

**PRESS RELEASE****UN Condemns Attacks on Schoolchildren in Southern Thailand**

Bangkok (20 March 2007) – The United Nations in Thailand today called for an end to violence against children in southern Thailand following a string of attacks on students in and around schools.

“UN agencies working in Thailand are deeply concerned about the ongoing violence against schoolchildren in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla,” said Joana Merlin-Scholtes, the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Thailand. “First we saw schools and teachers attacked; now children themselves are becoming targets.”

In recent weeks, three students were killed and seven others injured when assailants attacked a boarding school in Songkhla, five primary school students were injured when gunmen fired on their bus in Narathiwat, and two teenage girls were killed while on their way to final exams in Yala province.

The recent attacks follow a rash of school burnings and attacks on teachers in the restive provinces late last year, which led to widespread temporary school closures across the south.

“This is affecting children in all the southern communities and contributes to a climate of fear across the region,” said Merlin-Scholtes. “Such attacks against innocent children are against all norms and are completely unacceptable.”

Tomoo Hozumi, the UNICEF Representative in Thailand, said: “We call for an end to the violence so that all children can attend school in a safe and secure environment. Education is the key to present and future development in southern Thailand, and all schools should and must be treated as ‘zones of peace’.”

It is estimated that the conflict in southern Thailand has taken over 2,000 lives in the past three years, including 60 teachers. Over 100 schools have been burned down.

“It is especially important that schools in the South are sanctuaries for children,” said Sheldon Shaeffer, Director, UNESCO Bangkok. “Genuinely child-friendly schools, where cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity is respected and welcomed, can do much in the long term to stop the increasingly critical cycle of violence against children.”

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