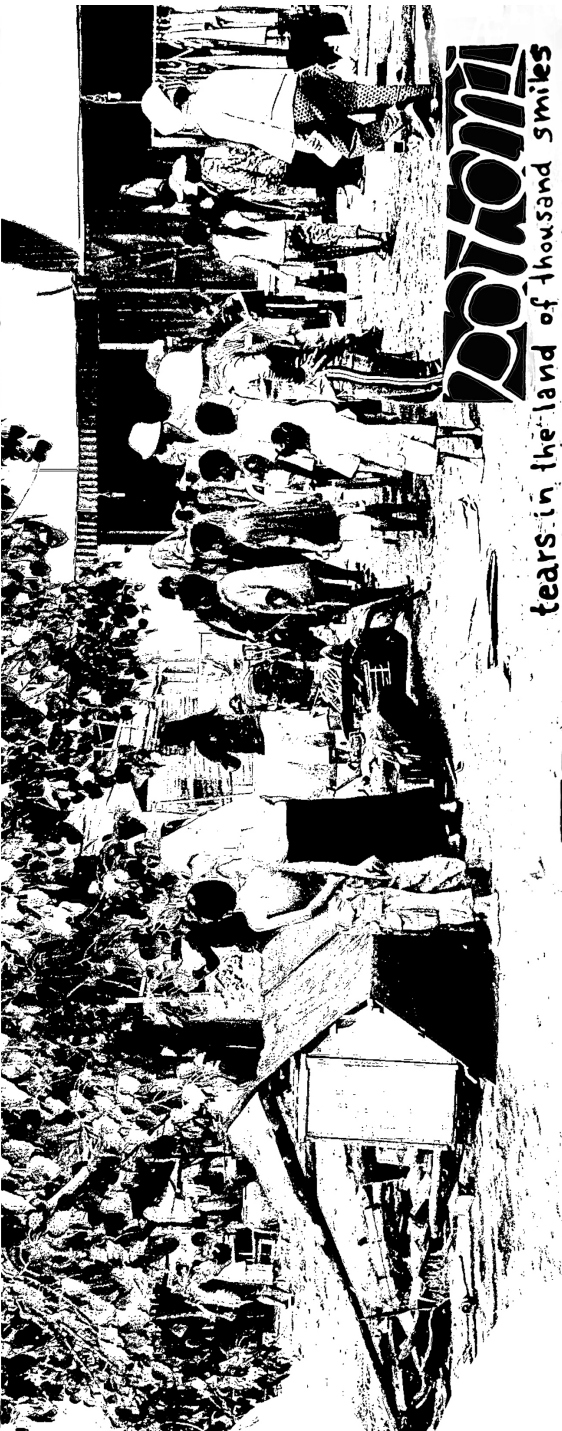


DISASTROUS



DO TOMORROW

tears in the land of thousand smiles

White feet on red soil

evictions in Cambodia

disORINATION#1

...is the reflections of a couple of people who wanted to get out of Europe for a while. By boat and train and thumb (but no planes) we've spent over a year now moving erratically through Asia; in some places we've stayed a longer time, other times we've just been passing through.

The two articles in this zine are from early on in our trip. Both are about places that weren't on any route we planned, but chance and curiosity took us there: to Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh and Patani, in the rebellious deep south of Thailand. In both places we encountered struggles very different to our own, but were deeply inspired by the people we met.

So now we want to share the story of our time in those places with friends on the old and new continents. We were looking for some new perspectives so we could try to stretch our own a little broader, and so when we write we try to explore the possible points of confluence with what we're used to, as well as the places where our ideas diverge. They are only reflections of transients, we didn't spend the time to immerse ourselves too deeply, but first impressions count for something too, and that's the basis on which we want to share them with you.

Since that time our journey has taken us to many more places. Some of them we could probably write about too; let's see if we ever do or not. We know that it takes us nearly a year to distribute these two articles, and while we could think of a thousand excuses for this, we still feel bad about it. Not least because we also wanted to give current information about what was going on, as one of the few forms of solidarity we could offer. A year later some things have changed.

White feet on Red Soil evictions in cambodia

The afternoon sun continues its sluggish trip above the red soil of DEY KRAHOM urban village. little bits of sand ascend, invited to a dance by motorcycles passing nearby. after short acrobatics in the air, they surrender to a slow motion towards the centre of gravity. the silence reigns, unusually for this time of the day, everything seems remarkably quiet.

the last large tree in the area, loyal to the village residents, offers us its shelter again from the fire coming down from the sky in its strategic point on the very edge of the red soil.

The security guards of FNG, the company that wants to evict, seem to be taking a day off from their normal cycle of provocation and intimidation.

using that fact, most of the villagers devote their afternoon to the practical nuances of their daily existences, those of people living well below the poverty line. a lot of them just cannot afford to completely throw themselves into a fight in defence of their own community.

when around 30 FNG workers come back after their lunch break, the atmosphere, until now suspended in a motionless heat, subtly changes.

momentarily nailed with the security guards' calculating eyes

The last minutes of relative silence are passing by, after that the workers get instructed, they're regrouping and rush towards the land that isn't conquered by the company yet. first they break through the symbolic barricade erected after yesterday's confrontation, then one of them climbs into the bulldozer's cabin, starts the engine and drives towards the spirit house - a shrine to the ancestors which the villagers believes protects their community and strengthens their resistance.

the call goes out over the loudspeaker that villagers have pooled their money to buy, and whoever is left in the community comes running.

From the mixture of shock, anger, a feeling of a big injustice and desperation, the tears of powerlessness mixed with the red soil shape great hatred that no cold thinking head would be able to stop. reaction fuelled by crushed illusions, the emotions escaping between the ribs of the rational skeleton. fury materializes in the form of passionately hurled stones, from elders trembling hands as from those of inexperienced children randomly picked objects get a new meaning, turning rubble into a medium carrying pride and the uncompromised struggle for what's theirs.

The events of that day were just another moment in the resistance of the Dey Krahom community, tensely awaiting the eviction that they have kept at bay for three years. Nineteen more communities in the Cambodian capital, and an unknown amount more around the country, are also menaced by the spectre of eviction. The crisis in housing is the most rampant in Asia, driven forward by confusion and corruption in the re-allocation of land after the Khmer Rouge era and a huge boom in land-grabbing and property speculation. The poor - urban and rural - are squeezed out of the economic boom - 150,000 people could be evicted from their homes within the next few years.

People living in these communities are usually poor. They get by, working as street vendors, day labourers and the like, in a town which flaunts provocatively its contrasts between extremes of wealth and poverty. The wars are over, but the violent and corrupt methods of the past thirty-five years have survived the conflict, taking root as normal and effective means of social control. For communities trying to protect their land and homes this means a stark and brutal repression, but despite this many resist in creative and interesting ways.

Necessity forces communities to organise their resistance, and due also to no other ideology than practical necessity, this organisation is mostly non-hierarchical. At least in the capital Phnom Penh, people from different affected communities meet regularly to share their experiences. But this organisation is not wholly from below: the influence of Cambodia's huge NGO industry is never far away and this has mixed implications for the people's struggles. Yet in Phnom Penh, as the professionals move in assume their dominant role, there are still many within NGOs trying to promote a culture of autonomy, rather than dependant relationships.



Where do we fit in? trying to run from the west and its post modern drudgery, re-inspire our burnt out selves that seem to have lost the ability to believe in anything for a few years now. we know that in these far-off cultures that we may as well be space aliens - even though we live in a squatter world where eviction and imprisonment are daily realities, we are still a world apart from people here and our privilege is clearly stamped on our white skin.

It has been already few months of our trip few months since we set off on this imprecise quest. it is a quest only as far as life is one, but becomes more and more visible as such the further we get away from the well worn patterns of the european anarchist paradigm. we're armed in patience, though our quest is not determined in a specific way we don't carry agenda, only direction even the route is flexible. we ended up in cambodia without having had that idea when leaving the old continent.

