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HANDLING INDICATOR

TO : DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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JAN 2

Date of Action 1/6

FROM : AmEmbassy BANGKOK

DATE: December 18,

Action Officer

SUBJECT : Incident Involving Prime Minister's Son

Name of Officer

REF :

SUMMARY

A recent incident in which a group of soldiers overturned a police booth and threw it into a canal has provided the political opposition with a convenient cudgel for attacking the Government. Although the criticism has a high noise level and is personally embarrassing to both the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Praphat, the incident is unlikely to have any far-reaching effects.

* * *

The action against the police booth located on the superhighway between Bangkok's airport and the city proper took place on November 19 and was carried out by a reported twenty to sixty soldiers under command of a captain. Allegedly claiming to be acting under the orders of Lt. Col. Narong Kittikachorn, son of the Prime Minister and son-in-law of Deputy Prime Minister Praphat, the soldiers allowed the lone policeman on duty at the booth to remove the radio transmitter and other equipment before overturning the booth and throwing it into a canal. There was no personal violence. The soldiers also reportedly identified themselves as members of the Eleventh Infantry Regiment and said that other police booths would be demolished -- one per night.

GROUP 3

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Lt. Col. Narong subsequently admitted that the soldiers involved in the incident were under his command as the Commander of the Second Battalion of the Eleventh Royal Guards Infantry Regiment, but denied any personal responsibility for the affair, claiming that his men were simply drunk. He reportedly told the press that he had apologized to the Director-General of the Police and had ordered that the police booth be restored (which was done). Narong also reportedly said that he had been "scolded" by his father, and subsequently -- as the uproar grew -- complained that if someone else had been involved in the incident it would have gone unnoticed.

When asked about the affair, the Prime Minister said that it was being investigated by the army. General Praphat, caught in the embarrassing position -- not only of having his son-in-law involved -- but also technically being in charge of both the police and the army, suggested that the matter be forgotten, reportedly describing it as a "youthful prank not worth further attention." Deputy Defense Minister and Deputy Army Commander-in-Chief Kris Siwara later said that Thanom and Praphat had ordered stern action against the soldiers involved, and announced that Narong was to be confined to his base for fifteen days. He explained, however, that this disciplinary action was because of the misdeed of Narong's men and not because of any personal involvement by Narong. Kris also reportedly noted that clashes between the police and military are "common" phenomena, adding that he had participated in them in his younger days.

The press and opposition MPs took a more serious view of the matter. Initial press reporting was wary, with only the English-language Post giving complete coverage and daring to mention Narong by name. Kukrit Pramote in a column criticized the other papers, including his own Siam Rath, for the timidity of their reporting. There was, however, and continues to be considerable sharply critical comment in the press on the incident (the normal lead-time between an occurrence and the appearance of Thai editorial and column comment giving time to get some feel as to whether it was "safe" subject matter). The journalists have been able to see all sorts of dangers in the affair; renewed conflict between the army and police, a reversion to army strong-arm tactics, army disregard for the law, danger to democratic institutions, a weakening of the unity of the country, etc.

The opposition MPs, happy to have so convenient a cudgel with which to beat the leading government figures, provided additional comment and copy to the newspapers, both groups following the same line. Democrat Party Secretary-General Thammanoon Thien-ngern called for Police Director-General Prasert Ruchirwongse to press charges against the persons involved. Thammanoon also sarcastically agreed with Praphat that the matter was a small one -- when compared to others for which the present government is responsible.

EUF MP Meedej Vorasiha presented a seven-part interpellation to the Speaker of the House which expresses many of the commonly held beliefs and rumors about Narong. Its text as reported in the Bangkok World is as follows:

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"To which military division is Lt. Col. Narong Kittikachorn attached? Is he not the son of Your Excellency the Prime Minister and the son-in-law of His Excellency the Interior Minister?

"Has an investigation committee been appointed to probe the overturning of the police booth by a group of soldiers? What has been the outcome of the probe?

"In connection with the case, it is true as has been alleged that Lt.Col. Narong had done bodily harm to a House Representative (Rep. Suchin Chaovisit -- UTPP -- Si Sa Ket)?

"Is it a fact that Lt. Col. Narong is the director and proprietor of a number of firms here and abroad because of his power and influence?

"Is it true that Lt. Col. Narong has accumulated cash and property valued at between 200 and 300 million baht? Can a committee investigate his holdings?

"Is it the case that the slaughter house and meatball factory in which Lt. Col. Narong holds shares or has interests had recently slaughtered female water buffaloes in violation of the law? Has the director general of the Livestock Development Department imposed fines on the enterprise for these alleged offenses?

"Has there been government harassment of businessmen and traders such as sand transporting merchants and owners of businesses on New Phetchburi Road?"

Students tried to get into the act when the Political Studies Group at Chulalongkorn University laid plans to invite Narong and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner to participate on a panel discussion on the police booth incident. They were reportedly discouraged by their advisors as well as Narong's and the Commissioner's indications that they would not cooperate.

Even His Majesty the King may have obliquely been referring to the incident when, during his annual review of the Royal Guards he admonished the Guards for the unity of the nation to behave in a way that would command public respect, confidence, and love.

Comment: As with so many squalls in Thai politics, this incident is unlikely to have any significant or far-reaching aftermath. There is nothing to indicate any change of attitude or policy on the part of the military or that it is the beginning of really severe problems between the police and army.

It is certainly believable -- and likely -- that Narong was indeed responsible for the incident. He has a wide-spread reputation for being involved in all manner of corruption and for being arrogantly brash and ruthless. One rumored motive for his involvement is that the police chief of the area where the booth and a slaughter-house in which Narong has an interest are located, was recently changed. According to the rumor, the new police chief has not been giving the cooperation -- active or

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passive -- which some of Narong's illegal activities require and Narong staged the police booth incident as a warning. In any event, Narong's father and father-in-law are likely to take steps to keep him somewhat more subdued in the future.

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