

Malaysia angry over Thai terror blame

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S B Azim (a) SF-11

ASSOCIATED PRESS

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec. 25.

— Malaysia's deputy prime minister said Thailand's reputation would suffer if photos that it claims show Thai Muslim rebels training at a militant camp in Malaysia proved to be a hoax, a news report said today.

Thailand's interior minister, Sutham Saengprathum, claims the government has photos showing the rebels training at the camp near Malaysia's border with southern Thailand, where insurgents are fighting for an Islamic state.

But the Bangkok-based *Nation* newspaper reported Friday that the photos only showed boys dressed in mili-

tary costumes at a sports day parade in southern Pattani province. Sutham said the prints the government has are different from those published in the media.

Malaysia has not asked Thailand to turn over the photos, but Malaysia's deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak said Bangkok would suffer embarrassment if its claims turn out to be false.

"I feel that if what the newspaper reported is the truth, then it will be a big embarrassment for them (the Thai government)," the national Bernama news agency cited Razak as saying late Friday.

He added that Malaysia would not seek an apology if

Thailand's claims proved to be false.

Thai Prime Minister Mr Thaksin Shinawatra claims the rebels have established training camps in Malaysia's Kelantan state, which borders Thailand's Muslim-dominated southern provinces, without the Malaysian government's knowledge. Malaysia has angrily denied the accusation.

Thailand has struggled to quell violence in the south since Muslim militants early this year rekindled a decades-old dream of a creating an Islamic state in Buddhist-dominated Thailand.

Nearly 580 people have been killed in the violence since the beginning of the year.

Officials' homes attacked

Suspected Islamic militants threw molotov cocktails into the homes of four officials in restive southern Thailand, causing minor damage but no injuries, police said Saturday, a report from Bangkok says.

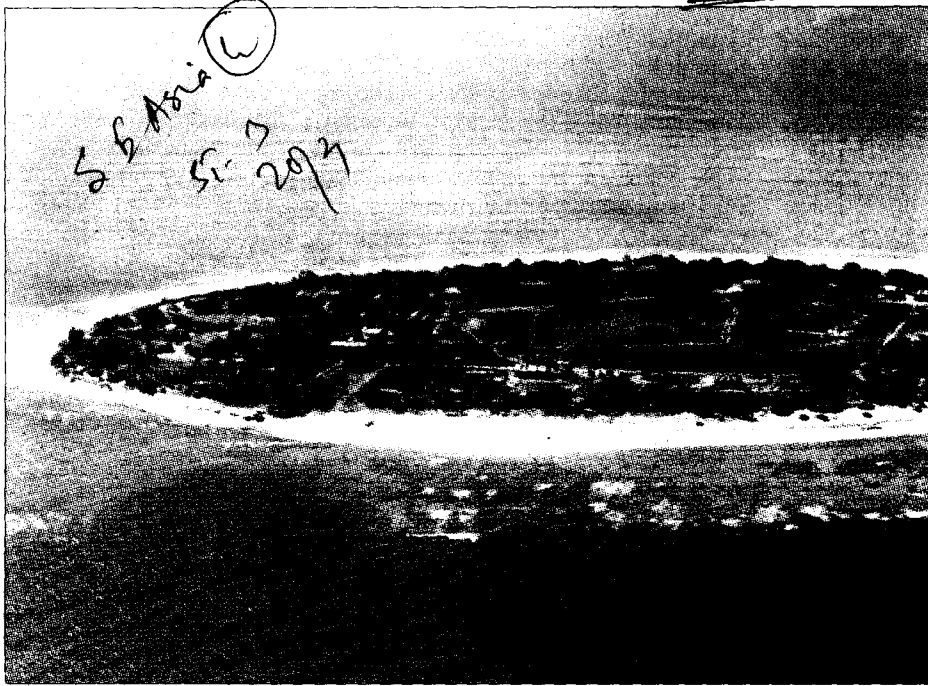
An unknown number of assailants riding motorcycles attacked the homes of a policeman, a district official, a security volunteer and a former civil servant in Pattani province shortly before midnight on Friday, said police Capt. Thanong Puangmanee.

