

Thai government seeks bombing suspects

New Year's Eve attack kills three, wounds 38 in capital

By MICHAEL CASEY
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BANGKOK, Thailand

Thailand's military-backed government named supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on Monday as unofficial prime suspects in New Year's Eve bombings that killed three people and wounded 38 in the capital.

Nine foreigners were among the wounded after nine small bombs exploded across Bangkok and its environs Sunday night. The attacks caused city authorities to shut down large-scale celebrations, and raised concerns about Thailand's stability, shaky economy and thriving tourism industry.

The bombings capped a year of unrest in Thailand, including a military coup three months ago and an increasingly violent Muslim insurgency in the south.

Nobody has claimed responsibility for the bombings, but the government is focusing on supporters of the former regime — though it has named no one specifically and presented no proof.

"From the evidence we have gathered, there is a slim chance that it is related



AP PHOTO

Police search for clues Sunday evening at the scene of a bombing in downtown Bangkok, Thailand. At least two people were killed in a series of nine explosions in the Thai capital.

to the southern insurgency," Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont said. "It is likely related to people who lost their political benefits," he explained, referring to Thaksin's ousted regime.

A bloodless Sep. 19 coup against Thaksin was the culmination of months of tensions, as a popular movement staged

protests demanding he step down for alleged corruption and abuse of power.

Despite the takeover by the military, which installed Surayud as head of an interim civilian government, political calm has not been restored and the coup leaders accuse Thaksin's supporters of trying to stir unrest.

Thaksin, who has been barred from the country since the coup and is traveling in China, said through his lawyer that he had nothing to do with the bombings. He condemned the attacks and called the allegations of his involvement "unfair."

"Thaksin was elected by the people and even during the time of conflict, he has refrained from using violence," Thaksin's lawyer Noppadol Patama told a news conference in Bangkok. "It is very unlikely that a politician who was elected by the people will resort to violence."

Deputy national police chief Ajirawit told reporters that security had been stepped up at 6,000 different locations across the city. But on Monday there were few signs of the bombings and little evidence of a security presence.

Although Western embassies issued warnings to their nationals to exercise caution because of the possibility of fresh attacks, many tourists in Bangkok, including at least one of the wounded, took the violence in stride.

The wounded foreigners included four Hungarians, three Serbians and two British citizens. Two remained hospitalized.

"I can't see why this would deter me from coming back," said Paul Hewitt, a Briton.

An explosion in a crowded shopping district drove a piece of debris deep into Hewitt's left arm. He was hospitalized overnight and discharged Monday.

"I just happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. It

could've happened anywhere in the world," said Hewitt, 55, a retired flight attendant from Horsham, England.

Still, travel industry insiders and analysts worried about the bombings' effects on tourism, a major revenue earner.

About 1 million tourists come each month, and many seek out Bangkok's elegant temples, blazing-hot food, riotous nightlife and sidewalks jammed with vendors.

"What happened will most certainly hurt tourism, and will likely hurt consumer confidence as well as consumer spending," said analyst Aekpittaya Lemkongaek of BFIT Securities, who predicted that the fallout from the blasts could cut into economic growth this year.

The bombings dealt a fresh blow to foreign investors' confidence in the Thai economy, already shaken by a year of political turmoil and inept efforts to control the value of the baht, analysts said.

A long holiday weekend provides a short cooling-off period after the bombings, but weakness in currency and capital markets is expected when trading resumes.

Surayud and army commander Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratkalin both dismissed speculation that Islamic separatists were responsible for the New Year's attacks, although militants frequently use small-scale bombings in their insurgency in southern Thailand. The fighting has led to almost 2,000 deaths in the past three years.

Interim government replaces anarchy in Somalia



AP PHOTO

Somali women in colorful dress come out to support the Transitional Federal Government in Joghhar on Monday. Somalia's prime minister, Ali Mohamed Gedi, on Monday ordered all Somalis to hand over their weapons within three days. "If they fail to heed the orders of the government, the government will forcefully extract weapons from them," he said.

