couple of weeks before the Youth Consultation, children living in the southern border provinces suffer from stress and anxiety due to the daily threat of violence. The study, conducted in 2006-2007 by the Thai NGO Knowing Children, Friends of Thai Muslim Women, the Luk Rieng Group and the Young Muslim Association of Thailand, involved some 2,400 Muslim and Buddhist children in the affected provinces. The study used a variety of research methods especially designed to gather responses from children living in the deep south including drawing, essays, visual stimulus, attitude surveys and network interviews. The study was the first to give children living in the affected provinces the opportunity to directly express their perceptions of the violence and the impact it is having on their lives.

According to the Ministry of Education, at least 30 school students were killed and 92 injured due to violence in the affected provinces between January 2004 and December 2007. In addition to being victims of the violence themselves, children have also borne witness to the brutal slayings of parents, other relatives, teachers and community members, as well as to fighting between soldiers and insurgents, bombings and the burning of their schools.

“Most children in the study said the greatest danger in their lives is the unrest,” Hozumi said. “Their responses indicate that almost every aspect of their lives carries risk because of the continuing violence, including attending school or going out to play.”

Hundreds of schools in the provinces have been severely damaged or destroyed over the past five years, and many children now travel to and from school and attend school under armed guard. Due to the unrest, education authorities have been forced to repeatedly close schools for periods ranging from days to months.

Asela Dorotae, 14, who witnessed the slaying of her father by insurgents two years ago in Yala, is among the tens of thousands of children living in the far south whose lives have been deeply affected by violence.

“We were on our way home,” recalled Asela, who still cries when she talks about his death. “The insurgents asked him to stop the motorcycle. They pushed him to the ground. Then they shot him and then stabbed him.”

Asela sat beside the body of her father for three hours before soldiers arrived at the scene. To date, no one knows who killed him or why.

Her father’s death led Asela to volunteer to participate in the study. She also joined the Luk Rieng Group and helped the NGO enlist children from other villages to participate in the study.

“I learned that I am not the only one who suffers from loss,” Asela said. “At first I wanted revenge, but then I realized that it would never bring an end to the violence. Peace has to start with us, the children, and I want adults to listen to children like me.”

Among the positive findings in the study was that none of the children expressed a biased or negative view of other religions or referred to religion as being a cause of the unrest. In addition, few children expressed negative opinions of soldiers and police.

Rawsedee Leartariyapongkul, Project Manager of the Young Muslim Association of Thailand, said the study’s findings suggest that reconciliatory bonds clearly exist among children in the far south and that actions are urgently needed to maintain positive thinking among young people and to prevent the violence to become inter-generational.

“Children want peace despite their differences,” said Rawsedee. “It is our duty to ensure they maintain such positive attitude and don’t change them as they grow up.”

Currently, there are not enough programmes being carried out to promote positive thinking or physical and emotional security for children living in the far south, Rawsedee said.

UNICEF is calling for establishment of “zones of peace” – areas free of weapons, armed personnel and propaganda from all parties – in order to reduce violence and the stress it places on children.

“I believe this can happen in the far south” said Amanda Bissex, Chief of Child Protection, UNICEF Thailand, who noted that zones of peace have been successfully established in other conflict areas, including in Nepal where thousands of children were traumatized as a result of armed conflict between Maoist insurgents and the government.

Bissex said zones of peace could be set up at schools in the southern provinces where people in local communities are truly open and committed to the idea, and in which all parties, including government, community members, religious leaders, insurgent groups as well as the children themselves, are in agreement.

“So if there is violence in the community, children know that there is a place where they can go, where they will be safe and protected for the time that they are there,” Bissex said. “This is very important for reducing stress in a child’s life.”

More importantly, children can continue to study in these places in a normal way without fear of being attacked or having their studies disrupted, she added.



“Primary school children pray in front of their classroom at a school in Pattani Province before beginning their afternoon classes. At least 30 school students were killed and 92 injured due to violence in the four southernmost provinces between January 2004 and December 2007”.

Children said they hope “zones of peace” will materialize in the near future, especially in holy places like the mosques or temples. In addition, they hope to have schools that provides both Islamic and Buddhist teaching.

“I don’t want to study or pray with feelings of stress and anxiety,” said Asmah Nima, 16, of Songkhla, who wants schools and mosques to be free from weapons. “And there should also be the places where there is no discrimination against one another.”

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*** Full report of *Everyday Fears: Children’s perception of living in the southern border of Thailand* can be downloaded at www.unicef.org/thailand**

Recommendations for promoting peace and security for children*

1. Promote awareness of children's rights and child protection in both the Pattani-Malay and Thai languages among civil society and all armed groups and forces, including the military, police and Village Security Teams.
2. Focus peace-building education and activities on children in both state schools and religious schools as well as out-of-school children, through formal and non-formal education programmes.
3. Promote implementation of the Ministry of Education's regulation banning corporal punishment in schools, and support development of alternative disciplinary techniques.
4. Strengthen mechanisms for reporting and responding to violence against children within families, communities and schools.
5. Ensure that child protection services and organizations have appropriate resources to identify and respond to cases, taking into account the unique nature of the situation in the southern border areas.
6. Design programmes to address the emotional stress that children experience living in the provinces affected by the unrest, and ensure these programmes also build upon the children's natural resiliency.
7. Promote drug prevention and rehabilitation programmes on the principles of harm reduction, and strengthen diversion and rehabilitation programmes for children as alternatives to legal proceedings.
8. Ensure that schools and communities are designated as 'zones of peace' by reducing the presence of arms among all parties.

***Source:** Everyday Fears: Children's perceptions of living in the southern border area of Thailand.