Police were looking for the suspects. However, no further information was available.

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THE STATESMAN

China protests against Vietnamese trip to Spratly



This photograph shows an aerial view of a garrison which the Philippine military had identified as a Vietnamese fortification built in the Sincowe East Island, one of the many islets, shoals and reefs located in the disputed Spratly Islands. — AFP

Associated Press

HANOI, April 19. — A boatload of Vietnamese tourists set sail today on a maiden voyage to the disputed Spratly Islands despite strong protests from China, one of six governments, along with Vietnam, that claim all or part of the islands. The Vietnamese navy ship loaded with 100 tourists left a Ho Chi Minh City port without incident, said Mr Duong Xuan Hoi, deputy director of the Vietnam national administration of tourism, one of the participants.

But neighbouring China wasn't celebrating. After talks with Vietnam on Friday in Beijing, foreign ministry spokesman Mr Kong Quan said, "China has indisputable sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and the surrounding waters. Vietnam is infringing on China's sovereignty."

Vietnam, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei each claim all or part of the tiny low-lying islands teeming with fish and believed rich in oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea.

But the Philippines has said it has no problem with sightseeing tours to the islands as long as they have no other purpose. Taiwan has not commented on the trip, but last month erected what it called a bird-watching stand on a reef in the islands. Officials did not say who would use the structure. Foreigners were not allowed on the first trip but may be allowed later.

In 2002, China and the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, including four of the Spratly claimants, signed an unprecedented voluntary accord to try to work out disputes without violence.

Thai PM calls for decisive action against bird flu

Associated Press

BANGKOK, Jan. 28. — Accused of inaction and a cover-up, Thailand's prime minister today demanded quick and decisive action to forestall a global bird flu pandemic.

Thaksin Shinawatra opened an emergency meeting of Asian ministers and international health experts by warning that the virus poses a serious threat to public health and could also devastate the region's economies, as they try to recover from last year's SARS epidemic.

The meeting followed a declaration by Deputy Mayor Prapan Kitisin that Bangkok was a "danger zone" after the avian disease was detected in a fighting cock, chickens and ducks in the capital. The national police chief has warned farmers not to throw dead birds into the nation's waterways, including in Bangkok's web of canals, to avoid spreading the virus.

The Thai government has been accused of trying to keep the bird flu outbreak secret to protect its billion dollar poultry industry. Thaksin said today that bureaucratic inefficiency, rather than any intention to



A man displays a couple of ducks for sale at a Beijing market on Wednesday. China confirmed an outbreak of bird flu traced to a duck farm in southern Guanxi province on Tuesday and now has three separate outbreaks. — AFP

hide the truth, explained why the government didn't come clean sooner.

"The most appropriate word is screw-up. Some agencies screwed up in Thailand," government spokesman Jakrapob Penkair told reporters, adding that heads would eventually roll.

