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Background Notes

THAILAND

Population: 32 million
Capital: Bangkok

The Kingdom of Thailand, formerly known as Siam, is located in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia. It has an area of approximately 200,000 square miles—about the size of France. Thailand has common boundaries with Burma on the west and north, Laos on the north and east, Cambodia on the east, and Malaysia on the south. The shape of the country has been often compared to the head of an elephant with its trunk extending down the Malay Peninsula. South of the main portion of the country and east of peninsular Thailand lies the Gulf of Siam.

Thailand's topography is diversified. There are four main geographic regions—central, northeast, north, and south. The central region is dominated by Thailand's most important river, the Chao Phraya. There the land is rich in alluvium and well watered by an extensive network of canals and irrigation projects. The northeastern region, a large plateau rising about 1,000 feet above the central plain, comprises roughly one-third of the country. A great deal of its land is poor because of drought in the dry season and flood in the wet season.

The topography of the plateau makes irrigation difficult, but planned irrigation and flood control projects on the Mekong River, which forms much of the border with Laos, should improve its agricultural potential. Completion of these projects, however, is not expected for some years. Northern Thailand is primarily a region of mountains and valleys and comprises about one-quarter of the nation. The mountains running north and south are forested, and the valleys between them are narrow but fertile. The southern region, a long sliver of land running from central Thailand down to Malaysia, is covered in great part by rain forest.

Thailand is a tropical land with high temperatures and humidity. The climate of much of the country is dominated by monsoons. In most regions there are three seasons: from June to October the rainy season, from November to February the cool season, and from March to May the hot season. Rainfall varies but is generally heaviest in the south and lightest in the northeast.

Thailand's flag is comprised of two red stripes, top and bottom; two white inner stripes; and a wider blue center band. The blue represents royalty, the white Buddhism, and the red stands for Thailand itself, whose name means "Free Nation."

THE PEOPLE

Thailand's population of 32 million is composed primarily of people of Thai stock. The principal minority groups are the estimated 3 million Chinese located in the larger urban areas, the 700,000 Malay-speaking Moslems of the southernmost province, the 40,000 Vietnamese of the northeast, and the various hill tribes of the north estimated at about 200,000. The society is predominantly rural in nature and is most heavily concentrated in the valleys and plains of the north, northeast, and central regions.

The language of the country is Thai, of which there are a number of regional dialects. English serves as the second language among the educated and official elements of society. Buddhism of the Theravada School is the religion of over 90 percent of the people, but the Thai Government permits religious freedom and a great number of other religions are represented throughout the country. For some years now universal education through the fourth grade has been offered in all parts of the kingdom and the Government is currently seeking to extend this to the seventh grade. Universities exist in the capital, in the northern city of Chiengmai, and in the northeastern city of Khon Kaen. Plans for an additional university in the south are well advanced.

