

## **The Red Drum massacres of 30 years ago**

The Red Drum massacres of 30 years ago represent excesses in counter insurgency that no one wants to revisit. But memories die hard and a healthy way of living with the horrors is to admit them.

About 3,008 people - accused of being communist suspects - are believed to have died after being pushed down 200-litre red drums alive or semi-conscious and incinerated. The atrocities began in military camps in a small village in Phattalung about two years before the events of October 13, 1973, and continued through 1975, according to a former special branch police officer.

To put to rest the souls of the villagers, thousands of people from the southern provinces of Phattalung, Surat Thani, Songkhla, Trang and Nakhon Si Thammarat converged for religious rites at a rubber plantation in Ban Kho Lung, in Phattalung's Si Nakarin sub-district on April 10 this year.

The plantation housed two companies of soldiers, one from the Senanarong barracks in Songkhla, and another from the Ingkayuth Boriharn barracks in Pattani.

"It was the policy of the Thanom Kittikachorn government to decisively flush out communist insurgents," said the former special branch police officer.

But the government never specified what "decisively" meant. While the soldiers at Ban Kho Lung resorted to pushing suspects down red drums before burning them, forces in Nakhon Si Thammarat killed entire households and left the bodies right there, he added.

"As subordinates, the officials merely followed orders. Mistakes were inevitable."

Police also played their part in the drastic suppression, killing suspects based on lists sent from intelligence units, he confirmed. They sent on some of the suspects to the military camps at Ban Kho Lung. But the officer emphasized he never witnessed any of the red drum executions.

The suppression waged by the police and the military drove thousands of villagers into the arms of the outlawed Communist Party of Thailand.

Fon Silamul, now a provincial councilor, was one of them, his operational patch the Phu Banthad mountain range. He remembers how fear convinced him to join the party after soldiers and police visited the homes of his relatives and took the men for questioning at Ban Kho Lung camp.

When relatives went to visit the men at the camp two days later, they were told that some had been released but others were now dead. Not one ever returned home.

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Mr. Fon said he could not remember a single man - "old or young" - remaining at home in the villages of Ban Na, Lamsin, Khao Khram, Ban Tone, Ban Loh Kwai, Ban Lam Nai, Ban Na Wong, Ban Rai Nua and Ban Kongla after news began to spread of the people accused of helping the CPT being burnt alive.

"What can villagers like us do when we are sandwiched between the government officials and the CPT? If we refused to cooperate with either side we would be in great danger.

"Taking sides with the CPT seemed to be the best way to survive in the circumstances when the police and security officers could not provide us with protection and everything was a real mess."

Mr. Fon remembers the hooligans and thieves from other areas who came to steal cattle most nights until there was not a single animal left in his village. The police feared for their own safety because they were outnumbered by these gangs. They refused to respond to calls to root out the thieves.

When people could not rely on government officials, they turned to members of the CPT united front who had settled in the area about "nine years earlier" (or in the early 1960s). These men and women promised to save them from military atrocities and maintain law and order.

Things were made worse for many villages as the lists of CPT members and hooligans prepared by the village headmen often contained the names of those with whom the headmen was in conflict. These were arrested but none were executed before 1970. Most underwent "re-education".

The mass killings reportedly began in 1970, when rangers with the Special Task Forces in Lop Buri and troops from Ingkayuth Borihan barracks were sent to crush communist insurgents.

When Mr. Fon and other villagers living near the Ban Ko Lung camp were asked how they knew those arrested later became victims of the flaming red drums, they said they could hear the roar of military trucks - used to drown out the screams of those being burnt alive - throughout the evenings after communist suspects were taken to the camp. The villagers would smell human flesh burning and see the fumes rise into the night sky.

"At the same time, some arrested villagers from Surat Thani were thrown from helicopters over the Phu Banthad mountain range," Mr. Fon alleges.

Asked if they had proof of the mass killing, Mr. Fon and other villagers said they found human skulls and bones scattered along Klong Muay, adjacent to Ban Kho Lung camp, after it was closed in late 1975.

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"Many children used the skulls to play football and we were told that ash and other remains were dumped in Lamphan, a part of Thalaе Luang in Phattalung."

The people of Phattalung did not know much about the Red Drum atrocities. All they knew was that soldiers were killing communists because they were at war with government troops.

He said that the figure of 3,008 people killed in Red Drum cases was compiled by a committee attached to the pro-democracy Student Federation of Thailand in 1975 who were sent to visit the area to collect information on the victims. There are no known copies of this report available now.