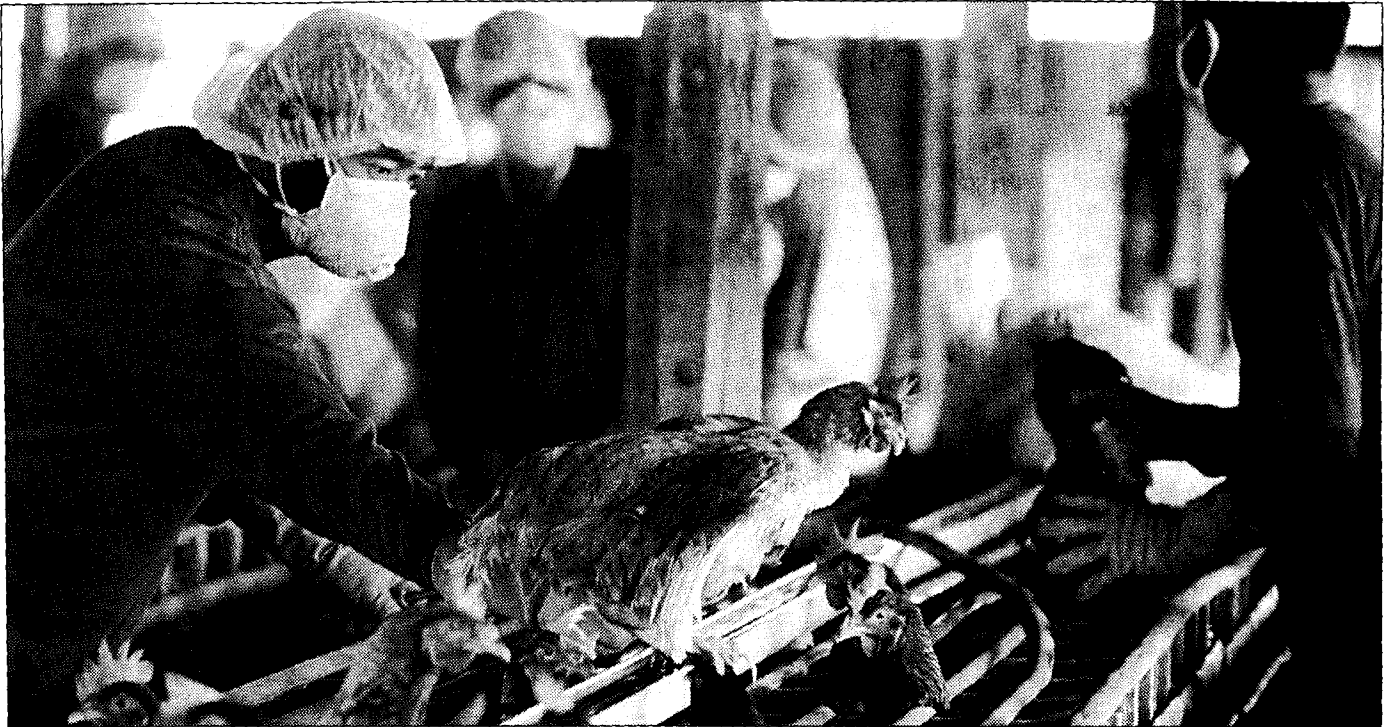
For weeks, Thai farmers complained that their poultry were dying of the same disease that had killed thousands of chickens in neighboring Vietnam. The Thai government initially claimed the birds were suffering from chicken cholera, a disease not harmful to humans. Thaksin has

since admitted that officials suspected for weeks the country was facing a bird flu outbreak, but had kept it quiet to deter public panic.

Thailand has so far confirmed two human deaths from bird flu, both children. Eleven other people in Thailand are suspected to have been infected, six of whom have died. Officials are awaiting test results.

Sri Lanka today imposed a ban on the import of chicken and poultry products from Asian countries to prevent bird flu from entering the island nation.

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Thai livestock officials collect chickens to be destroyed at a farm 105 km north of Bangkok on Sunday. (Reuters)

Thai troops battle chicken

S. B. Arin (u) 1.3.2004

Bangkok, Jan. 25 (Reuters): Thailand brought in troops and prisoners today to kill millions of chickens in the hope of stopping the spread of highly contagious bird flu, which has jumped to humans in Vietnam and Thailand.

With ordinary people too scared to go anywhere near chickens, 400 soldiers were drafted into Suphan Buri province northwest of Bangkok, deputy agriculture minister Newin Chidchop said. A hundred prisoners were also brought in. "We have had labour problems. It is difficult to

find labourers as after the bird flu outbreak was confirmed, many of them are avoiding working on farms," Newin said.

All chickens in the province, a major area of production in a Thai industry which raises one billion chickens a year and earns \$1.5 billion in exports, will be killed. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra went to talk to worried farmers in the province today, promising them compensation, help with starting up again once the epidemic was defeated and a suspension of their debts.

China became the latest

country to ban imports of Thai chicken to try to stop the deadly disease spreading to the country where the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars), which scared the world, broke out last year. Beijing, widely accused of covering up that outbreak for weeks, ordered aircraft, ships or other vehicles carrying Thai chickens be sealed and cleaned.

