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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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FROM : American Consulate, Udorn DATE: October 9, 1973

SUBJECT : The RTG Through the Eyes of an Irreverent Governor

REF : Chiangmai Please Pass Kho Khe Air Station

SUMMARY: The Royal Thai Government (RTG) is not dealing effectively with such problems as agricultural production, irrigation, psychological operations, and overpopulation, according to Samran Butsapawanit, the new governor of Lampang province. In a frank conversation with Consulate officers in August, when he was governor of Chaiyaphum province, Samran explained how he had taken the initiative to launch several projects on his own in the face of RTG intransigence. He also complained that nowadays RTG officials moved about quickly in cars on new roads and no longer spent the time to stay overnight with the villagers to get to know them, learn about their problems, and help solve them, as he had many years ago when he was a district officer. Altogether, Samran gives the impression of being an intelligent, well read, resourceful, and forthright senior RTG official, in contrast to many of his fellow governors in the Northeast. END SUMMARY.

Samran is a low key man who makes his points with irony and understatement. For instance, he noted that he had read in the latest issue of Time magazine that Americans were now eating buffalo meat because of the high price of beef in the U.S. Thai, he said, had been eating buffalo for some time and he was confident that the Americans could make the dietary adjustment with little difficulty and perhaps even come to like buffalo.

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AGRICULTURE: CHAIYAPHUM'S MAIN PROBLEM

In Chaiyaphum, the Governor said, the biggest problem was the low level of agricultural production primarily because of a lack of rain. There had been more rain this year than in 1972, but the farmers still did not have enough water, particularly in Kaset Sombun and Phu Khieo districts. Samran said that the problem there had been aggravated by the construction of the new Nam Phrom Dam in Chaiyaphum which had changed the direction of the stream that formerly provided water for these districts. He thought that the shortage of water faced by the farmers in these two districts was too high a price to pay for the 70,000 kilowatts of electricity that were generated by the dam to provide power to the towns and cities. It is difficult to eat electricity, he commented, when there is no water or food.

The Governor in fact was generally skeptical about the benefits of dam construction in the Northeast. Dams such as Nam Phrom had been built solely to generate electricity which, he said, was not in short supply in the Northeast. Such dams benefitted the relatively wealthy people in towns but not the poor farmers who made up the bulk of the population. In some instances dams had been built for both power and irrigation, but the electric generating plants had been installed and begun operating first, while the canals to provide water for the farmers had not yet been completed. Even these multipurpose dams and some built solely for irrigation tended to provide water to the farmers only during the rainy season.

STEPS TO RELIEVE WATER SHORTAGE

Governor Samran has tried several means of relieving the drought conditions in Chaiyaphum. He arranged for artificial rain making planes to fly over Chaiyaphum, but they were of little help because they couldn't control where the rain fell and it often did so outside the province. He also used funds from the Accelerated Rural Development (ARD) budget to purchase water pumps to bring water from the river into the paddies. The Governor also bought simple well drilling equipment which the villagers can operate themselves. He feels this will get water to the farmers faster than if he asks Bangkok to send in a large well drilling rig which would take time to be approved and moved to Chaiyaphum. Several of the smaller rigs can also dig wells in a number of villages for the same cost as the larger one in a few.

Governor Samran has also encouraged farmers to plant crops such as tapioca which require less water than rice. The Agricultural Promotion Department in Bangkok, however, has opposed this idea because other provinces have already produced a bumper crop of tapioca and the price has dropped considerably. Nevertheless, Samran went to Bangkok and personally purchased tapioca roots. He said that since there was not enough water for the rice he preferred to take a chance on the marketability of tapioca rather than have the farmers do nothing, which in effect was what the Agricultural Promotion Department was recommending.

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GOVERNOR HOPES FOR RETURN OF POLICE SPECIAL ACTION FORCE

Samran said that there were no Communist Terrorists in Chaiyaphum but there were gangsters in the northern districts of the province. To suppress these criminals he wanted to get back the Provincial Police Special Action Force platoon which was based in Chaiyaphum but had been assigned temporarily to Sakon Nakhon for counter-insurgency operations several months ago. There were not enough other police available in Chaiyaphum, he went on, to handle organized gangs of criminals.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE OPERATIONS

Samran said that Chaiyaphum had its fair share of movies, leaflets, and radio programs designed to boost the Government's image. He felt, however, that these activities had little effect on the villagers. The four man Provincial Psyops Team would simply drive into a village, show its movies, and give a propaganda talk, and then leave without spending much time rapping with the people. He also felt that some district officers (DO's) regarded psyops as a substitute for personal contacts between themselves and the villagers. Samran said that in the old days when he was a DO he didn't use movies or leaflets but traveled regularly among the villages and took an active interest in the village problems. He said that in those days the roads were poor or non-existent and it was difficult to go to distant villages and return in a single day. Thus DO's often stayed overnight in the villages. One ironic by-product of improved transportation had been that it had made the DO's more distant from the villagers.

CRITICISM OF POLICE

Samran felt it unfortunate that the responsibility for investigations in civil cases at the district level had been moved from the DO's to the police. The people, he thought, were more likely to bring problems to a trusted DO than to the police. The present arrangement meant that popular grievances, including those against the police themselves, festered until a flagrant violation of the law created a major problem. The older arrangement often enabled the DO's to solve problems between villagers while they were still minor disagreements.

OPPOSES CHANGES IN LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

Samran criticized the recent changes which forced village chiefs and Kamnans (chiefs of Tambons consisting of several villages) to retire at 60 and which required new Kamnans to be popularly elected. He preferred the traditional system in which the village chiefs elected one of their own number as the Kamnan. Mandatory retirement was unworkable, he said, because the villagers who traditionally respect the wisdom of age would continue to look up to the older village chiefs and Kamnans

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even after they retired and would not transfer their loyalties to the younger men who were elected. Thus the retired village and Tambon chiefs could easily obstruct the work of their younger replacements.

HILL TRIBE PROBLEMS

Governor Samran told us that in the mountains of Southwestern Chaiyaphum there were a few villages of Lawe hill tribe people whom he had visited on numerous occasions. The Lawe who are related to the Mon have no written language of their own. Samran has promoted the construction of schools and building of roads into the villages to help integrate the Lawe into Thai society but he had had difficulty finding teachers willing to work in these remote villages. He hoped that in time the attractiveness of the Lawe women might help in the recruitment of male teachers.

POPULATION PROBLEM

While Samran has tried to use the resources at hand to solve a host of immediate problems, he is pessimistic about the long run, particularly the rapidly increasing population in Thailand, which he felt in time would dwarf all other difficulties. Given the past record of the RTG's lack of responsiveness to basic problems of this nature, he felt it most unlikely that the government would bestir itself to deal with the population problem in time. The top RTG leaders did not now support a birth control program, he said, because they wanted a larger population and did not see this as a future problem. Samran said he had studied the question of population growth in Chaiyaphum and had tried to promote the use of the intrauterine device in the province but a great many women complained about unpleasant "after effects" of the loops.

PROSPECTS

When we talked to him, Samran thought that he would remain in Chaiyaphum until he retired a few years hence. His transfer to the larger Northern province of Lampang, while not a giant step up the RTG ladder, does constitute RTG recognition of his competence if not of his irreverence. Samran, who previously visited the U.S. on a U.S. grant, speaks some English and reads economic texts in that language. U.S. Air Force personnel at the Kho Kha Air Station in Lampang and other American officials should find the new Governor an easy person to deal with because of his intelligence, friendship to Americans, and willingness to speak frankly with them.

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