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Thaksin: Bombings work of kidnappers

Sharanjit Singh; Shahrum Sayuti

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - As Malaysian tour agents lamented last minute cancellations to Haadyai following Saturday's bomb blasts which killed a child and wounded 38 people, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra today came up with a new theory on the bombings.

He told reporters that the people who planted the bombs, for which no one has claimed responsibility, were "kidnappers" who simply wanted protection money from the owners of places or firms they had targeted.

"I believe the bombs were caused by kidnappers, not (people with) any political ideology ... these people make a living by seeking protection fees, boasting of their self-importance," he said.

At the border town of Bukit Kayu Hitam, tour agents have reported cancellations of up to 30 per cent for the Songkran (Thai new year) weekend.

"This time I (am going to) die ... Songkran is the time I get an opportunity to make some money but many holidaymakers have cancelled their trips," an agent, who refused to be identified, said.

Meanwhile, Haadyai-Songkhla Hotel Association president Somboon Ponglertnapakorn was quoted in the Bangkok Post as saying that at least 20 per cent of the Songkran hotel reservations in Haadyai had been cancelled since the bomb blasts.

Safety concerns would make it more difficult for hotels to attract guests, he said, adding that operators were increasing security staff at parking lots and luggage check-in areas.

The report also stated that the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) was moving quickly to counter negative fallout from the incident.

The TAT estimates that nine billion baht would be spent in Thailand during the Songkran holidays this year.

TAT offices around the world were updating the global community about developments and countering speculative news reports, the report said.

Under normal circumstances, at least 10,000 Malaysians and Singaporeans visit Songkhla and Haadyai and spend between 2,500 and 3,000 baht (between RM250 and RM300) each over an average three-day stay there.

Three days after the bomb blast at Haadyai's railway station, the situation has returned to normal.

A survey by the New Straits Times at the scene yesterday showed that repair works were going full swing while hundreds of passengers waited for the train as if nothing had happened.

Security presence was also light with only several policemen guarding a cordoned-off area where the blast occurred.

Haadyai station master Fari Bunrengkau said the situation on the day of the incident was alarming but it was not as serious as reported by the media.

"There was a lot of commotion on the day of the incident but things were quickly put under control by the authorities.

"We did not even change the train schedules on that day," said Fari, whose office is less than 10 metres from where the bomb went off.

Four of his staff, including his 40-year-old deputy Chat Laukongpet, were among the injured.

The bomb blast, one of a series of similar incidents in various parts of southern Thailand on Saturday, still made the headlines of almost all Thai newspapers today.

Malaysian vice-consul general in Songkhla Mat Stapa Mat Som, when met at his office, said the consulate had yet to receive any official statement from the Thai authorities about the incidents.

Mat Stapa added that the Thai authorities' allegation that the bombings were committed by the Pattani Liberation Organisation and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional have yet to be proven.

"From what we know, this separatist movement has not been active for a long time," he said.

Senior intelligence officials had said the explosions were the work of foreign saboteurs.

Reuters reported that Palakorn Suwanarath, head of the Interior Ministry's southern border province administration, said yesterday the sabotage was carried out by three separatist groups seeking attention and financial support.

The allied groups, calling themselves Bersatu (United), consisted of Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Pattani United Liberation Organisation (Pulo) and Mujahedin, he said.

Thai newspapers yesterday quoted unnamed Thai security sources as saying the separatist groups held a meeting in March in Kuala Lumpur to plan sabotage in southern Thailand in April.

Thaksin has said he would raise the issue with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad this month at a meeting in Kuala Lumpur.

Pulo's website today denied it was involved in the bombings which it blamed on the Thai Government.

In the early 1990s, the southern Thai provinces saw a wave of bomb attacks on railway tracks and stations, most attributed to separatist groups.