CAMBODIA is one of the countries on the map that is uncomfortable to think of visiting as a tourist. only the thought of being a tourist leaves a bad after taste. to join the ~~arm~~ reach of tourist soldiers scratching their paths, marching their way through out the world in their limitless conquest, expecting to be kindly served by the local populations wherever they go, changing the shape of local societies, reducing their role to that of entertainers.

a country so heavily experienced in the near past. today's brutal reality that doesn't leave many illusions for the majority of the population a contrast with a smile on the tourist face, blessed with the ignorance of everything that doesn't fit in their tourist paradigm. happy holidays in a cheap, exotic place.

police in SIEM REAP use tasers to disperse local vendors trampling each other while trying to sell anything to the whites.

we don't want to be part of that picture, even if that's exactly how we will be seen by many people.

if we hadn't found a friend of a friend in PHNOM PENH armed with knowledge of local issues and projects - if we hadn't this starting point, we would bypass CAMBODIA for those reasons.



The trauma wrought on the Cambodian population by its recent history is amongst the most intense this planet has been forced to witness. In April 1975 the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh and enacted the most radical, most rapid and most deadly communist revolution in history. Within days they had emptied the capital and sent the whole population out to work the land. Most people who had skills other than those needed to cultivate the land were carefully watched and many slaughtered. Hundreds of thousands more died of starvation as the country's rice harvest was sold to China in exchange for guns. All records of land ownership were also destroyed.

In 1979, the Vietnamese invaded and overthrew the Khmer Rouge. But a civil war continued until the mid-1990s between various factions of the ex-Khmer Rouge, Vietnamese communists and 'democrats' supported by Thailand. All sides continued to force young Cambodians to fight in their armies, and ideological differences slid into minor significance in a war that just served the vested interests of the various faction leaders.

In 1993, with the country still at war, the United Nations made a huge investment in sponsoring elections. Blue helmets and election monitors were jettied in from around the world. The election was marked by massive fraud and violence, but it was deemed sufficiently tolerable to open the door to a global mobilisation for the capitalist transition of the country. In 2008 the elections are still blatantly rigged, but the Cambodian economy is starting to boom. Yet as prices soar most of the population continues to survive on around one US dollar a day. Government bigshots and their families are stealing left right and centre, yet rich countries continue to donate to the economy. They turn a blind eye to the corruption because they know their investment could bring them big bucks a few years down the line.



Everything always in Cambodia is referred back to the violence of the country's recent history. There is always an explanation to give of why Cambodia is a special case. Yet whilst the scars are all too visible, the facts of history are also used as an excuse, by whoever's purpose is suited to do so. For example the enduring violence and corruption are depicted as an inevitable hangover from those troubled times. The next logical step would be that this can be ironed out if the country is successfully steered along the path to capitalist democracy.

Another spurious argument goes like this: the country was totally deskilled in the 1970s and it therefore needs outside help in order to rebuild its own capacity. This is the gateway by which big international institutions legitimize their presence in the country. Foreign governments direct the country's political and economic course through technical assistance, while a deluge of foreign NGOs takes care of the social infrastructure. The real government is allowed to plunder freely. All these institutions secure their niche by promoting a myth of societal incompetence.

The argument of a nation deskilled is used as an excuse for this strange new variant of imperialist oppression - but still in many ways it is inarguably true. That this is solely due to the Khmer Rouge's slaughter of experts is a dubious assertion however – after all nearly thirty years have passed since the end of the genocide, and that's more than enough time to learn a few skills. That so many people have been broken by the violence - demotivated by the trauma - would seem more accurate. Lethargy and disillusionment are widespread, cynicism and resignation become seen as the norm.



As you begin to see past the cloud of despair that cloaks Phnom Penh you can feel the excitement of a town on the edge. The streets stand attentive for the next violent crime – maybe there's a gangland shooting, or later someone is just being stabbed for their mobile phone. It was only a few years ago that the practice of selling guns openly in the city's markets was stopped. Danger brings fear, but also immediacy – in this city the present tense overrules the past and the future. Yet while these by-products of poverty both rot and animate the city, the elite cruise by in their imported Hummers, exhibiting a wealth that could only have come from the ruthless exploitation of the mass of the population.



The wealth may not trickle down, but sometimes cynical practices typical of the elite seep down into the wider population. So, for example, The Lighthouse orphanage, formally based at Dey Krahorm, invites socially-conscious tourists to visit and make donations for running costs. We heard that the managers keep all the money for themselves; the kids see none of it. Making money off the backs of hungry children is outrageous, but it doesn't seem strange in the chaos of Cambodia.

Yet the cynicism of some is always countered by others building new dreams from the chaos: the first place we arrived in Cambodia, by chance while hitch-hiking, was another project for orphans, in the north of the country. We met a family who were converting their garden into a school and home for children, spending whatever time and money they could find on the project and on the welfare of the kids. As we spent more time in the country we worked out that this wasn't unusual – within the rubble of a broken society is a current of unrestrained possibility and optimism which leaves us oscillating between inspiration and despair.

Strait away after arriving in the capital we cautiously look to make connections, find some way to make a one-month stay meaningful, knowing that such a short commitment can only be so useful. We know nothing about the culture and enough language only to ask for a lift and vegan food. We are aware that we are a couple of western buffaloes ignorant of most of what's going on around us. We don't want to end up doing more harm than good.

On our own, there's not much we can do. One day we take a trip out to the local rubbish mountain to share out a sack of rice to the homeless kids who work there but to get in deeper we need to go through the NGOs. We would prefer not to do that, but it's the easy way in. We find out about the eviction crisis we hear about some people who are trying to visit eviction sites as often as they can. Like in CHIAAPS or PALESTINE, the hope is that white faces will deter aggressions from the destructionists.

It sounds about right for us: we're not getting too deeply involved in the intricacies of local contexts that we barely understand, just responding to a concrete request of the community for solidarity. Many years of squatting means we're used to sitting around waiting for evictions and we make the decision to go along there. We have the naive hope that we can communicate to the people there that we have something in common – that we know what it is like to lose our homes, and to live every day in fear that one morning we will be woken up by cops. But we also understand that there are crucial differences – when we first moved into squats we took the choice to sacrifice our security in exchange for not being slowly stifled by the world of work and conformity; these people didn't choose their poverty. We can't really understand where they're coming from. Being a human shield is a bit weird, but to imagine any deeper involvement just seems arrogant.

The City against the PEOPLE

Work has already started on Phnom Penh's first 40 storey skyscraper, and this is an indication of the changes in store for the city. Property prices are booming booming booming, while wages stay miserable. To buy a small house nowadays would cost around \$60,000 – which if you are earning a dollar or two a day, is too inaccessible to even dream about.

This inequality has to be understood in the context that thirty years ago there were no records of land ownership. People just moved into wherever they could in Phnom Penh. A law was created that if anyone occupied land for five years, then they could claim title. This means that most urban poor communities in the city are not squatters, they are people who in theory have a legal entitlement to their homes. This legal right, however, is usually meaningless. Because they are poor they cannot pay the court expenses to claim their homes, and so many times they are left at the mercy of whichever corporation decides to develop their land.



The land at Dey Krahorh for example was reclaimed in the early 1980s. A former swampland, it became home to 850 families, as the government invited people to settle the land. Amongst those who came were some of the most talented traditional musicians in Cambodia who were encouraged to live together in order that these traditional art-forms should not be forgotten. Others find whatever ways they can to make money in the city, improving the construction of their houses whenever they have the resources to do so.

As the urban development has progressed over the last few years, these companies claim to have offered suitable alternative housing for the communities. This usually means, after a violent eviction, that they are given a tarpaulin and a bag of rice, and relocated to a site with no facilities some 20-30 km outside the city. There is never access to their previous employment, and it often results in sickness and starvation.



One day we get the chance to parasite onto a perfumed NGO fact-finding trip to one of these communities.

the inhabitants had been evicted two years ago without even knowing it was going to happen - they were just shown a document with their names and some thumb-prints which claimed they had already agreed to leave. at their new place there are no facilities, even water has to be paid for and delivered by truck. the site is in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by ricefields, yet plots of land are nevertheless tiny, half the size they were promised, with no space for a vegetable garden, or for married children to get their own space. the little space remaining the local council tries to take to resettle more families from the city. there's no school, no health clinic and most families can only survive by sending one member into the city to try to work. the only brick houses are those built by churches for widows, in exchange for their souls.

you know it's bad when a woman tells you that life here is worse than it was under the KHMER ROUGE.