By MOHAMED OLAD HASSAN
AND ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOGADISHU, Somalia

Fighters belonging to a militant Islamist movement fled into a rugged, forested corner of Somalia from rapidly advancing government forces Monday, and the prime minister offered amnesty if they surrendered.

Regional diplomats worked to arrange the speedy deployment of African peacekeepers to help the interim government establish its authority in the country, which has known only anarchy for 15 years.

As the last remaining stronghold of the Islamic group was overrun by government troops backed by Ethiopian tanks and MiG fighter jets, the net began closing on suspected al-Qaida militants believed to be sheltered by the hard-line group.

Neighboring Kenya vowed to seal its frontier to prevent any extremists, now wedged against the sea and their border, from escaping the 13-day military offensive.

Sea routes from southern Somalia were also being patrolled by the U.S. Navy, hunting for three al-Qaida suspects believed to be among the Islamic group and wanted for the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa.

"Kenya cannot be a haven for people who are not wanted by their lawful government," Kenyan government spokesman Alfred Matua said.

Thousands of Somalis have fled their homes in the wake of advancing Ethiopian and government forces, but most have returned to their homes once the fighting subsided. The U.N.

refugee agency has sent supplies to the Kenyan border as a precaution, but so far there has been no increase in the number of Somalis seeking refuge in Kenya, said Christian Balslev-Olesen, country director for Kenya for UNICEF.

The military advance marked a stunning turnaround for Somalia's government, which just weeks ago could barely control one town — its base of Baidoa — while the Council of Islamic Courts controlled the capital and much of southern Somalia.

But with the intervention of Ethiopia, which has one of Africa's largest armies, the Islamic group has been forced from the capital of Mogadishu and other key towns in the past 10 days.

Yet it does not mark the end of the Islamists or their ultimate defeat. The group has promised to wage an Iraq-style guerrilla war if defeated, and a woman was killed Sunday in a mysterious blast in Mogadishu.

Diplomats want the peacekeeping force to replace the muscle of Ethiopia, a Christian country long despised in Muslim Somalia. Both countries have fought two wars, the last in 1977, and Somalia lays claim to territories in Ethiopia.

In a bid to cement its control, Somali Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi ordered a nationwide disarmament beginning Tuesday, an immense task in a country awash with weapons after more than a decade of civil war.



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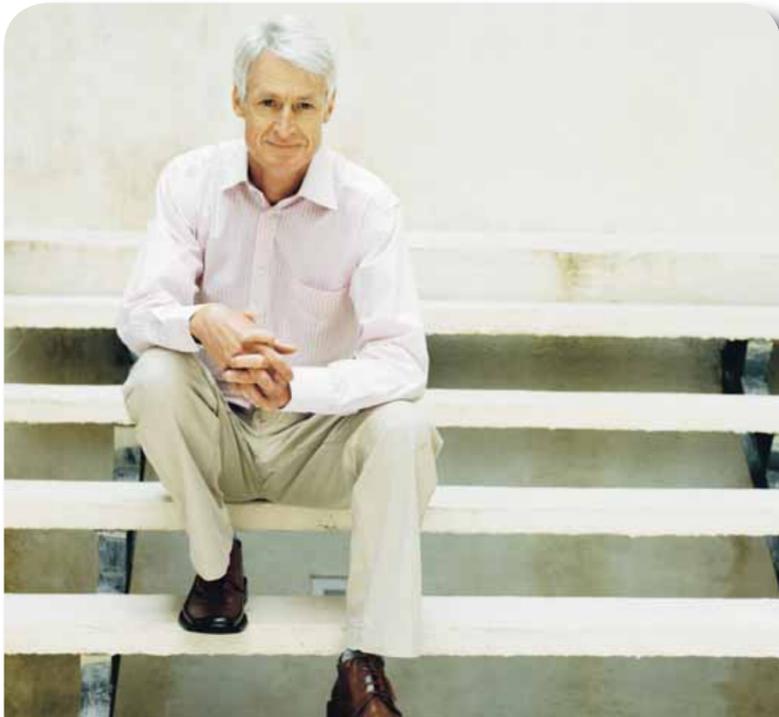
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