The Thai government, fighting off allegations it covered up an outbreak of bird flu which the WHO fears could generate an epidemic worse than Sars, is promising swift and ruthless action.

But experts are wondering where it will emerge next after springing up in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Indonesia also confirmed an outbreak of avian influenza among chickens but a senior agriculture ministry official today said there is no evidence so far that the disease has spread to humans.

Indonesia had previously insisted it was free of the flu and blamed the deaths of thousands of chickens on parts of East Java and the tourist centre of Bali in the past three months on Newcastle disease, a virus that is harmless to humans and does not affect the safety of poultry meat.

Flu spreads as toll rises to six

Bangkok/Hanoi, Jan. 24 (Reuters): UN officials said today the deadly bird flu that has jumped to humans in Vietnam and Thailand was spreading — a warning grimly underlined by confirmation of a sixth death from the disease.

Experts fear the avian virus could set off an epidemic worse than Sars, another disease which crossed from animals to humans, killed 800 people and frightened the world last year.

"There's no denying the disease is spreading," Anton Rychener, Vietnam representative for the Food and Agriculture Organisation, a UN body, said.

The WHO said a 13-year-old Vietnamese boy had died on Thursday from the H5N1 strain of avian flu, and that an eight-year-old girl had tested positive for the virus.

She was critically ill in Ho Chi Minh City, the first confirmed cases of bird flu in southern Vietnam since four children and one adult died in the country's north.

In Thailand, a chicken butcher, one of six Thais being tested for the disease, is believed to have died of pneumonia yesterday, but more tests were being done, officials said. The WHO has said the near-simultaneous bird flu outbreaks in Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and now Thailand and Cambodia were "historically unprecedented".

Thailand will host a meeting on Wednesday of senior health

and agriculture officials from Asian countries and international agencies fighting the outbreak.

Thailand denied today it had tried to cover up an outbreak of bird flu, saying it had had suspicions for weeks but had only known for certain when tests confirmed the disease. After weeks of declaring the country free of bird flu, the government confirmed today that two boys, aged six and seven, had contracted the highly infectious virus.

"The government never realised it was avian influenza before yesterday, but it was suspecting that it might be. That's why some measures in extraordinary degrees had been put in place," said Jakrapob Penkair, the government's chief spokesman.

Critics have accused the Thai government of trying to hide the outbreak by blaming the deaths of tens of thousands of chickens since November on poultry cholera.

"The government's efforts to sweep the problem under the carpet has exploded in its face, leaving the poultry industry in tatters and the very safety of the public in jeopardy," the *Bangkok Post* newspaper said in an editorial today.

The bird flu outbreak threatens to devastate the Thai chicken industry, the world's fourth largest with exports worth \$1.5 billion annually and employing hundreds of thousands of people.

More bird flu cases in Vietnam: WHO

HANOI, Jan. 17. — The World Health Organisation confirmed today that a fourth person had died from bird flu in Vietnam and warned that a growing number of people were falling sick with respiratory illnesses. The UN health agency said more people had been referred to two hospitals in Hanoi, raising fears that if they test positive for the virus it could wreak havoc on Vietnam's predominantly rural population.

The outbreak, which comes on top of a re-emergence of SARS in southern China, has sparked an Asia-wide health scare.

But Mr Bob Dietz, the WHO's spokesman in Vietnam, cautioned that there was still no evidence of human-to-human transmission of bird flu despite the deaths of several members of the same family.

"We believe we are seeing more cases of respiratory illness," he said. "It is too early to say whether or not this indicates an increase in H5N1 cases. "It may be because more people with respiratory illnesses are being sent to these hospitals from the areas surrounding Hanoi because of concern surrounding H5N1 infections reported to the public." A five-year-old child in the Vietnamese province of Nam Dinh who died on 8 January became the fourth confirmed death from the H5N1 strain of the virus.

The WHO says all four victims caught the virus directly from a bird and not through human transmission. Vietnamese experts have blamed bird flu on the deaths of nine others. — AFP