The situation at Dey Krahor is significantly different. Their would-be owner, 7NG, which is trying to build two skyscrapers on their land, tries to sell itself as a progressive company. To this end it built a new town, full of small-yet-comfortable houses, also 20km out of town, into which to move the residents. But this time there would be employment – a sweatshop also built by the company, producing goods for major Western chains such as Walmart and Target. There would also be transportation into the city for those who needed it – a bus service also run by the company. So these new feudal landlords have the option to profit twice out of the people's lives: once when they forcibly evict people from their homes, and then again in the new place where, through poverty, people become completely dependent on what the company provides and how it chooses to exploit them.

In its propaganda 7NG patronizingly declares that they are offering what the people want – tidy houses far from the squalor and drugs problems that afflict the area currently. Company spokesperson Srey Sothea claims it's a 'kindness' to buy houses from the villagers. It's even possible that some residents were actually happy with that deal. The vibrance and determination of their resistance shows that others certainly are not.

The new houses are worth only a fraction of their current homes, because of the location, which also means they are completely impractical for the work most people have – day labourers, motorbike-taxi drivers and street vendors. Although many families have eventually taken up the offer of a house, for most it has not been through free choice. Either they have succumbed to the intimidation to move, or left fearing that those who resist would eventually end up with absolutely nothing.

As so many people refused the offer of relocation, 7NG started to offer cash instead of these houses. As of February 2008, no offer had been made to anyone which remotely came close to the real value of the houses – or in other words, that would allow people to buy a new house in the city.

Not believing it's own propaganda, 7NG has always known that it wasn't offering a deal that the community could accept. From the outset the company has tried constantly to break the unity and resolve of the community through a combination of bribery and repression. In January 2005 they managed to sign a contract for the relocation of the entire site with the 36 people who had been chosen to represent the community. It is not known exactly what offer 7NG made to these community representatives. Those who they supposedly represented however, knew nothing of the deal until after it was signed, and certainly did not consent to it.

As the stand-off continued, the company pursued different strategies aimed at destroying the community's integrity. One such practice is to making separate and different offers to each family, and the better offers are tempting for some. For example, it is known that many people were offered 5 or 6 houses in the new development, and have proceeded to let or sell the extra ones. It's a cunning trick which creates suspicion between neighbours and breaks their solidarity, as no-one knows who might be in negotiations with 7NG at any one time.

The other side of the coin is repression. Provocations by the company's security guards, dressed in uniforms almost indistinguishable from the cops, are an almost daily occurrence. They built two security compounds, one at each end of the site, and the presence of the company is permanent: watching, plotting and waiting.

Many days they bring heavy machinery on site to clear vacated houses or just to act menacingly. Always they are seeking to claim, and mark as theirs, every few inches of territory. Some of the guards have even been

neighbours, evicted a few years before from another nearby community, who needed a job, and it is clear that this is a conscious strategy, designed to disempower Dey Krahorn when they see their own people turned against them.

The threat of criminal charges is also used to neutralize individuals who are actively resisting. This has especially targetted the new group of community representatives, chosen by the community after the first group of community representatives sold the community out. A few of this group of 23 people have been convicted and are in prison, most are in hiding, all have had to leave Dey Krahorn through fear and the stress has driven at least one person to nervous breakdown. When the cops and the courts can be so easily bought, not much evidence is needed, leading to situations such as on 27th September 2007 when a female community representative tried to block a security guard from taking her photo with his phone. The phone fell to the ground, but rather than picking it up, the guard reported to the police that the woman had stolen it, and they came and arrested the woman.

The response of the community is very interesting for those interested in anarchism or other forms of non-hierarchical structure. Basically it became clear that visible community leaders were likely to be singled out for repression, or attempts would be made to bribe them: both effectively neutralizing resistance. So therefore for these purely practical and non-ideological reasons this community, along with other communities in the capital, chooses to operate without leaders. Sometimes, however, spokespeople are needed to negotiate with the company or local government, or to attend the regular inter-community co-ordination meetings. For this reason, people chose a pool of about 20-30 community representatives, none of whom rank above the others.

The community also has made the decision that women can get away with more than men. So in any confrontation it will always be the women and children who take the front line. It means company guards are less likely to physically attack and so the community has more chance of staying in control of their own resistance. And even if nothing else is happening that day, a group of women will always assemble to hurl curses at the 7NG guards, trying to break their morale. Any Khmer speaker who happens to be visiting is invariably shocked by the vitriol – however much we asked, nobody was ever prepared give us a translation of what was said.





Simply refusing to leave is of course the main way in which the people of Dey Krahorn resist 7NG, and by planning and acting strategically whenever the company tries to take some space. Each day dawns under the stress of uncertainty, as no-one knows whether there will be confrontations that day. Confrontations such as on the 29th August 2007, when armed police turned up to demolish 30 houses which they said were occupied by people who had already left the site, or the 3rd December of that year, when the company entered the area with their bulldozer, trying to provoke. On that occasion the adults tried to calm the situation down, trying to avoid giving the reaction the company was pushing for, but the kids could not restrain themselves so well: they pelted the machine with stones, breaking its windows. Two weeks later people had to block the company building a fence round part of the site. In each of these incidents there is a high danger that people will be targeted for repression by criminal charges, or even that an active response would be an excuse for an immediate eviction. Injuries of people by the company are also widespread.

The community also sometimes organise events to raise the profile of their struggle. They co-ordinated to devise and launch a community plan for the land, and were involved in the organisation of human rights day protests. And they are actively involved, through the community co-ordination, in a city-wide movement against eviction. But despite the dynamism of their movement, a majority have already been forced off

their land. Those that have left have survived three years of daily fear and insecurity, and although the stress certainly shows, they are ready for anything.

Step aside, the professionals have arrived!

In Cambodia, people tell us, there's a higher concentration of NGOs than anywhere else in the world. They come in a wide range of flavours, both international and local. Fuelled by the free-flowing cash available for the 'rebuilding of Cambodia', they have become a key part of Cambodia's institutional infrastructure, in many areas more important than the state itself.

To analyse the role of NGOs in Europe from a radical perspective is just repeating what we all know – the experience of most people involved in grassroots resistance is that they are simply part of the state apparatus, unnecessary mediators that would tame through bureaucracy people's passionate desire to rebel. But we have the privilege to ignore them - all communities with a bit of ingenuity can mobilise the resources to make autonomous self-organisation possible, therefore making NGO interference thoroughly unnecessary. Because of the economic marginalisation of Cambodia's urban poor, it can be difficult to access even basic information, let alone material, publicity or legal advocacy. So although many rural communities resist without an NGO ever hearing of their struggle, in the big city they are a fact of life, and there is inevitably a great temptation for communities to seek help from the professionals.

There's plenty of the worst kind at work in Cambodia. People tell of the big international NGOs trying to impose their inappropriate development agenda, Christian missionaries creating NGOs as front organisations to push their imported moral values or rival NGOs squabbling over the oppressed communities they each want to represent. Those with the potential for something better are those which directly work with communities, trying to facilitate their access to resources. Around the issues of housing and land there are probably at least a dozen such organisations in the capital alone. They can use their networks to connect people to the experiences of other communities, find lawyers, doctors or architects, open gateways to media coverage, and lobby on their behalf governments, companies and international organisations. Whether these tools are useful or not, they would be far beyond the reach of the urban poor acting on their own.

Maybe we can't write off all NGO activity as automatically as we could in richer countries. While there is no need to waste time discussing the really big bad institutions, these smaller, more direct groups raise some interesting questions: is it possible for the actions of privileged outsiders to complement in any way the genuine popular struggles? Or do privileged attitudes and the needs of the institution just get in the way, inevitably assimilating the people's rebellion into conventionality and impotence? We keep asking because we want to remain critical, not just of NGOs but also of ourselves. In these far off countries we also continue to underestimate the inevitable chasm between our outlook and that of people we encounter.

Many working in NGOs desire, like we do, relationships of solidarity with the communities they work with. But NGOs and urban poor communities can never be equal partners in the struggle – their starting points are too different. Communities have so much more to lose – their homes, their means of livelihood, even their lives. For them resistance is survival, it's as simple as that. We hear about one rural community that sat down together before the situation got really intense and talked about how many people they were prepared to have injured, how many imprisoned, how many killed before they gave up the struggle. Activists in NGOs are not risking nearly so much – they want to help but will be able to go home to their secure housing at the end of the day. Plus they get paid good money to work with people who have virtually nothing – so if they don't want to be seen to be profiting from poverty then they really have to prove their usefulness.



