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FROM : American Embassy Bangkok

DATE: SEPTEMBER 7, 1971

SUBJECT : Overview of the Thai Insurgency

REF : A) Bangkok 10711; B) Bangkok A-320; C) Bangkok A-73

SUMMARY

As the Thai insurgency completes its sixth year, it is time to take a searching look at the inroads made on Thai society, prospects for the future, and the effect on regional relationships. The insurgency has developed a more realistic, longer-term strategy: enjoying relative security in its primary base areas, an adjacent village infrastructure is being formed, already manifest in the Northeast as a local political movement. The government has responded with a much more coherent strategy, consistent with Mission advice, and is taking steps to obtain more mileage from resources assigned to counterinsurgency. The next five years promises a "struggle for the village", as government expansion from the center comes to grip with this social frontier. The larger significance of the insurgency lies in the strain it can apply to the central power structure, the advantage it can take from any extraneous crisis in Thai life, and the leverage afforded China in influence upon Thailand. END SUMMARY.

I. The Communist Perspective. While the insurgency has grown slowly (failing in initial efforts at mass expansion), the movement is now firmly established in Thailand. In all three outlying areas of the country, centers of revolutionary warfare faithfully follow Maoist doctrine and the leadership of the Communist Party of Thailand. The insurgency looks to China for direction and support -- yet has kept a sufficiently indigenous appearance to be accepted as compatible with Thai nationalism, at least by many opponents of the present administration.

The immediate Party aim is to consolidate rural "liberated areas" as bases for expanding political/military action. These bases, located near vulnerable frontiers, could receive alien reinforcement, but we do not expect outside help of a magnitude that would

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jeopardize the Thai identity of the insurgency. The Communist movement has made few attempts to attack American bases or personnel, though it criticizes the Thanom Government for military cooperation with us. The Communists have seen the insurgency as serving long-term goals within Thailand, not to be dissipated as an adjunct to the IndoChina struggle.

In the past year the insurgency has:

a) Improved significantly in organization;

b) Frustrated the sporadic government offensives against its mountain redoubts;

c) Obtained better arms and financial support and begun systematic training of recruits inside Thailand;

d) Developed a village infrastructure in the original center of the insurgency (the Phuphan Mountains), for the first time organizing public demonstrations hostile to district officials, halting development projects and the elementary school system - as yet in a limited area of the North-east. They term this "building Peoples' State Power".

The insurgency is not in the short term a serious threat to the stability of the country or to survival of the government. It exists in rural areas into which the Thai polity has not yet been extended effectively, or where the RTG has actively alienated the population and terror of the insurgents is the ruling influence on the local population. About 80 of the 632 districts in Thailand are seriously affected. As far as we can tell, Communist activity in the towns is simply supportive of the rural insurgency, not yet an urban movement.

Although leadership of the Party is able, and comprises figures with substantial political roots in the country, it is deliberately self-effacing and seeks no charismatic appeal. The Party is also limited by rigid Maoist orthodoxy, and argues no pragmatic platform (such as for a "common front"), aimed at dividing the Establishment or even the organized opposition. The Party's naked aim of "seizing state power completely" would appear to repel other dissident groups. All this could change, of course, with the increased flexibility which may be emerging in Peking, enabling the Party to exploit politically some future crisis in Thai society (depression, prolonged struggl over succession, an unpopular military coup or reverses abroad).

Even on present course, the insurgents are building a strong rural organization which, within five years, could challenge government authority over certain province-sized areas in strategic positions, and interdict RTG use of key overland communications. The insurgency is stilllocalized after six years of struggle but is improving its techniques, survives in vigorous form in the face of the RTG counterinsurgency effort, and is a serious servitude on Thailand's resources -- with dangerous potential for the future

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Counterinsurgency Progress

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II. The Interests of Peking and Hanoi

The insurgency serves Chinese foreign policy by:

a) Helping in the active, forward defense of the Chinese frontier. The Chinese regular forces on the Nam Beng Road are within 50 miles of the "liberated areas" of North Thailand;

b) Focussing the attention of the Thai (and the influential Chinese minority here) on China's ability to affect the course of events inside Thailand;

c) Successfully demonstrating Maoist revolutionary warfare;

d) Drawing Thai resources away from aid to non-Communist neighbors.

The foregoing objectives are likely to be pressed by any Chinese government over a long period of time, regardless of temporary reverses. As the insurgency does not emphasize initiatives against Thai forces, aiming rather at extension of a covert village infrastructure and use of indigenous resources wherever possible, we do not expect the insurgency to wither away as the result of an accommodation between Bangkok and Peking. The insurgency already has its own momentum, and does not depend upon large-scale support from abroad.

North Vietnam has limited its role in the Thai insurgency to external training and facilities, deferring (it seems) to Chinese priorities, despite the large Vietnamese colonies in the Northeast and Hanoi's stake in the air war from Thai bases. Vietnamese appear to have been responsible for the three minor raids on U.S. bases in Thailand, but they were poorly manned and abortive.

