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Submitted with this airgram is an assessment of the communist insurgency in the North which Vice Consul Chiang Mai, James R. Bullington, prepared prior to his departure. [redacted] Mr. Bullington has followed the insurgency quite closely for more than two years. His report is a succinct and careful analysis and quite useful as a basis for further discussion and analysis.

MASTERS

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INSURGENCY IN NORTH THAILAND

I. GROWTH AND STALEMATE

From its beginnings in about 1967, through 1971 and well into 1972, the communist insurgency in North Thailand appeared to be making steady, albeit not spectacular, progress. By early 1972, there were well over 2,000 full-time jungle soldiers, plus more than 1,000 village militiamen -- this represented an increase of about a third over early 1971 estimates. Armament was good and getting better, with the introduction of 82mm mortars and RPG rockets. Perhaps most importantly, in terms of the Maoist formula for successful Asian insurgencies, several mountain base areas had been established and made secure. Their security was most dramatically demonstrated by the failure of operation Phu Kwang.

In short, the insurgent threat was becoming increasingly serious, especially in view of the RTG's demonstrated inability to cope with it. At least by mid-1972 Phase I of the insurgency -- the establishment of secure base areas -- seemed to be largely completed. It appeared that the time had arrived for Phase II -- expansion of the mass base into the lowlands and countryside, with the objective of eroding RTG control and gradually isolating government strength in and around the cities.

By mid-1973, however, there has yet to be any indication of significant CT expansion into the lowlands. Indeed, there are strong indications that the insurgency has failed to make any real progress during the past year:

---Order of battle estimates show about the same armed strength as last year. (A substantial increase in the number of "regulars" was achieved mostly by integration and redesignation of previously recruited militiamen).

---There has been no overall growth in CT control of population or territory.

---The frequency of CT attacks and general level of violent activity have declined.

Consequently, it now appears that the insurgency threat, while perhaps undiminished, has certainly not grown in consonance with past CT performance and the expectations it engendered For the moment, at least, "stalemate" is probably the best one-word description of the insurgency situation in the North. Why has this come about?

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II. REASONS FOR STALEMATE

There are several apparent reasons for the communists' failure to make significant progress during the past year:

A. Intrinsic resistance of lowland Thai. For several years many RTG officials in the North have dismissed the insurgency as essentially a hilltribe phenomenon. It can never be a serious threat to RTG sovereignty, they contend, because of the northern Thai peasant's great love for Buddha, King and family, and his consequent intrinsic resistance to communist subversion. He has never been a political revolutionary, and he cannot readily be made into one.

While this reasoning may be nothing more than an excuse for complacency, and at best seems unduly optimistic, it also appears to have some basis in what the communists might term "objective conditions". Specifically:

---From the point of view of the ethnic Thai northerner, the insurgency is almost wholly external, since it is primarily composed of hilltribers led by Sino-Thai from the central plains and the Northeast. (See Chiang Mai's A-05) this greatly limits its appeal.

---The northern peasant is largely apolitical, and the communists have yet to find themes which could politicize him. He is not particularly concerned about the "puppet clique" or use of Thai soil for "U. S. agression" in Indo-China.

---While there are serious economic and social problems (i.e., incoming distribution, tenancy, corruption, etc.), they have not yet become politically important. The sense of desperation and outrage which creates revolutionaries does not seem to exist.

B. Internal insurgent problems. Not only have the insurgents encountered serious problems in expanding into the lowlands; they have also experienced growing difficulty during the past year in maintaining control of the hilltribe population in their base areas. Defections have not been serious in terms of absolute numbers, but it is clear that the CPT leadership has been forced to devote increasing amounts of time and resources to holding on to what they already control. This has almost certainly limited their ability to expand. Moreover, should the RTG ever develop the means to exploit it, this widespread

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hilltribe disaffection represents a serious vulnerability to the secure CT bases. Maoist doctrine would dictate that this vulnerability should be eliminated before serious expansion can proceed.

C. Failure to mobilize the "petty intellectuals". In the long run, probably the most serious limiting factor on the insurgents' ability to expand into the lowlands is a dearth of capable, dedicated, local leadership. This can in turn be traced to their failure to mobilize the northern "petty intellectuals", the schoolteachers, the students, the minor bureaucrats, the small merchants, etc.