There's many foreigners working the NGO scene, often diverting their careers for a year or two to get a change of scenery and to 'make a difference'. But because the Khmer language is a struggle to learn, meetings are often conducted in English. This means that Cambodians must communicate in their second language, and what's more do so with people who come from much more dominating cultures than they do. Thus the 'natural order' of informal power becomes established. And as many foreign NGO workers do not come from a background where formal and informal power hierarchies are regularly challenged, half the time they don't even notice that they are being dominating.

The problem is, advocacy on behalf of communities is not fundamentally empowering for the community members themselves and so does not encourage their self-reliance. Recently, some NGOs are becoming conscious of this and trying to not just be paternalistic Father

Christmases giving out presents of support. Instead they try to avoid telling communities what to do, not wanting to fall into the trap of fostering dependency. They encourage communities to self-organise, but provide resources which communities know they can make use of if the need arises. But this new philosophy is only slowly emerging; the 'hands-off' approach clearly can potentially conflict with an organisation's need to create a demand for its services, and the dominating tendency of many who work in these institutions.

We can't be sure, but from conversations it seems that this approach has only arrived in Phnom Penh in the last few years and is only gaining ground due to the stubborn persistence of a few individuals in continually challenging the established NGO social niche. Now it seems that everybody at least pays lip service to the need to step back and let communities take charge. However, when we sit in on meetings, we sense the reluctance of many to relinquish the buzz of being the ones to make the decisions, and it seems that probably actually many decisions are still being made in NGO offices and then being presented to communities to get the green light of approval. Maybe NGOs will only finally stop taking control when the communities they work for force them to do so.

To their credit, the people of Dey Krahom have managed to ensure to a large extent that the responsibility for the struggle lies within the community themselves, despite having the support of many NGOs, and also other foreigners (like us) who visit as much as they can. As we understand it, the villagers come up with their own strategy and tactics for resistance and if funds are necessary then they pool their money, and this autonomy is important for them. The white people can be a human shield against company aggressions, they can fight court cases on behalf of the people and they can make videos to communicate their situation to the world. They can even make suggestions which will be listened to and considered, but the struggle rests with the villagers themselves. So each time there is a problem at Dey Krahom, the villagers will react in their way. The phone calls will certainly go out to their NGO friends, but first priority will be to raise the alarm in the village itself over the megaphone system they have set up.



For some other places the distinction is not so clear. We were talking one day to an American whose NGO worked with the communities around Boueng Kak lake, where some 4000 families are facing eviction. That day there had been a big test – the company had moved equipment on to the area for the first time to make preparations to drain the lake.

“And so how did the community respond?” we asked. “They ran to seek help from the NGOs”, we were told, although gloomily, because in telling us this, he was admitting that the work of his NGO to empower the community to struggle had failed. He also knows that they have no chance of successfully resisting unless they take control of their own situation. It doesn't take much to work out that there is an impossible contradiction here. There is no way that the privileged can meaningfully empower the poor if they don't do it for themselves, but this is an enduring frustration for them (or us). It means that for all the power our privilege gives us, when we try to build self-reliance we just create dependency.



One interesting network is the inter-community co-ordination. Although set up by NGOs, it has the aim to bring the different communities that are facing forced eviction together to share experiences and ideas. The NGOs go along, but take a back seat and anyway, the meetings are in the Khmer language which most of them don't understand. The process has been going for a few years now, and is clearly maturing as a functional network. People start attending events at other communities, sharing ideas for tactics, resolving disputes created by propaganda in the press and - a sign of the level of solidarity that has been built up - even pooling money to help other communities out.

The amnesty woman has arrived and the community co-ordination is convened so that she can explain her findings to the people. She's charismatic and speaks KHMER and everyone listens attentively as she explains such technical subjects as how forced evictions in Cambodia contravene international human rights law, and how this can be used to lobby international aid agencies which donate to the CAMBODIAN government. Surely she knows that this language goes over most people's heads, but for her it is important to make an effort to be accountable any way. Later an NGO representative, and one of the key people promoting the hands off' approach encourages community members to explain to the visitor something about how the anti-eviction movement is structured. "how did we come to be here today?" - he asks the room, but is met with blank faces. "I mean, who organised this event?", he continues. "the NGOs", somebody ventures in reply. "the NGOs and who else?" he presses, but again there is silence clearly of the hundred or so community representatives in the room, not really feel that they had a stake in the organisation and he is left to explain by himself the idea behind the community co-ordination.

when we question him after the event, he is quite deflated. he's proud of the progress that the community co-ordination has made in promoting horizontal co-operation, and so if communities still see it as an NGO initiative, then that is a big problem. probably the NGOs need to stop going to the meetings, he suggests, to put a clear distance and try to shake off the dependency relationship.



Priorities are different. NGOs look at the situation and urge non-violent tactics. They know that the state and companies are constantly trying to provoke violence to legitimize their repression. If communities respond with violent tactics they risk greater repression, whether it be criminal charges brought against them, injuries as guards and police beat them with impunity, or an eviction a few days later as the city acts to clear the streets of this 'violent social menace'.

Many in NGOs counsel that resistance should be non-violent, but for different reasons. At times it's from an ideological commitment to non-violence. Or otherwise because they know that the struggle will need to be long term, and to keeping it peaceful is a strategy to not be burnt out by an onslaught of repression. Sometimes they say that communities can decide for themselves which course of action they believe is most suitable, but it is only possible for the NGOs to work with them if the resistance is at an open and therefore non-violent level. Finally some advocate non-violence just because they have built up relationships with the people they work with, and care about their safety at a personal and emotional level.

Having seen the company's provocations in action, and while we're certainly not pacifists, we would have to say that strategically, it seems like good advice.. But good advice from the point of view of people who do not have their homes to lose. Good advice from people who do not live every day with the emotional stress of having your home under siege. Good advice from people who can't share the anger or desperation, don't need to find new hope from somewhere to keep their spirits alive. While we can understand this advice, it should only be offered in this sense - advice from another, safer, world - not as an attempt to subdue resistance into institutionalised conformity.



Stones are in the air at DEY KRAHORM. We're just monitoring, taking pictures. It wouldn't be fair to the community to get involved, although we too are angry and want to throw stones. We can see how this scene was engineered by ING, trying to provoke the community into exactly this action. We watch how the security guards throw stones at the people and then all step back at once, allowing their cameraman to capture the faces of the villagers responding to their aggressions as potential evidence. We know that throwing the stones is not a sensible, strategic course of action but we also see the faces of the villagers as they arrive on the scene to see their spirit house bulldozed, the symbol of their resilience flattened. We can feel the anger.

about this act, and about the constant threat that hangs over their futures, and understand the need to release that. Sensibleness is important, but so is the need to release tension and to not take things lying down.

So we take some photos, keeping our own anger inside of us, and don't make any judgement because it's not our place. The next day there's another clash; the night passing didn't subdue the community's rage. After that comes a temporary respite, as ING dismantles its security camp at this end of the urban village, and there are no significant aggressions for the next three weeks until we leave. The spirit house is rebuilt bigger and stronger within a few days.

We leave when our visas expire, inspired by what we've seen, confused by the superficiality of our transient lifestyle, but I guess we're getting used to that by now. The people of DEY KRAHORM try to maintain some normality until the next flash point comes, try to not let their precarious situation dominate their lives. Everywhere the wheels keep turning: the hand carts the DEY KRAHORM villagers use to sell shellfish, the pick-up trucks of the ING security, the sewing machines in the sweatshop at the relocation site, the hummers in which the rulers parade their ill-gotten wealth - the cogs in the machine of the GREAT CAMBODIAN ECONOMIC MIRACLE...





Dey Krahorom lasted almost one year after the events described above. Just as we were finishing the layout of this zine we heard about the violent eviction which took place on Saturday January 24, 2009. A few days before, each household was made an offer of \$20,000 for their homes, higher than any offered made previously. According to the Phnom Penh Post, a few accepted but most continued to resist, refusing to accept any offer from the company that had tormented them for four years.