III. Counterinsurgency Progress

The Thai leadership heretofore has taken a long-term view of the insurgency, often to the neglect of measures at the point of contact with the terrorists. Priority has been given to modernizing central institutions and spreading their effect outward from the core of Thai society (the Central Plains), into the main population and resource centers of the rural regions.

This aspect of the Thai effort is working well, and has been a generally satisfactory consequence of U.S. assistance programs. Communications have been built up rapidly; public and private investment in province and district centers have followed, bringing visible social and political benefits. The national budget now gives the outlying regions a proportionate share, though rural areas are still far from parity with the Central Plains in per capita income. Administration has been improved through systematic training and better selection of officials. The re-establishment in 1969

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of representative institutions has weakened Communist appeal by providing legal outlet for discontent and aspirations for change. The military and police forces have been outfitted with a wide range of modern equipment from the U.S., are developing the organization required to support it, and the military have fielded substantial forces abroad (e.g., Vietnam), in mutual security programs. Counterinsurgency training has been placed on a sound, systematic basis, and experience gained in counter-guerrilla tactics.

But the government has had little effect as yet on rural village life, where the main insurgent effort is directed. The RTG is endeavoring to extend itself into village life on a regular basis, while the insurgent infrastructure has grown to the point where some District Officers are being challenged in their very seats of authority. The nation finds this stage very difficult to deal with, as it makes demands for local leadership, initiative, resources and organization of effort that are not readily available in this high-centralized and possibly over-extended country. The next five years of the insurgency will probably deserve to be called "The Struggle for the Village."

IV. RTG Strategy

The "1972 Communist Suppression Policy" (FTB 17,536) shows a remarkable clarification of Thai planning strategy in the past year. It states:

1) There will be no lessening of Red China's threat to Thailand or support of the insurgency as a result of anticipated political developments.

2) There is uncertainty over the course of U.S. policy toward Indochina, with accompanying trend of declining support for development of Thai armed forces. U.S. and other nations will certainly not participate in Thai CI operations.

3) The insurgency situation in Thailand will worsen due to limited military intervention and domestic subversion, although no overt aggression against Thailand appears likely. Intensity of insurgency activity and escalation will increase in the North, Northeast, Mid and Far South and Central regions, in that order.

4) The enemy will make a determined effort to gain complete control of Sayaburi Province, Laos.

5) A continuing threat to Thai security will exist along Cambodian border areas.

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The Policy involves the armed forces in internal security as a "first priority mission": the Thai military is clearly directed against the armed bands of the insurgency in an offensive posture, and instructed to take direct or supporting action against other insurgency components. (The concept also provides for employment of previously unused First Army elements from Bangkok, giving all RTA elements a share of CI experience.) Specific tasks include:

1) Limited offensive action by RTA elements against insurgent forces and bases outside Thai borders.

2) Sustained offensive operations against insurgent forces and bases in all major stronghold areas.

3) Support of paramilitary and village security forces through training and joint exercises in order to turn over responsibility for population security to civilian authorities by 30 September 1972.

Several guidelines are established to implement the concept, based on previous lessons learned and deficiencies noted in past operations.

1) Greater emphasis on intelligence, expanding networks at village and district levels, aimed at CT infrastructure and auxiliary support elements.

2) Increased patrolling and aerial reconnaissance to enhance tactical military intelligence.

3) Maintenance of steady pressure on insurgent armed elements by recurring offensive operations of company size.

4) Development of responsive commands with adequate manpower, effective communications and good intelligence.

5) Increased use of long range reconnaissance and small units.

This guidance (which reflects much of the collective U.S. Mission advice offered in recent months) represents radical improvement over such statements in previous years, and would permit a more efficient use of resources. We perceive preliminary signs that the policy is indeed being implemented, though essentially the severe existing limitations on junior leadership, supply and operating budget remain unimproved. These resources have been insufficient to permit sustained operations with forces already deployed in CI. Many of the critical details constitute long-standing problems, solution of which is hampered by a dual resource squeeze:

a) The military is sharing the general budgetary stringency. Although the Army has begun a long-term expansion of force structure, its total funds for the coming fiscal year have been slightly decreased.

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There is also a growing overhead for operation and maintenance of the weapons systems received under military assistance. The net effect is to reduce CI operational resources.

b) The armed forces are giving more command emphasis and cadre resources to external considerations (e.g., Laos and Cambodia).

Although the role of the Army in counterinsurgency - now targetted more clearly on the main insurgent armed bands - will continue to be crucial, the government is endeavoring to increase the role of the police and militia under the governor's civil authority, as described in Bangkok 10711.

