ENCLOSURE TO
A-715 FROM
BANGKOK

ADDRESS BY U.S. AMBASSADOR LEONARD UNGER
AT
AMERICAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE LUNCHEON
BANGKOK, THAILAND
Wednesday, January 17, 1968

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I appreciate this opportunity to meet with members of the American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand, and welcome the invitation to carry on the tradition of an annual appearance by the American Ambassador. Much of what I have to say today will relate to our relations, as Americans, with the Thais in whose country we are living as guests. While the record of Thai-American relations speaks for itself, generally, sight tends to be lost from time to time of certain basic realities which I would like to put in better perspective. I should state at the outset, that in addition to speaking as the President's personal representative to Thailand, I am expressing deep, personal convictions based upon experiences over the past ten years--first in Thailand, then in Laos, and more recently in Washington, where I dealt with many Southeast Asian matters, particularly the problem of Vietnam.

I

Vietnam, by almost any standard, is the most absorbing and complex issue in American political life today. The issue is whether the nations of Southeast Asia shall be able to set their own independent course and be free of subversive aggression. Thailand, therefore, also attaches extreme importance to the outcome of the Vietnamese struggle. Its determination equals that of the United States to bring about a final settlement in Vietnam which assures national freedom and fosters the return of peaceful order to Southeast Asian affairs.

The government of Thailand has made its position unmistakably clear. It has done this through active participation in collective defense arrangements under SEATO. Thailand has also enabled the U.S. to bring its air power to bear against North Vietnam and its infiltration into the South. Thailand has sent troops of its own to help defend South Vietnam, and it has taken firm measures to protect its own people against those assaulting not only South Vietnam and large sectors of Laos today, but Thailand itself.

Communist hostility toward Thailand is but one of many reflections of this nation's strategic importance in the total Southeast Asian picture. Ironic as it may seem, another measure of Thailand's key role in Southeast Asian events is this country's growing prominence in the American controversy over Vietnam.

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In the cross fire of political battles over Vietnam, many Americans naturally want to examine our commitments elsewhere in the area, and to assess the dependability of those with whom we have aligned ourselves. I do not quarrel with the usefulness of responsible, free debate. I am seriously troubled, however, when I see certain facts about Thai-U.S. cooperation misread in ways that damage Thai-American interests, and encumber the Vietnam problem with negative and discouraging implications which do not actually exist.

The frequency of late of such distortion and misinformation has provided a new and disturbing experience for the Thai government and people. It is never pleasant to find one's country being criticized or subjected to hostile cross examination by foreigners. It is even less pleasant when they seem to question the validity of national policies, programs and instituions that have been carefully developed over the years for the express purpose of self-preservation. Having governed themselves for over 700 years, the Thai feel no need to adjust their way of doing things to meet foreign concepts of how things should be done. Moreover, having decided that defending Vietnam is in Thailand's own best interests, they do not want their actions interpreted--or misinterpreted--in lights cast by the clash of conflicting views over similar U.S. policies. Neither do they want it assumed that their fundamental policies are merely a response to the wishes of a large power. Understandably, they resent the bland assumption that the pattern of events in a neighboring state inevitably will be repeated in their own.

II

Nevertheless, perhaps largely because Thailand is known to have both communist guerilla forces and U.S. military units in the country, it seems often to be assumed that American forces have been sent here to deal with the internal threat and are more or less covertly engaged in combat against insurgents in Thailand's rural areas. This of course is not the case. The only combat actions in which U.S. forces here participate are those well-publicized out-of-country operations directed against Vietnamese communist targets. U.S. military units in Thailand, other than those belonging to the Air Force, are neither equipped nor organized for combat assignments. The Thai government has stated repeatedly that in suppression actions against the guerillas, the only American help it wants or needs is that giving Thai military and security forces their own means of dealing with the problem.

Combat operations by Thai-based units of the U.S. Air Force are carried out against North Vietnam by our fighter-bomber aircraft, and against Viet Cong concentrations in South Vietnam by B-52 bombers, and have entailed the assignment to Thailand of about thirty-three thousand U.S. Air Force personnel. The Air Force units require in turn, from other U.S. military services here, myriad forms of logistical support in which some seven thousand troops are engaged. There are roughly three thousand additional U.S. military personnel in Thailand serving with the military assistance program, working on engineering and military research projects, and in SEATO.

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Let me add, if I may, a footnote to what I hope will end misguided speculation about U.S. involvement in guerilla warfare here. A year ago, Ambassador Martin confirmed for you that unarmed U.S. Air Force helicopters were on assignment in the Northeast. As Ambassador Martin emphasized, this was a temporary, non-combat measure, taken at a time when added mobility was of critical importance to Thai authorities organizing their own resources to blunt an escalating insurgent threat. Accordingly, in January of 1967, after the Royal Thai Government had completed the transitional training required for field operation of its own newly acquired force of forty-nine troop-carrying helicopters, the U.S. helicopters were withdrawn from Thailand. They were replaced in the field by these Thai helicopters, furnished by the U.S., which Thai authorities are using with increasing effectiveness. Additional helicopters have been provided, including ten to the Thai National Police, and more will become available to the armed forces and police as Thai pilots and mechanics complete training courses and can make use of these aircraft.

