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What Do We Know About Bangkok's Deadly Blast?

An initial analysis based on the evidence we have so far.

By Jeff Moore
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On August 17, at least one explosion occurred at 6:55 pm, Bangkok time, at the revered Erawan Shrine, located at the corner of Phloen Chit and Ratchadamri Road in Thailand. Officials have confirmed that at least 16 people were killed and more than 80 were wounded, though local media reports already suggest that the death toll could be much higher.

As authorities investigate, more details will come in, and the above information is expected to change. Accordingly, the party responsible has yet to be identified, but an initial analysis of the attack is possible based on what we know so far.

First, because of the location and timing of the explosion, the attackers meant for it to be an exceedingly high casualty event.

Location-wise, the Erawan Shrine is continually filled with tourists and worshippers. It's situated on a busy intersection; it's on the city's most popular shopping street; it's directly below a skywalk for Bangkok's BTS/Skytrain; and it's close to scores of eateries and the Grand Hyatt hotel. Hundreds of people pass by the shrine every 30 minutes on a daily basis.

Interestingly, this shrine is also next door to the Police Hospital, which itself is next to a major police headquarters building.

As for the timing, CCTV shows the explosion happening at 6:55 pm, when people in Bangkok are both getting off work and heading out for the evening.

Second, the apparent placement of the devices also indicates the attackers wanted a high casualty event. Initial photo interpretation of the blast site (photos posted by *The Independent* [here](#)) shows a concrete post of the shrine's fence nearly destroyed and the fence bent out toward the street (photo 6 of 10). This clearly indicates a blast occurred inside the fence line, which means an explosive device was placed inside the shrine's perimeter. Photos of deceased persons inside the shrine area bolster this hypothesis (photo 2 of 10).

Outside on the street, photographs from the same source show motorcycles mangled and cut in half (in the upper left of photo 7 of 10), indicating they were very close or next to the explosion. It also suggests one of the motorcycles might have carried a device – even though Thai police have said that the bomb was eventually planted at the location by the attackers instead of hidden in a motorcycle. The overturned motorcycle on the right hand side of the same photo (toward the middle of the intersection) is less damaged, indicating it was further from the blast. This places additional suspicion on the other motorcycles as potential bomb carriers. Again, this is just an initial photographic interpretation.

The core of the shrine – the ornate centerpiece and most exposed part of shrine – is not visibly damaged, again from photographs (2 of 10, and 10 of 10.) It is entirely possible that this indicates a bomb with directional blast qualities. TV reporting from the BBC that said some bodies were cut in half reinforce this initial supposition. The explosion (or explosions) seems to have been positioned low to catch victims in their midsections.

There is no reporting yet on the type of explosive used, but it is apparent that it was powerful. Commercial and/or military grade explosives cannot be ruled out. At the same time, the southern insurgency has produced some exceedingly powerful bombs out of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil, commonly referred to as ANFO. These usually use commercial or military grade explosives as boosters to initiate the explosion. Blast residue will reveal the type of compound used within 24 hours or less. Authorities will know well before the public does.

And while it's entirely too early to assign blame, careful speculation is warranted.

One possibility is that this was an anti-government attack organized by radical factions of the “Red Shirt” supporters of former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who was toppled by the ruling junta in a coup last May. If so, it would be a surprising escalation. Red-related factions have staged attacks that produced casualties in the past. However, while their arson attacks in Bangkok and other provinces have caused incredible property damage, they have not resulted in high body counts. A high-profile and higher casualty attack like this one could cause the main faction of the reds to lose the moral high ground in the eyes of the Thai public.

Another explanation is that this was the work of Muslim separatists in the south of the country who have been waging an insurgency against the government for decades. If this was an insurgent attack, it would also represent a major escalation of that conflict. While it is unclear why the insurgents would choose this particular time to escalate, they have struck outside the confines of the insurgency zone before. In May 2013, a presumed student faction of the insurgency set off a bomb next to Ramkhamhaeng University. Other insurgent cells attacked Danok and Phuket in 2014. In keeping with this hypothesis, attacking a popular Buddhist/Hindu shrine is indeed in line with the more radical veins of the southern insurgency.

Overall, both the reds and the insurgents do have an incentive to pressure the sitting government to accept their demands. Inflicting damage on Thailand's economy, its tourism industry, and the reputation of the ruling government would benefit both groups.

But if the casualty counts are true, this will be one of the worst – if not the worst – terror attack in Bangkok's history, and one of the worst in Thailand's history. This in turn begs the question as to whether either group – anti-government factions or the southern insurgents – would be willing to risk this high casualty count and the attendant consequences in order to advance their broader objectives.

The alternative explanation is that this is an attack by a different terror group or political faction altogether. Might it have been the work of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)? If so, why Thailand, and why now? Alternatively, could this possibly have been the work of a mentally distraught individual?

No matter who the culprit is, one thing is for sure; the Thai national security establishment will react, and retribution will be decisive – maybe not too public, but certainly decisive. The gloves will come off.