The governor is not a direct subordinate of the regional Communist Suppression Director (army commander), nor is his control of the police unequivocal. In fact, the governor's executive powers are largely implicit. This vagueness can be quite a useful tool in the hands of an extraordinary governor, but it handicaps many. The insurgency tends to victimize the routine bureaucrat, to exploit areas historically advantageous to dissident movements, and to take advantage of the dispersion of Thai programs. The rural administration needs a stronger executive structure at the province and district level, particularly if the governor is to assume greater responsibility for local security, as envisaged in the 1972 plan. The insurgency has been called by a Thai savant "organizational warfare", a form of struggle in which the Thai establishment has been weakest at its lowest levels.

The quality of civil leadership in security sensitive areas has improved markedly in response to the challenge of the insurgency. The District Officer Academy has provided an outstanding program of instruction for nine months to nearly 80 percent of the officers now holding this critical position in communist-threatened areas, and the Community Development offi training program has been almost as successful. There has been a steady improvement in the quality of governors, appointed from many relevant RTG departments. We understand that the RTG now contemplates a wholesale change in the disposition of governors and key department heads, which in our preliminary view represents important changes for the better.

As a first try at incorporating the village into the Thai polity, the civil authority is training younger assistants to the traditional village chief, charged with improving ties to the central administration. A conce of village self-defense is being worked out in the same villages. But thi effort still lacks resolution, and is handicapped by continuing weakness in the civil paramilitary force (the VDC) which is assigned to provide the next higher security link. The Army is beginning to retrain the VDC, but except where local leadership is unusually good the insurgency has successfully made this program a target.

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The police has improved its operational leadership, worked on a better public image, and established a good national CI training program. It is not yet concentrated sufficiently on the insurgency, though our vigorous efforts in this direction promise some success. The police have made few inroads on the village infrastructure of the Communists, in contrast to success against the Communist leadership in Bangkok.

Investment in rural road building, with American materiel aid and World Bank loans, is bringing rural villages into contact with national life. (85% of Northeast villages are now within a day's round trip by oxcart from a road, whereas less than a quarter were open to such influence when the insurgency began). Yet a serious dilemma has been reached: after building a road to a village, what can the government realistically do (in thousands of such cases) to take advantage of access, and relate it to further development?

Minority peoples are beginning to receive assistance and trust on their own social and cultural terms, as a response to the insurgency. The arming of hill folk to defend their own villages is working well in limited areas, but ethnic distrust and weak communications in the Northern mountains are still shortcomings in the CI effort.

But the greatest problem is one of overall coordination and direction of the counterinsurgency effort. The strongly centralized structure of the Thai bureaucracy, and the somewhat vague, "national consensus" style of Prime Minister Thanom's administration have worked against firm, coherent direction of the participating agencies. The Communist Suppression Coordination Center has sought to draw civil and police authorities into voluntary collaboration with CI planning -- a frustrating process, which only recently promises some success. For the first time, the governors, police and military leaders will meet with RTG leaders for a full week of joint discussion of counterinsurgency plans programs - in specific operational terms.

The loose coalition which sustains the present administration has often divided within itself over strains produced by rural development. The police and civil administration, for example, are directly divided in parliament over control of the criminal investigation process at the rural district level -- just at a time when they are expected to increase their unity in directing attention to the insurgent infrastructure. This is only one example of the many pressures arising from rapid change in rural life that demand the government's attention. In taking the socially revolutionary step of assuming responsibility for the inner life of the village, which the insurgency is forcing it to do, the government is encountering very complex issues which it cannot solve rapidly. There is some danger that this strain may be reflected in turbulence at the center of Thai political life.

V. Conclusion

The vital interest of Thailand is to stifle the insurgency while it is still manageable. It is also in the U.S. interest, insofar as we seek to stabilize Southeast Asia and limit calls upon our resources. A

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related matter is whether Thailand can establish enough internal stability to be a vital factor in the future of Southeast Asia beyond its frontiers.

The insurgency is expanding, and improving its techniques, while the government is slowly improving its performance and extending its control. The outcome will depend upon the RTG ability to continue to improve its focus on internal security. An economic or political crisis at home, or excessive commitments abroad, could open the way for major insurgent gains. The enemy, for its part, could escalate the threat by increasing external intervention, thus changing the "rules", but we expect the insurgency to develop along current lines for the present.

The next five years will be a critical period in determining the issue and the return on our investment in Thai internal stability. While U.S. assistance now is only a small (and declining) proportion of the Thai effort, it has an important rationalizing effect, helping the Thai to coordinate and integrate their total CI program. It is important psychologically, and as a vehicle for that limited advice which the Thai still need.

NEWMAN

(While concurring in and contributing to this assessment MACTHAI wishes to observe that while the insurgency initially grew slowly, armed insurgent strength and the level of activity has doubled during the last two years. During the past year insurgent organizational improvements have included the formation of new area commands, main force battalions and village military units coupled with increasing number of Sino-Soviet small arms, crew served weapons and mines.)