HISTORY

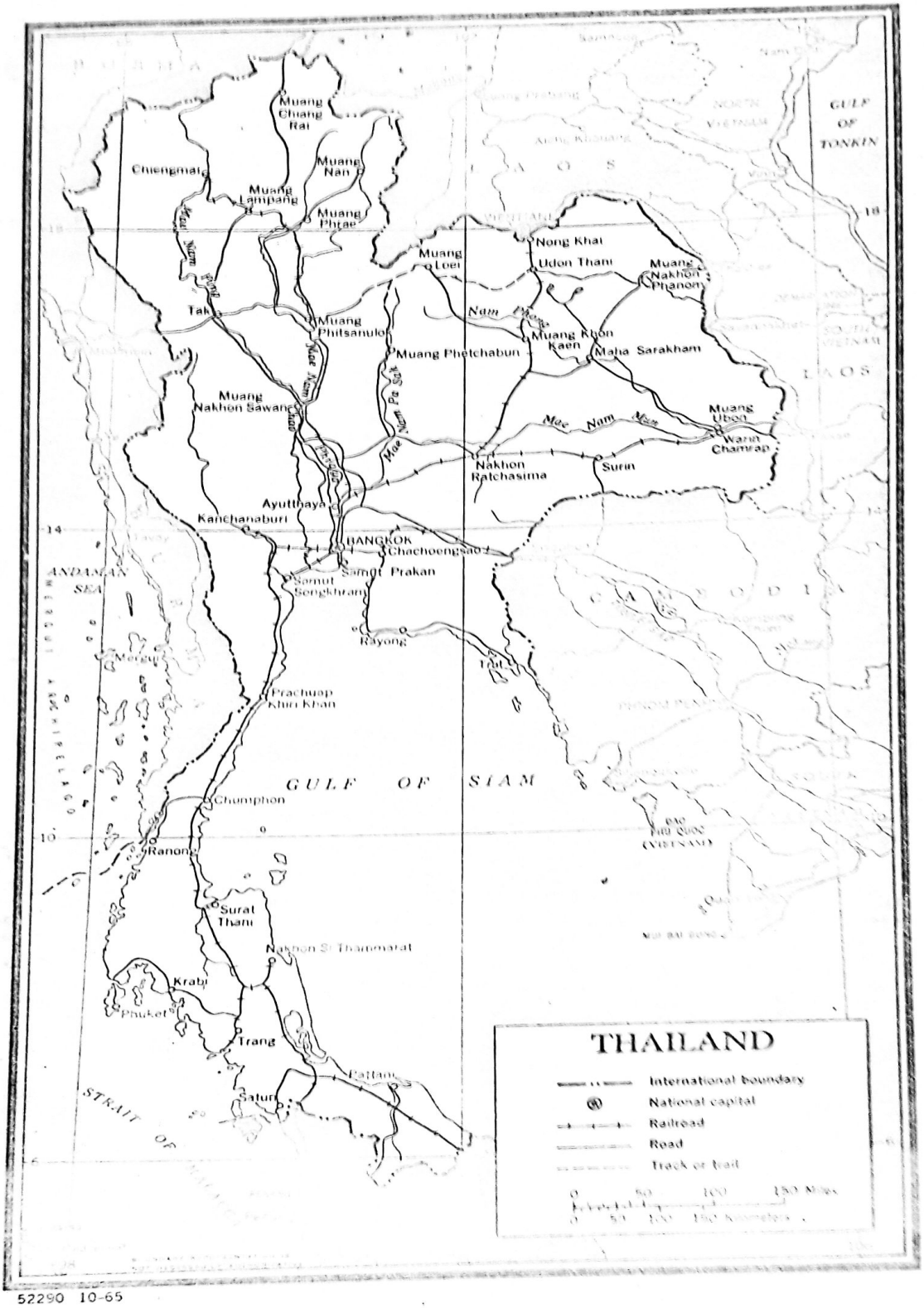
More than 1,000 years ago the ancestors of the Thai began migrating from southern China, where an independent Thai kingdom formerly existed. This process was greatly accelerated when southern China was overrun by the Mongols under Kublai Khan in the 13th century. During that century what was to become modern Thailand had its beginnings in a kingdom having its capital at Sukothai in the north. In the 14th century the capital was transferred to Ayutthaya on the Chao Phraya River a few miles north of Bangkok. This kingdom had some contact with the West, beginning with the Portuguese in the 16th century, but until the 19th century its relations with its neighbors in Southeast Asia were of predominant importance.

Toward the end of the 18th century Burmese armies overwhelmed the kingdom. Rama I, founder of the present ruling dynasty, was one of the leaders who eventually drove out the Burmese. He established the capital at its present location, Bangkok, in 1782. His successors, especially after the British victory over Burma in 1826, were to find themselves increasingly preoccupied by a new threat, that of European colonialism.

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Rama III began the process of accommodating to Western power with the negotiation of a treaty of amity and commerce with the British in 1826. More important steps in this direction were made by Rama IV, known in the West as King Mongkut, and by Rama V. (King Chulalongkorn), who carried out a virtual revolution of modernization in the Thai Government in the last quarter of the 19th century. These great monarchs combined diplomatic skill with recognition of the need to modernize the state structure and thus made it possible for Thailand to survive as an independent state, the only country in South and Southeast Asia which was never colonized by a European power.

European predominance in Southeast Asia was challenged in the 20th century by Japanese power. When Japan struck at the Philippines and Malaya in December 1941, it also invaded Thailand. Faced with overwhelming Japanese power, which quickly caused the collapse of Western forces in the area, Thailand acceded to Japanese demands. Although nominally an ally of Japan during World War II, Thailand was in effect an occupied country.

The defeat of Japan was followed by an era of increasingly close relations with the United States, which had led the fight against Japan and had extended assistance to Thailand in the immediate postwar period. Thailand saw at once the threat posed to its independence by the victory of the Communist forces on mainland China in 1949 and has been an active participant, along with the United States, in efforts to check Communist expansion in Asia.