The lesson here, I think, is two-fold: First, the nature of American assistance to Thai counter-insurgency programs does not lead toward direct American involvement in those operations. On the other hand, we must not become so transfixed by our Vietnam experiences that we lose our capacity here to take decisive, practical steps in providing the training and equipment with which the Thai government itself can bring the insurgency under control, and in due course eliminate it.

III

We will continue to hear dire predictions, that Thailand inevitably will go the way of Vietnam, and that sooner or later Americans will be fighting communist insurgents here. In fact, Thailand resembles Vietnam only in that it is another intended victim of the same communist effort to expand its domination by using the technique of the "war of national liberation." Violence and killing in Thailand by communist terrorists, most of them trained outside Thailand, does not express grass roots political sentiment.

Thailand's people are united in a rapidly developing nation seeking to work out its political and economic destiny with care and forethought. Land ownership is primarily in the hands of those who work the soil. There is no tendency to split along religious lines, since virtually all Thai are Buddhists. Minorities are for the most part being assimilated and woven into the life of the country. One could cite many other factors working in Thailand's favor--its sense of self confidence developed over centuries of managing its own affairs--its able leadership, competent civil service, and armed forces showing their mettle today in Vietnam--its economic growth rate running around eight percent per annum--its capacity to organize and carry out rural security and development programs--and the social and economic mobility of Thai life.

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Furthermore, Thailand's well-educated, skilled and enterprising young people do not migrate to other countries except in rare instances. Among the hundreds who annually go abroad for long periods to further their education or professional experience, all but a few are drawn back by loyalty and family ties and by their country's ample economic opportunities. I think it is fair to say, incidentally, that in large measure these have been created by Thailand's heavy emphasis upon private initiative and enterprise.

Thailand is also unique in that the continuity of its life and institutions has never been broken by colonial experiences. There has never been any need here for for a national independence movement aimed at dislodging colonial rulers. Communist bands do not find in Thailand, therefore, as they did in Vietnam, any real opportunity to generate loyalty to a revolutionary struggle, or to identify themselves with compelling patriotic causes.

Above all, there flows from Thai attitudes toward the person of His Majesty the King and the institution of the monarchy a sense of national unity land continuity so strong that it extends into the remotest villages. To the citizens of Thailand, the King's full endorsement of efforts to counter the guerilla threat is a buttress against subversive attempts to undermine the government's authority. In Thailand, as the communists have discovered even in relatively unprotected rural areas, the task of marshaling popular support for anti-government causes is difficult and unrewarding.

IV

In the Northeast, for example, in a poor area encompassing more than ten million people, where several years of subversive groundwork has been followed by two years of intensive terrorism and recruitment drives, the number of armed insurgents remains below two thousand. Reliable intelligence indicates that considerably more than a thousand of them have been trained outside Thailand in Communist China, in North Vietnam, and Pathet Lao territory.

At present, the mission of the insurgents, almost all of whom are full time fighters, assassins and political activists, is simple. Their mission is to break the links between Thailand's government and villagers, and to then replace the government's authority with their own. While there are isolated villages where this mission has been accomplished for a few hours, there is no point in Thailand upon which the insurgents have thus far been able to impose more than temporary control.

To see the present situation in fair perspective, however, one must look back to 1966. During that year, the level of communist violence increased markedly over 1965, a rise consistent with the insurgent campaign predicted by Peking in 1965. Communist operations reached a high point toward the end of 1966. In January of last year, the number of armed encounters rose as the Thai government's counter actions developed momentum. By March 1967 the insurgents had adopted

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the tactic of avoiding contact with government forces, and the number of monthly armed encounters dropped by two-thirds. The rate of forced village propaganda meetings has declined even more dramatically during the past year. Assassinations have shown a slight but steady decline and now are at a lower rate than at any time over the past two years.

A prime explanation of these trends, in my opinion, is the combination of armed pressures by Thai military and security forces and the expansion of Thai Government programs for the improvement of the villager's lot. The forces have chased the insurgents from past operational bases and forced them into other areas. This has broken or strained insurgent connections with established sources--often merely their own kinfolk--of food, intelligence and other forms of support. This has raised significantly the rate of defections and desertions, which reflect in general a lack of political motivation among those villagers recruited through intimidation or promise of material gains.

Given the Royal Thai Government's commitment of additional military and police forces to communist suppression work, its program to establish small, permanent security forces in threatened villages, and its growing attention to the aspirations and legitimate grievances of the villagers, I would expect insurgent efforts to organize the Thai countryside to meet with as little success in 1968 as they did in 1967.

They won't quit, however. Those who dominate the guerilla ranks in Thailand are disciplined, well-trained, fully-indoctrinated insurgents. Thailand's northeast border provinces, where most of them are operating, or some of the other Thai border areas where there have been indications of additional outbreaks of insurgency, are too important to long-range communist plans to create a revolutionary base within this kingdom. More immediate objectives include protection for the flank of communist infiltration routes through Laos into South Vietnam; development of a capability for striking Thai military installations, including those being used to help in Vietnam; inducing the Thai government to question its policy of close alliance with the U.S.; and shaking U.S. faith in the stability of its ally.