We had hoped to finish this article on a high note by recounting this act of continuing defiance. Then we heard about the eviction and suddenly all these analytical words we wrote seem cold and empty, against the devastating frustration of knowing that these people who inspired us so much, people who fought so hard and so long and without compromise, eventually lost. Again and again it happens – the power and imagination built up by the collective force of people's spirit crushed in a moment by something which should be so weak but is somehow stronger. However much we get used to it, somehow each time it is still incomprehensible.

As the eviction happened we were far away, with friends, in another community in another land, but who also forced into struggle for their survival. We hadn't managed to keep much contact with Dey Krahorom after we left - we got distracted by too much. In the end we couldn't even get it together to publish this article at a time when it could have helped to spread information about their case. Now we can only read in the newspapers that post eviction they are in a desperate situation, trying to get some means to restart their lives. Although surely their pride of never having given in must in many ways keep them strong.

Communication was not easy in Dey Krahorom: with most people we did not share a common language, and it took some effort to have more serious conversations with those people who did speak English.. But conversation is not necessary to be amazed by people, and to witness their strength was something that fires our own imaginations. Their struggle has surely made a big difference to the urban landscape of Phnom Penh – developers can no longer assume that getting rid of people will be so straightforward. And the years of resistance of Dey Krahorom surely sparked some little fires of hope among members of

other communities facing a similar fate. At the end of the day, the company wins the most important victory, for the control of the land. In all the more subtle ways, the community wins. They have the power and dignity already, but we hope that also they find the comfortable living situation which they need and deserve.

Further information on the Cambodian eviction crisis:

<http://www.babsea.org/programs/ccp/evictions.htm>

<http://www.licadho.org>

<http://www.cohre.org/deykrahom>





tears in the land of thousand smiles

There's a war going on in the deep south of Thailand. Almost three thousand people have been killed in the last four years, since the long-running tensions between the majority Muslim population and the state flared up again. But outside the conflict area, few people know about this war, or if they do then they write it off as a typical independence struggle, or religious conflict. It is unlikely to trouble many of the throngs of tourists that flock to the islands, beaches and brothels a few hundred kilometers further north, escaping for a while to the 'land of smiles'. The Thai government has successfully kept news of the war distant from their reality, not wanting to disturb their spending habits.

But actually this lack of interest in the conflict, and readiness to resort to stereotypical ideas about Muslim rebellion, only serves to make it easier for the Thai government to act with total impunity in the area, massacring, assassinating, torturing and terrorizing the majority Muslim population in its 3 southernmost states, referred to by its inhabitants a Patani.

We were also naïve about the conflict, when some activist friends in Bangkok brought us along to a conference discussing the impacts of war on women and children. There we met with representatives of the student movement, who were keen for us to join with them in their regular visits to the war zone. We agreed, and a few days later we were taking the train to the south to spend a week touring some of the villages most affected by the war, listening to the villagers' stories of violence, repression and confusion.

Starting from a point of ignorance, staying such a short time, and relying on translators to understand what was going on means that our impressions cannot be regarded as an authoritative analysis of the conflict, and we certainly don't pretend to want to do that with this article. But nevertheless, we wanted to try to record some of our experiences, both to try to provide some perspectives on the state violence in this little-known conflict, and to share some thoughts about solidarity with struggles that arise from vastly different cultural, religious and political ideals from our own.

Starting Points

How do you start to understand a war, with all its complexities, different agendas and manipulations of truth? We could start with history – many people in Patani have a high level of consciousness of historic repressions. The northern part of the former Sultanate of Patani was colonized by Thailand (then Siam) in 1785. Since that time there have been ongoing attempts to assimilate the Muslim population into the Siamese culture: attacks on Islamic education and educators, encouraging non-Muslims to move there from other parts of Thailand, repression of the Melayu language. And from the beginning there have been groups taking up arms to resist the Thai state.

A sense of history is ever-present amongst the people of Patani. People remember the leaders of independence movements of this century: Mamuhayadeen who was sold out by the British after he mobilised the people of Patani to fight for them in India, Haji Salun who tried to take advantage of Thailand's transition to democracy, by proposing a set of reforms, only to be arrested and killed by the new government, Seny Madakakan who is the first Muslim from Patani to be elected to parliament and is subsequently poisoned.

Each wave of repression and each massacre is also remembered. How the army slaughtered 400 people in several villages in Dusonyo, burnt their bodies and then threw them in the river. Memories of 1975, when a man crawled out of a river alive in Kotor Bridge, into which he and five others had been thrown after being shot by soldiers – and of the demonstration afterwards which occupied the government offices for one week, and then was ended by the massacre of 70 people.

Can we understand a conflict by looking for socio-economic reasons? Maybe it gives us a few more clues: to start with Patani is the poorest part of Thailand, the household incomes are half the national average. Society is divided within Patani itself: whilst 88% of the population is Muslim, most of the public officials are Buddhist. Economic resources can also be a trigger for conflict, and there are plenty of these around, most notably the natural gas which is being exploited offshore, but local people do not really see the benefits. Aside from legal resources, the border zone is notorious for drug smuggling, fuelling an underground economy with links to powerful people. Another motive for rebellion may arise as the Thai state tries promote an economic transition from a

rural economy along the well-worn path of capitalist development, pushing more and more people into working wage-labour jobs for large companies.

Many possible reasons for conflict exist. But there's no simple explanation for what's going on. Everyone, even the people of Patani who have grown up with the conflict, have to content themselves with only a partial understanding of exactly what's happening and why. No-one can know all sides to the story – it's far too complicated for that, there are too many agendas, too many secrets and too many lies. As for us, all we can do is to write about what we saw, heard and felt.

New Insurgency, New Repression

Since 2004 the conflict starts to intensify. Thaksin, the new Thai prime minister kicks off a new hard-line policy towards the people of the South. Many believe that it stems from his personal political agenda of centralizing state power in the hands of the prime minister– he wants to challenge the influence of the king in politics and the policies of appeasement of the old hierarchy. So he dissolves institutions which were designed to promote dialogue and transfers power from the military to the police, who proceed to repress demonstrations and assassinate people, using the infamous drugs war as justification.

From the rebel side, a dramatic declaration of intent comes with an unexpected raid on an army camp in January 2004. They successfully seize a cache of guns, killing four soldiers in the process, an action which effectively announces the coming escalation.

28 April 2004: Young people set out to fight the Jihad in eleven places in Patani. Armed mainly with knives they set out to attack police outposts. One hundred and five are killed, seventeen arrested. Many of the deaths occur inside the historic Kru-Ze mosque, into which one group of rebels had retreated. The soldiers were killing everyone inside – people praying as well as rebels. The incident is remembered and resented in Patani for its excessive force and violation of a sacred space. “But they only had knives...”

Six months later there's a demonstration in Tak Bai to demand the release of 6 men. They had been armed by the government who had trusted them as informers. Then when they sent soldiers back to check on the guns they had disappeared. So it was decided they must have passed the weapons to the separatists and they were arrested. That's the logic of Patani.

The demo of 20,000 ends in a massacre. The state opens fire on unarmed demonstrators. Many are killed. Next comes a mass arrest, people piled into trucks six deep to be transported to the army camp. Dozens suffocate. The Thai government admits a death toll of 85; the true figure is probably much higher.



Since 2004, around 2700 people have been killed. To ask why and by who doesn't always bring answers. Insurgent groups surely exist, but they make no public announcement of their existence, and do not claim responsibility for attacks.

Actually it is often not clear who is responsible for each killing. People know that sometimes it is convenient for sections of the military to make their attacks look like those of the rebels. Likewise the mafia. Likewise anyone with a grudge against someone. There are many different agendas, rivalries and business interests at work down here. And many many guns.

State of Terror

The presence of armed men in every village, at every crossroads, is already a pressure for the population. The knowledge that they regularly arrest people arbitrarily, torture them and frequently kill them, or simply go to look for some fun while drunk in the evenings, creates a climate of fear where no-one feels safe.

Military police, army, paramilitaries: all have their impunity guaranteed by law. First came martial law which let them sequester any land they wanted for their camps and hold people for 7 days without a warrant. Emergency law extended this to 30 days, and absolves the military of any responsibility for those they kill. Now a new internal security law is coming in which extends the detention period once more.