GOVERNMENT

Since the revolution of 1932, which overthrew the last of the absolute kings, Thailand has been a constitutional monarchy with the King as Chief of State, a Prime Minister as head of government, a cabinet, a parliament, and an independent judiciary. The present Chief of State, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who was born in 1927 in the United States, ascended the throne in 1946 and is an extremely popular sovereign. The Prime Minister, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, took office in December 1963 after having served previously as Deputy Prime Minister. He is assisted in his executive duties by an exceptionally able Cabinet.

Since 1932 Thailand has sought to develop a constitution suited to its traditions and its present needs. The military, especially the army, has had a predominant role throughout most of this period, which has been marked by several coups and attempted coups. The most recent was in 1957. In 1958 a bloodless "revolution" carried out by the ruling military group abrogated the constitution then in effect and replaced it with an interim constitution which gives extraordinary powers to the Prime Minister and to the executive branch. At that same time Parliament was dissolved and replaced by a 240-member appointed Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly was given the dual responsibilities of serving as an interim legislative body and of drafting a new constitution.

Administratively the country is divided into 71 Provinces which are further divided into districts, townships, and villages. Township and village leaders are chosen by their fellow villagers. District and provincial officials are career civil servants appointed by the central Government.

ECONOMY

The Thai economy is both fast-developing (7 percent average annual growth rate since 1960, and 9 percent in 1966) and stable, an unusual combination. Thailand has shunned excessive deficit financing, has built up comfortable foreign exchange reserves, and has created a stable currency readily convertible at free market rates. These conditions, created by conscious Thai efforts, have facilitated development and attracted investment.

Internally, the Thai economy continues to rest largely on an agricultural base with rice by far the major crop. In 1964 Thailand became the largest rice exporter in the world. Although rice continues to be the major Thai export, the last decade has seen a dramatic diversification of Thai agriculture. This is reflected in the increasing inportance of new exports, notably corn, tapioca, and kenaf (a fiber used in ropemaking). Thus, while output of rice has increased over the last decade, as a percentage of total exports it has declined from over 60 percent to about 33 percent. Rubber and tin are the other major export commodities.

Despite the manifest economic progress which Thailand has experienced in the last 10 years, the per capita income is still only about $130 per year. The increase in gross national product (GNP) of approximately 7 percent a year has been partially offset by the yearly population increase of about 3 percent. Although population pressures are not yet severe, it is clear that national health and stability are dependent upon a steady and significant degree of economic growth.

The Thai Government is now embarked on a concerted effort to broaden the base of the nation's economy. An unusually large part of the national budget goes to education and economic development. Efforts in the latter category are largely concentrated on basic irrigation, transportation, communications, and power facilities. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) is playing a major role in this effort through its financing of the Chao Phraya irrigation project, railway rehabilitation, port development, highway construction, and the combined irrigation and hydroelectric project at Yanhee in northern Thailand.

The Thai economy is relatively free of controls and relies largely upon private rather than public enterprise. The Thai Government is interested in industrialization and is receptive to prospective private foreign investment.

The baht is the unit of Thai currency. It is freely convertible at the rate of about 21 baht per U.S. dollar.

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UNITED STATES AID

Thailand's importance to the security of the United States lies in its strategic location in the heart of Southeast Asia, its strong friendship for the United States, and its membership in SEATO.

Internal security and defense considerations require larger expenditures for the modernization and maintenance of the military and police than the Thai budget can sustain. At the same time, Thailand faces an urgent need for economic and social progress for which large capital expenditures are required. Thailand's security is inextricably related to its continued economic progress. The interest of the free world requires that the United States assist in providing the additional resources which Thailand needs for security and economic development.

United States grant assistance to Thailand under various economic assistance programs has totaled $339.0 million during the fiscal period 1946-66.

Loans under the U.S. economic assistance program during the same period totaled $135.4 million. In addition to the above amounts Thailand, as a participant in a number of regional projects, has received substantial grant and loan assistance from regional aid funds. As a staunch ally of the United States, Thailand received $600 million worth of military aid under the military assistance program during the 1946-66 period. Both our military and economic aid programs have the common goal of strengthening Thailand as an independent country which will be a stabilizing force in Southeast Asia and a bulwark against further Communist expansion in that area.