In almost all successful revolutions, the primary leadership has come from neither the higher classes nor from among the workers or peasants, but from this group of "petty intellectuals". Examples abound: Lenin, Mao, Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, etc. Moreover, not only the top leadership but also the vital mid-level and lower leadership is normally drawn from among this group. There is no indication that the CPT has developed any significant support among the "petty intellectuals" of the north, and until it does, it is most unlikely to be able to develop the kind of leadership necessary for the revolution it seeks to create.

D. RTG CI efforts. It would be comforting to think that the RTG's counterinsurgency programs have played an important part in curbing communist expansion and achieving the stalemated situation which now exists. In a sense, they have: the enemy's problems and shortcomings have been so profound as to make even the weakest opposition at least marginally effective. However, should the communists ever be able to overcome their present difficulties, there is no reason to believe that the present CI effort would be able to contain the insurgency within its present limits. In effect, the RTG continues to give the CT the opportunity to correct their weaknesses.

III. FUTURE PROSPECTS

In light of the above situation and anlysis, what are the prospects? What can the CPT do to break the stalemate and move on into a more advanced phase of the insurgency by expanding into the lowlands? What can the RTG do to prevent this from happening?

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A. CPT options. Assuming that the status quo is unacceptable to the communist leadership, which it almost certainly is, there are several alternative courses of action available in the coming months:

---Seek greatly increased external assistance, probably in the form of more Chinese advisers and weaponry and Pathet Lao "volunteers" with which to seize control of isolated lowland areas near present CT bases. If such areas could be held long enough (as in Cambodia and Laos), it might be possible to organize a genuinely local insurgent force to carry on the revolution. Such a course of action would be extremely risky, however, and there is little reason to believe the CPT's external allies would support it.

---Use present, mostly hilltribe, forces to execute a few military "spectaculars", such as attacking a district town or cutting major north-south road and rail links. This might demonstrate continued CT prowess and boost internal morale, while seriously discomfiting the RTG; but it would not solve the more fundamental problems of developing local leadership and popular support for the insurgency. Moreover, it might galvanize the RTG into mounting a more vigorous CI program.

--- Use existing forces for frequent harassing type forays and ambushes in isolated lowland areas, thus bottling up RTG officials and security forces in their owns and compounds. Then, particularly at night, there would be a good opportunity to build up a political infrastructure, perhaps through increased use of terrorism. This would be an orthodox course of action which proved effective in Vietnam and elsewhere, but in view of the CPT's lack of effective local leadership cadre and other problems discussed in Section II, it would not appear to be very promising for North Thailand at the present time.

---While attempting to hold and further consolidate existing base areas, switch to primary emphasis on peaceful struggle and clandestine organization in the lowlands, in effect calling off offensive armed activity for the time being. This would involve infiltration of universities, and especially such institutions as teacher training schools, to recruit the "petty intellectuals" so desperately needed for leadership positions in the insurgency; penetrating RTG agencies and

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other legitimate organizations; and mounting intensified propaganda attacks against the American presence and the current government. This course of action might be doctrinally justified as a "step" backward to make two forward"; it could lull the RTG into further complacency; and it could fit in with broader international developments, such as a putative RTG-PRC rapproachment. At least from the vantage point of North Thailand, this appears to be the most potentially dangerous strategy the CPT could adopt at this time. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the communists are even considering diminishing the armed struggle nor that they could successfully implement such a strategy should they adopt it.

B. RTG goals. Unlike the CPT, the RTG can succeed in the long run by simply avoiding failure. Its strategy can, therefore, be essentially defensive. (This is not to dispute the point that the best defense would be an offense that would eliminate the CT and their bases. Such an approach has been tried, however, and proved unsuccessful). Assuming that the RTG is no longer relying primarily on its conventional military forces to eliminate the insurgency, as is almost certainly the case, what should be its primary goals?

---Avoid serious national-level political or economic upheavals. Any extended crisis, such as a prolonged succession struggle when the current leadership steps down, could create opportunities for rapid expansion of the insurgency.

---Improve economic and social conditions. It is highly debatable whether or not this would have any direct impact on limiting the insurgency. It could, however, have great indirect effect by blunting CPT propaganda appeals and efforts to recruit the "petty intellectuals".

---Mount a more effective CI effort, including a serious defector program, more imaginative counter-guerrilla tactics, and improved RTA performance. (For fuller discussion of possibilities along these lines, see Chiang Mai's 113 and 119). This would threaten and hopefully erode the CT secure bases and thus keep the communists on the defensive.

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