Villages are classified (previously officially, now unofficially) as red, yellow or green zone. Officially this classification has been revoked, but the practice persists amongst the military. If there has been an attack nearby, the village that is enough for the village to become red zone.

This means the entire population of the village are assumed to be separatist rebels, and acts of state violence will continue in order to terrorize and intimidate them into submission.

We are invited by students to go and visit some of these villages. They try to do this as often as they can, so the people there do not feel so isolated, to listen to their stories and pass them on to human rights groups. Their aim is to support and strengthen the community, to counteract the divisions which the military try to engineer, and to try to create a breathing space so that villagers can decide together in which way they want to engage with the conflict.

It is slightly harder to target students than the rest of the population: they are better networked, have friends in Bangkok. But for the monitoring work they also face repression. Students organized a demo in December 2007 demanding justice for a woman who was raped by paramilitary and then killed, together with her family. People came from Bangkok to participate and police did not attack the demonstration, which lasted for 5 days. Four people were later arrested however, and tortured.

Going to the red zone is dangerous, not many people are prepared to do it - they know the military is out of control and unpredictable. For the students, a couple of non-Muslim Europeans with them helps them feel safer. Their reasoning is that the more they go, the idea that outside groups visit the red zone becomes normalized, and so slightly safer, and consequently more NGOs and journalists will feel comfortable to go. But at the present time, news from the red zone doesn't surface much.

We spent four days visiting villages across the three provinces. Piling into minibuses early in the morning, passing through countless checkpoints, always being waved swiftly through as soon as the military saw the white faces, never meeting our ambitious schedules, because of

being invited to eat, or to pray together, or having to talk to soldiers. Amidst all this, listening to tales of torture, killings and the daily fear that comes from living in a war zone. Here are some of them:

Gutong, Yaratthawat Province

We leave the van quickly and enter the coffeeshop before the paramilitaries see us. “Don’t sit in a circle like that” the women tell us, scared of the problems that may come later from the two paramilitary camps in the village. They have already been warned not to speak to students, NGOs, or journalists. Yet they want us to be there. Here we see almost only women, hardly any men.

There had been a shoot-out somewhere in the local area, leaving one rebel killed. When they heard about this, the villagers did what they always do in such moments, rushed to the mosque, to feel safer together, to not leave anyone isolated. The paramilitaries surrounded the mosque and arrested 38 of the people inside. Three more they took from their homes. A five-year-old child was crying so they hit him with the butt of a gun and took him as well.

Some weeks later they let the people go, but in the minds of the military these 41 people are now clearly “separatists”, and soldiers start to go back to their houses, looking for them. One man manages to avoid a bullet fired through a small hole in his house. They run away, across the border to Malaysia, knowing it is not safe to stay.

There’s a paramilitary camp at each side of the village, right up against the houses. The soldiers like to get drunk at night. The people from the houses nearest to the camp go to sleep with friends nearer the centre of the village. Still no-one feels safe, but it is slightly better.

The paramilitary come and stop us talking, make us listen to them instead. They tell us that the separatists have returned to the mountains, proving the legitimacy of their action. Also they tell us not all the villagers are bad in Gutong village. According to them it is actually only 70% of the village who are the ‘bad people’, those who support the separatists. The other 30% co-operate with the military and are therefore ‘good people’. There is no-one in the middle of course, it’s a straightforward black-and-white issue. What makes the military’s version completely ridiculous is the claim that the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ parts are geographically separated - that a line could be drawn through the village to divide the people. Yet he tells us he wants peace, doesn’t understand

why he is so hated. We listen respectfully, ask polite questions. Arguing with him will only cause problems for the villagers later.

Aside from creating a culture of fear, the military presence has torn the community apart. People have been divided into “good” and “bad”, and they didn’t even get to choose which side they wanted to be on. Many of the young people from the “good” side have taken jobs with the paramilitaries, have been paid good money to harass their neighbours. Somewhere there’s drugs traffic involved too, complicating the situation and creating small divisions that can be manipulated into bigger ones by those with an interest to do so. A village divided is no threat – people cannot organize their self-determination and plan their future together. Faced with popular resentment against the state, polarisation is an effective tactic. The students talk together and with us – how is it that this community has been destroyed, and how can they support it’s rebuilding?



The military had thought this village was safe for them, a “green zone”. But in the morning of January 14, a bomb explodes as a military vehicle passes by. People waiting kill the 8 soldiers inside. The throat of one of them is cut. Caught off their guard, the army looks to the nearby area in their search for those responsible. In this way the spectre of suspicion falls upon Ruepoh village.

The wives and mothers tell us their stories. One woman tells of her husband, a 47 year-old rubber-tapper. He had been working in his rubber garden when he heard the bomb. He was also at work two days later when he heard that the police were at his house. Returning home, he was asked by the police to accompany them to the military camp for a short while. On the day we visited, six weeks later, he still hadn’t been allowed to go home.

When his wife went to visit him he told her that he had been tortured with boiling water thrown into his face and inside his mouth. His face was still blistered and swollen. They had inserted a gun in his mouth and tried to make him sign a confession. After this he was locked in a freezer room for three hours and then forced to stay under the hot sun all day long.

A mother tells of her 32 year old son, arrested four days after the bombing. Two army vehicles came to take him away. Some time later she saw the same vehicles heading back in the opposite direction,

towards the mountain. Later that afternoon, as she came out of the mosque after praying, the village leader met her and asked her if she had a piece of cloth. "What for", she asked. "To cover the body of your son", the village leader replied. He had been asked by the military to go to the mountain to collect her son's body. The military's version of the story was that they had taken their prisoner there to look for supposedly hidden weapons. Despite being surrounded by soldiers and handcuffed from behind he had then tried to seize a gun from one of them and make his escape, so they had to shoot him. "Of course", they say, trying to justify their action, "we had to be careful. We know separatists like him must be expert at getting round the forest..."

They also arrested a woman six days after the bomb, claiming she carried the guns to the guerrillas. Her husband, a religious teacher, was not present at the time because he was teaching and praying in another village. Yet the military tracked him down and arrested him. The first his mother knew of his detention was when she was ordered to come with them in a helicopter and pick up his body from another military camp. The person who cleaned the body found three stab wounds, including one that pierced his heart from the back.

Possibly because he was a religious teacher, or maybe just to justify his death, the military chose to identify this man as the leader of the cell. His wife was tortured in prison and his brother was also arrested, along with another twelve people whose stories we did not get to hear before the military turned up, making further conversation impossible.

The military give us no choice but to go to with them to their camp to hear their side of the story. On the table they place tea and doughnuts, and a laptop with gory photos from the bombing on a looped slide-show. It is clear that the soldiers do not really trust us. One of them talks, the other just refreshes the screen each time it goes to screen-saver. I guess he doesn't want us to lose perspective.



We visit a man at home. On February 9th 2008 one hundred police and army had turned up to his house at 3.30 am. Someone had accused him of keeping a gun there.

This is how they tortured him: the police told him he had a face like a terrorist. They slapped him repeatedly around the ears. When it hurt their hands too much, they took off their boots and used them instead, until

blood spurted from his ears. He was dazed and couldn't hear. They made him do press-ups and when he couldn't any more they hit him with bamboo sticks. They kicked him in the kidneys and made him sing the Thai national anthem. They kicked him in the chest until he fell backwards through a window. They made him clean the blood, and gave him a cigarette, but he couldn't smoke it because of the pain around his mouth. He refused to confess so they sent three policemen to dig a grave 70 cm deep outside. They made him strip naked and lie in the grave, covered him with earth, leaving only his face sticking out.

A dog was set loose. He was sure he was going to die. His ears were still bleeding. They asked him to confess again, but he just asked them to kill him instead, told them he couldn't take any more. They refused to let him pray, but left him alone the rest of that day. On the third day they told him to sign something, without letting him see what it was. He signed. He was then transported to another place, and during the journey, he was repeatedly warned that if he ever spoke of what had been done to him, he would be killed. Two weeks later he was released without charge. He was interrogated for the first four days, but after that never again.