V

The Thai government has developed an effective program to contain and compress rural insurgency. It has committed the requisite resources for this as well as for accelerating rural progress to make it increasingly difficult for subversive influences to take root and grow. Our two governments have agreed on how American economic and military assistance can best provide support to such programs. In fostering rural progress, the Thai government plans to continue to emphasize provincial roads and other communications links; expanding agricultural, public health, educational, and other governmental services in rural communities; assisting farmers' organizations; and developing water resources for human consumption and irrigation. Other projects are designed to establish local security forces in more and more of the endangered remote villages, to mobilize military and police forces for quick reaction to the outbreak of insurgent violence.

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and to modernize Thai military forces for defensive action against larger scale communist penetrations. The U.S. will assist these efforts with substantial levels of economic and military aid which last year totalled more than one hundred-ten million dollars.

In all our programs here, however, whether they fall within economic, military, or other categories (the Peace Corps, for example), there is an additional underlying theme, which must not be overlooked to get a true impression of what Americans are doing in Thailand. That theme is education in the broadest sense of the word. The emphasis upon teaching, technical training, and advisory activities in our assistance programs here is in keeping with Thailand's traditional practice of welcoming and importing advanced knowledge and new skills. Historically the Thais have sought to draw generously upon the experience and know-how of others to improve their own techniques so that they will be in a position to manage their own affairs with ever-increasing effectiveness.

In response to Thai requests, the U.S. has undertaken to provide large numbers of technical advisors, training instructors, professional consultants, and other specialists capable of imparting the special knowledge, competence and skills which Thailand wants in greater abundance. Those who can be classed as advisors, trainers, instructors and educators account for more than three quarters of the total USOM staff of Americans. A substantial proportion of U.S. assistance funds are allocated annually to the training and further education of Thai civilian and military specialists. Under the Participant Training Program administered by USOM since 1949, over five thousand Thais have gone abroad, to the U.S. and elsewhere, for advanced training. Additionally, many of the large scale Thai government projects which receive U.S. assistance are directly concerned with training. These include, for example, a program for training twelve thousand new members of the Thai National Police by the end of this year; the training for Accelerated Rural Development programs of technical personnel, over seven hundred of whom have completed basic courses, while fifteen hundred others are receiving on-the-job training in the provinces; the instruction of paramedics for rural public health services; educating village youths in basic vocational skills taught by instructors in mobile training units. These, to be sure, are but some of the ways in which Thailand obtains professional competence and technical skills to meet problems at home and keep pace with the outside world. By the way, as proof of the wisdom of the Thai Government's policy, I have been impressed with the large number of fields in which Americans and others were providing training here some years ago, when I was last in Thailand, but in which I now find Thai carrying on by themselves.

VI

To understand fully why Thailand and the U.S. have undertaken many of the wide range of projects which engage us here, one must first look outside Thailand--toward Vietnam and beyond--at Scutheast Asia as a whole. Within this vast, potentially wealthy area live 250 million people. None of them would be beyond the ambitious, domineering embrace of

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communism if no adequate obstacles existed to Red Chinese and North Vietnamese expansionism. We must add to this reservoir of Asian manpower, a fertile land mass the size of Western Europe, vast hydroelectric, mineral and petroleum resources, and a geographical position astride the air, sea and land routes joining the Pacific and Indian oceans.

U.S. policies toward the area take those strategic considerations into account, and above all the common determination among Southeast Asian states to preserve their national identities while advancing toward a more secure, stable and prosperous existence. U.S. policies in the individual nations of Southeast Asia are consistent with the basic American posture toward the area, but they vary from country to country, depending upon the capacity of each to maintain itself to its own satisfaction without outside help. The U.S. objective in these bilateral relations is an equal, progressive, mutually advantageous partnership, such as we have long enjoyed with Thailand. Our partnership with Thailand has proven uniquely productive, both in bilateral terms and in the beneficial,steadying affect it has had elsewhere in the area.

Thailand conducts its affairs on the basis of an independent, well-conceived set of policies which it has developed for itself toward the nations of this and all other areas of the world. On such basic matters, Thai and American positions are basically consistent. The effect of our alignment with each other, and with like-minded nations, is to give each of us greater influence than either nation could expect to exert in the absence of reinforcing policies and actions by the other.

Thailand, like America, is helping Vietnam in its own best interests. The United States is aiding Thailand for the same reason, and because it is our common firm belief that Vietnam is but one aspect of a much larger, potentially more formidable problem. Our efforts to solve and settle that problem depend ultimately upon people, both Thai and Americans, living and working in closer contact and in far greater numbers than ever before. This tests the capacity of Thai-American relations to withstand strains that our easy and cordial associations have not known before. I am fully convinced that the long term results from this period of intimate and broad Thai-American contacts will prove wholly positive.

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