The villagers said they bore no grudges against those who brought so much terror into their lives. They had no desire to take revenge against police and the military.

"Let bygones be bygones, and let us patch up our differences of ideology," Mr. Fon said. "I fully understand that the troops involved in the Red Drum case had to follow orders and the villagers thought they were fighting for their survival and for a better life. No-one was really at fault as it was very common to see losses on both sides when each side claimed to fight for a better ruling system."

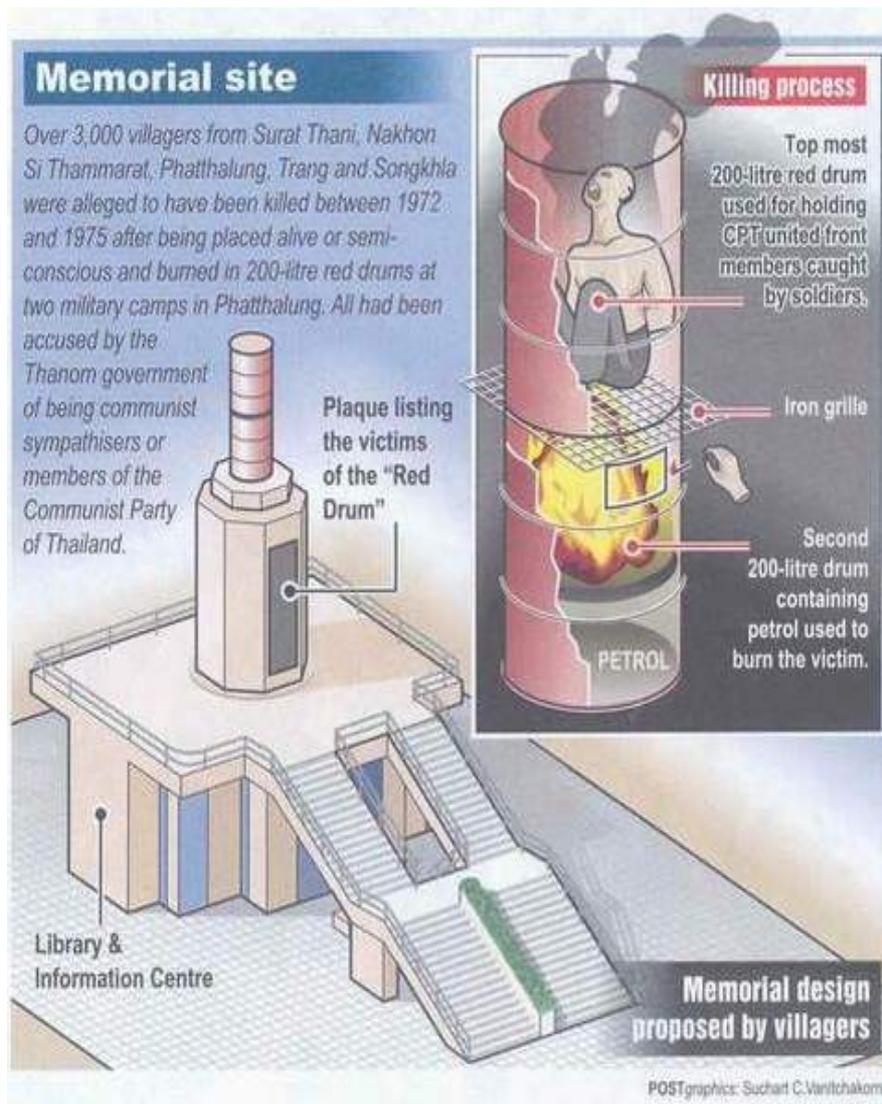
For the former special branch police officer, the events of 30 years ago may be seen as a case of over-reaction by the state. But for state officials then, danger lurked in every corner, especially in Kong La district, which they could not penetrate, not even when the deaths started mounting.

The Red Drum massacres ended in 1975, two years after the fall of the Thanom regime, and when Thailand established diplomatic relations with China, the officer said.

Though memories of the events of Ban Kho Lung are fading, most villagers who survived the horrors still refuse to talk about it.

Their only desire, they say, is to make merit in honour of those who perished in the red drums because "when those people were killed, they had no chance to see the monks for their last blessing".

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"We want the Red Drum case to be a lesson and not forgotten by our next generation that their ancestors sacrificed their lives for today's democracy." one said.

A group of villagers has already bought a piece of land for 450,000 baht to build an information centre and monument to those killed, a plan that apparently has run into opposition from state authorities, the former special branch officer among them.

But how else to repose the ghosts of the Red Drums?

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