Another man was arrested nearby the same night. For five days consecutively he was locked in the freezer room – from 8am to 5pm each day. And each day at 5pm would be two hours of interrogation. He thought it strange how little time was spent on questioning – so much torture with so little attempt to make use of it.

Yamatiga, Vatani' Romfe

Two months previously there had been a military swoop in this village. The soldiers turned up at 4.50 am, the time of morning prayer, and arrested 21 people in the mosque, and three more at their homes. The villagers said they just chose men who looked young and strong and arrested them. They waited for the women to leave the mosque, but then arrested several of them, searching under their skirts for concealed weapons. They gave a reason for the arrests, saying they were in connection with an incident that had happened several days ago, at some distance from the village.

Our student friends happened to be visiting a nearby village when they heard about the arrests in Yamatiga. So they changed their plan for the day and headed there. It was a tense situation they told us – sat in a circle of villagers explaining about human rights, whilst surrounded by the military.

The day we visited, the villagers had requested that the students come back to give some advice. Eleven people were still in prison with court cases coming up, and there had been new arrests. As we arrived more and more people came to the mosque, hoping to hear some words that might be useful. Soon there were over 100 people, and the only thing that it was possible to do was to give a general speech of encouragement, tell a few stories from other places. Practical advice that can be given is limited – there is very little it is possible to do in these situations....

While we were there we learnt that during the night after the original arrests and the students' first visit, the village school had been burnt down. This has become a common form of action during the insurgency by rebel groups who are trying to resist secular education – it is almost certainly also a tactic of the authorities sometimes when they are trying to sow discord in a community, or give legitimacy to a wave of repression. This time the state audaciously tried to put the blame on someone they had already arrested the morning before the fire. They took them from the prison and brought them to the burnt out school, and started beating him up in front of everybody until he fell down, unable to walk.

Ban Klong Mu Song, Patani province

We meet a 15 year old boy who shows us a bullet wound in his shoulder from a couple of weeks before. He had been riding a motorbike with his friend when a man started shooting from the back of a passing Chevrolet. The bullet passed through the heart of the boy's 14 year old friend, killing him, before entering his own shoulder. Villagers chased the car which entered a Buddhist temple in a Buddhist village nearby. Police arrived 30 minutes later, but wouldn't release CCTV footage; they claim the camera was broken.

Many Buddhists in the region have been given guns 'to protect themselves'. This was an initiative of the Thai queen, after two of her guards were killed in the region a few years ago. "If I could, I would learn how to shoot a gun myself" she apparently said, but in the end settled for just flooding the Buddhist community with guns. It certainly doesn't help interfaith relations much. In Ban Klong Mu Song, a Muslim village surrounded by Buddhist villages, shots have been fired at the mosque four times.

Pondok Baba Sed Warak, Patani Province

A pondok is a religious school, run by a spiritual leader, which is a key part of the Patani culture. When Sheik Said first brought Islam to Patani there were no mosques, so people studied in each other's homes, and the Pondok system grew from there. Islam in Patani is all about study and learning, and Patani is seen across the Islamic world as a centre of Islamic scholarship. Yet for the government, this traditional institution is clearly a terrorist training camp, and a target for repression.

When we visited Pondok Baba Sed Warak it was empty. Six months before, someone, presumably the military, had fired along the outside wall of the school. The police came the next day, searching for guns and bombs, but found nothing. They came back many times to threaten and harangue the old Baba's wife (Baba Sed Warak himself had passed away). They tried to convince her to convert the pondok into a secular government school. She refused, but more and more students were scared to come and study at the pondok, and it had to close.

Islamic School, Patani Province

We are invited to dinner at a private Islamic school. It's a break from the intense and tragic stories – this village has been quite peaceful, although the surrounding villages have more problems. There are many of these schools that teach academic subjects as well as Islam – it's a compromise solution to be able to teach religion – the pondoks have been attacked by the government since at least 1902.

We are traveling with some friends from the Bangkok Food not Bombs collective. They want to propose the idea of week-long educational camps for children, in different conflict areas. The educational system seems to have become very much a focus of the conflict and so they want to use the camps to support the kids caught up in the conflict, running sessions about the coping with conflict as well as talking about human rights, primary healthcare, language exchange and so on. By bringing students from Buddhist and Muslim communities around the country to be teachers, they hope that this exposure to the realities of Patani will provoke discussion and action around the country.

Over dinner we get chatting with one of the teachers in the school. He has studied in Egypt, and keen to talk about politics and religion with us. But mostly he wants to hear our ideas looking for new perspectives on

the key question: how Patani can find a way out of the situation it is in now. “What should we be doing?”, “Where should we look for a solution”. We try to give our opinion, but are totally out of our depth – one week in Patani has not given us the answer to the question on everyone’s lips. Then he asks about the global context: “So many wars against Muslims – is it, as they say, a ‘clash of civilisations’”? It was not the first or the last time that someone asked us that question.

The people from the village are very keen for the camp to happen. New ideas, new approaches, support from outside all bring with them the hope that somehow things are going to change for the better.



This is the second place to which the Food not Bombs group wants to propose the idea of a camp, in one of the hottest parts of the conflict zone, with repressive incidents happening on a regular basis. Last year, a car drove past the mosque and shot inside, killing a Ustazah, a female religious teacher, during prayer.

She was not able to rest in peace. As the villagers tried to carry her body to the grave, the military saw the crowd, and began to shoot in the air. The people put down the woman’s body and ran away, scared, but not so far that they couldn’t see the response of the military, which was to push the woman’s body into the ditch at the side of the road.

One man, enraged by what had happened, tried to hit out at one of the soldiers. Their response was to shoot him in the leg, and then repeatedly hit his head against a water tank until he died.

The woman’s father, the Imam of the village, had to escape from the village after these incidents. Because of being the spiritual leader, it was likely that he would be the next target for repression. Some forty people were arrested in a series of arrests in the days and weeks that followed, and arrests were still happening frequently when we visited some months later. Fourteen more people had been arrested in the two weeks preceding our visit.

When we proposed the idea of the camp, the village leader liked the idea of it, and appreciated the motivations behind it. But he said that he would not be able to give an immediate answer, it would need to be something which would have to be discussed amongst the villagers. With such an air of tension, where the next brutal wave of repression could appear at any moment, no decision could be taken lightly; the possible

consequences would always have to be considered.

back, Yala Province

We enter a man's house. He is still confined to bed, recovering from the six bullet wounds he received some weeks before.

He was first shot outside a shop in his village, by a man he did not know. He ran through the village to escape the gunshots, but was pursued, being shot six times in the process. Then something went wrong with his assailant's gun – it wasn't working any more. Bystanders noticed that suddenly he was unarmed and soon a mob set upon the man and beat him to death.

A dead body is less anonymous than someone who gets away. The state had to admit that the dead gunman was a paramilitary from the local camp. They denied, however, that he had been given orders to shoot the man we visited. They claimed that there must have been some personal feud between the two men. There is no possibility to ask a dead gunman what his motivation was. The injured man we visit, however, claims that he has no idea who his attacker could be – he had never seen him before in his life.



Everywhere we go, we hear traumatic stories of senselessness and suffering, but there are many more we didn't hear. That was one week on the road; our student friends do this every week. Incidents such as the ones we heard about are taking place on a daily basis in the villages and prison camps of Patani. And all we can do is listen, record the stories, write them down for others to read about. We cannot ask people about their resistance, nor even their opinions – to do so would be exceedingly dangerous for them.

We spend the last few days in Patani relaxing with our friends – visiting beaches and islands on which unsurprisingly we are the only tourists. Even doing this we need to be slightly wary – there are a lot of checkpoints around, you can't really feel safe anywhere. But soon we are hitch-hiking south across the border into Malaysia, trying to assimilate all we have seen and heard over the previous ten days, these brief glimpses into realities and struggles so unlike anything we are used to before.

Islam and the Struggle

If there is one thing that defines the culture, identity and struggle of the people of Patani, it is religion. People are devout here: nearly everyone ensures that they pray five times each day, and many people, both men and women, have studied Islamic thought. We arrived in Patani a couple of European anarchists who had rejected our own religions long before, and with plenty of political arguments against all organized religion. But we also showed up very naïve about the ideas and philosophy of Islam, and with no interest in making criticisms based on ignorance and prejudice. For us it was more interesting to go with an open attitude: to try and understand Islam in struggle, to try to understand Patani better but also get some new perspectives on conflicts around the world. Better also to look for points where we can find ourselves in solidarity, or that provide a possibility for useful exchange of opinion and experience, than stubbornly and arrogantly stick to our ideological guns. You can't expect to agree with everything.

First of all, it is impossible not to notice the strength people derive from their faith. Faced with daily repression, the very real possibility of death, and the material world decaying into a brutal violence, people need to find something stable, some source of meaning. Islam provides many people with personal strength, a spiritual space in which to reflect, and bonds of solidarity through a common identity. This in itself is an important reason to keep some of our views to ourselves: we have no right to challenge the means by which people cope with the horrors of war.

The state's war on Patani has become a war on Islam. They attack a pondok, claiming it is a school of terror, yet pondoks have been part of the culture since Islam arrived 500 years ago, a base for the peaceful study of spirituality. They target religious leaders and teachers, saying that they are fomenting rebellion. Organised rebel groups may or may not be trying to exploit people's sentiments to transform the conflict into a religious one. By attacking religious institutions, however, the Thai state is achieving exactly that.

One night we meet someone in a coffee shop who seems surprisingly open to talk about religion in the context of the popular struggle. Most people are too scared to do this and we are careful about what we ask. Yet we have a lot of questions. We want to know how the conflict affects the religion and the religiosity of the people. Are people

succumbing to a pressure to take on a more fundamentalist approach than before? How does what is happening to Islam in the rest of the world affect Islam in Patani? Is it a struggle for national liberation, or is it Jihad?

The answers that came were mostly theological and very utopian. A religious struggle is more powerful than a national liberation struggle, we are told, since the latter would be in the interests of whoever would run the country, whilst a religious struggle is for God alone. Islam is not just a religion to be practiced by individuals, but also describes the way society is to be ordered. Is the struggle a Jihad? Of course. As Patani was once an independent Islamic state that has been invaded, and because the freedom to practice Islam is so clearly being repressed, then two of the theological conditions for Jihad are met.

What about the fundamentalism? Between us we struggle to define what this word means outside the meaning it has been given by the architects of the terror war, and in the end give up. What about all the abuses that are carried out in the name of Islam, all the Muslim leaders that have not turned their countries into peaceful and spiritual Islamic states? How would an independent Patani be different? Well, he explains, the prophet taught that there are many ways within Islam, but only one true way. Many follow the wrong paths; the goal is to find the true way.

True Islam, the ordering of society laid out in the Koran, existed in the time of Mohammed, we are told, but probably no society since that time has reached that point. As a utopian vision it is inherently anti-capitalist, as many clauses in the scriptures discourage or prohibit the accumulation of wealth. What we are hearing is a far-away dream of revolution and perfection, the like of which we have become unaccustomed to hearing as the postmodern confusion challenges the belief in traditional left-wing revolutionary ideologies. It all presents many problems for us, most of which we don't bring up. The view of one person, dangerous yet interesting, is nevertheless a world away from how Islamic struggle is usually portrayed to westerners.

Patani Seen from Outside

Is it naïve of us to go into a war zone, and find everything so shocking and terrible that we can't believe that so little is known about it? What about in the rest of Thailand – is there a movement against the war? It seems there isn't. There have been several demonstrations in Bangkok against the war in Iraq, but there has never been one against the war in Patani. Why could this be?

Trying to read about the conflict we find very little in English, and what we find does not really match our experience. The conflict is often presented as a war between the Thai government and a Muslim separatist guerrilla army, rarely as a multi-faceted interplay of state repression and community resistance. In reality, the nature of the underground movements is known only to those involved. Yet the creation of 'separatists' as a singular identity, a political force apart from the community, serves to provide some legitimacy for the aggressions of the Thai government, as their policies of terror, torture and assassination become seen as unfortunate but necessary steps to be taken in the reality of a war.

Here's an example: Human Rights Watch's 2007 report "No-one is safe" focusing on the human rights abuses of 'the separatists' (the state they had criticized in an earlier report). The report's focus is how civilians are being increasingly targeted by separatist rebels, whether for their religion, for revenge, or for their position in Thai institutions (the bureaucracy, health and education systems), and alleging that this is connected with the deliberate radicalization of Islam by militants. Yet the tone in which these valid concerns are presented is often very reactionary, using emotive Islamophobic arguments which it assumes the reader can relate to:

"The generation of ethnic Malay Muslim men under age 30 constitutes the primary pool for recruitment into pejuang kemerdekaan Patani [=Patani freedom fighters]. Many of them were groomed for insurgency from a very young age during their education in tadika and ponoh [=pondok], where students are taught that Siam (present-day Thailand) invaded and occupied Patani Darulsalam, enslaving the people, suppressing Islamic practice, and destroying the ethnic Malay identity. The process of indoctrination is intensified at sessions of religious and political discussion after the evening prayer. The recruits are often scouted and persuaded to join by their friends, classmates, relatives, neighbors, or teachers."

Who will support a Muslim society's struggle for justice and self-determination when such respectable international organizations refer to their traditional institutions as centres for 'grooming' and 'indoctrination'? It seems that the authors have done little to challenge their prejudiced assumptions, and are happy to repeat the arguments that the Thai state routinely use to justify their own human rights abuses.

A combination of powerful actors has created a popular image of Islam for Western minds: repressive, violent, intolerant and conservative. If

people cannot learn to move past this then anywhere in the world where Muslims are repressed or in struggle becomes part of the same picture which we've all seen before and all know how to interpret. The next step is that reality starts to live up to the expectations.

A conflict cannot be dismissed because of the presence of actions or ideologies which don't fit with our own. We may well disagree with the choice of some insurgents to slaughter civilians, we may see the Sharia that many want to implement as an inevitably repressive means of control. Yet whilst these are serious differences which should not be ignored, they are not reasons to lose interest in what's going on. To do so would make the Thai government very happy.

Yet Patani is a land of nearly two million people; nearly two million different realities as each finds their own way to comprehend the fear, the confusion, the suffering, the past, present and future. It is a land politicized, with emotions, ideas and possibilities intensified by war, and the imperative to resist running high. While some succumb to brutalisation and cynically embrace opportunism, others conquer their fear and find meaning like never before as they struggle for liberation. How can that not be interesting?

Patani needs to breathe; it needs space to move. If violent chaos brings nothing more than apathy and fear, then oppression will continue, whether from current or new oppressors. But if people can seize the space they need to create together their resistance then they can begin to identify their desires, struggle for a liberation that is meaningful to them and their communities.

Right now there is no space – the state of emergency brackets all dissent together under the banner of separatism. To speak out is targeted just as much as planting bombs. The most prominent Muslim lawyer was disappeared in 2005; in December 2007 the husband of a woman who supported families of the Tak Bai massacre was slain. The climate of fear is very clearly aimed at the destruction of strong communities and empowering action – the state's appropriation of the space and scope for autonomous struggle.

This people must reclaim this space for themselves. It serves no purpose for outsiders to discuss how they align themselves, which group or ideology they can be in solidarity with. Instead we can choose to listen to the voices and screams of Patani, to hear some diverse truths from different people and let them be heard by others.

This is what is inspiring about the student movement, and a few NGOs which are active in Patani. Their goal is to monitor and condemn the actions of the Thai state on one hand, whilst also trying to counter the isolation and divisions of communities in the war zone. Always with the aim of supporting people's ability to take back the space for struggle, space to organize their autonomy and their resistance, to decide their own strategy and to seek out their own liberation. Any space taken away from the Thai government is space that people can take back for themselves. A women's group doesn't write off Islam as inevitably patriarchal, as others might, instead it listens to and supports the women of Patani, helps them take their own space and create their own agendas. The talk is of human rights, but not as some liberal concept of how a benign nation state should act, rather as a basic prerequisite for self-determination. At least that's how we understand it.

This is a much more practical way of relating to a conflict. Not to accept the prejudices and polarizations offered to us by terror-mongering governments and media, not to devalue the need for struggle by talking only about peace, not to despair and see only a hopeless situation. Instead to recognize the need that communities themselves have to construct their own future, and their potential to do this. It's no more than a direction to aim towards, and even this is difficult and dangerous, but should be something which we can all support.