Economic assistance has been extended in a number of fields, including education, power, health, highway construction, agricultural diversification, and improvement of Government services, particularly in rural areas. In addition to U.S. grant and loan assistance the present health of the Thai economy has enabled the country to depend increasingly upon international lending institutions for the foreign capital needed for economic development projects.

Military aid consists of military hardware, essential military supplies, and assistance in the construction and improvement of key military facilities and installations. United States personnel in Thailand oversee the delivery of equipment to the Thai Armed Forces and the training of Thai military personnel in the use and maintenance of the equipment.

Recent developments in Southeast Asia have increased the threat to Thai security from Communist-led subversion. In northeast Thailand, the country's poorest region, Communist infiltration and subversion have already begun. To meet this challenge quickly and effectively requires an accelerated program of economic and social development as well as improvement of the Thai security forces. The Thai Government has undertaken a far-reaching program designed to reduce these vulnerabilities of the northeast, and our military and economic grant assistance programs are aimed primarily at assisting the Thai Government in this essential security effort.

On this problem, the SEATO Council of Ministers said after its Washington meeting in April 1967:

> "The Council, conscious of the long-standing Communist efforts to foment insurgency in Thailand, noted the increase of such efforts in the past year and the conclusive evidence of support and direction by Peking and Hanoi. The Council was encouraged by Thailand's determination to defeat this Communist threat. It noted the Royal Thai Government's effective moves against the existing guerrilla forces and the impressive rural programs designed primarily to enhance the well-being of the people and to strengthen further their capacity to resist Communist blandishments and alien domination. The Council reiterated the determination expressed in earlier communiques to do whatever is necessary to assist that country to eliminate the threat."

FOREIGN POLICY

Thailand's history of independence from Western domination sets the country apart from its neighbors. The preservation of the nation's independence from foreign control can be taken as the Government's prime objective. The present threat to its independence is posed by the expansive policies of Communist China and North Viet-Nam, the prime instigators of infiltration and subversion in the area. To meet this threat the Thai Government is aiming: (1) to improve the standards of health, education, and economic well-being of the people and so remove conditions which Communists could exploit; (2) to improve the ability of the police and armed forces to provide security to the people; and (3) to maintain solidarity with other free-world countries, especially the United States.

In accordance with its policy of solidarity with the free world, Thailand is an ally of the United States in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which has its headquarters at Bangkok. Thailand provides economic and military assistance to South Viet-Nam, including a unit of ground forces; it recognizes the Republic of China and opposes the seating of Communist China in the United Nations; it prohibits trade with Communist China; and it cooperates with the Malaysian authorities in joint action against the Communist guerrilla remnants in the Thai-Malaysian border area. When the Korean war broke out, Thailand was the first country to offer ground forces to join those of the United States under the U.N. command to resist the Communist aggression. The Thai battalion served with distinction and was cited for valor in hand-to-hand fighting with Communist Chinese forces.

U.S. official relations with Thailand go back to 1833, when the United States signed a treaty of amity and commerce with Thailand, our first treaty with an oriental country. Since the close of World

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War II, relations have grown increasingly close and Thailand has become one of the strongest allies of the United States in Southeast Asia.

A demonstration of Thai-American solidarity occurred in May 1962. The breaking of the cease-fire in neighboring Laos and a subsequent movement of Communist forces toward the Thai border at that time gave a clear demonstration of the Communist threat to the area. Following on Thai-U.S. consultations, President Kennedy announced on May 15, 1962, that the United States would send American forces to Thailand to help meet the threat. About 4,000 American troops landed during the following week and joined about 1,000 other U. S. combat personnel already in Thailand because of a recently concluded SEATO exercise. Three other members of SEATO—Britain, Australia, and New Zealand—also sent military units. Although it did not become necessary to send these forces into action, their introduction contributed to a stabilization of the situation in Laos and the cease-fire was reestablished. The forces subsequently were withdrawn from Thailand.

At present Thailand is a strong supporter of the efforts to preserve the independence of Thailand's neighbor, South Viet-Nam. The Foreign Minister of Thailand, Thanat Khoman, said in a recent speech on President Johnson's decision to meet the growing threat to South Viet-Nam:

> "I am confident that history will prove that the momentous decision made last February by the President of the United States was a measure of greatness commensurate with the greatness of the American nation. We are proud to bear our fair share of responsibility and sacrifices so that your people and mine can live in peace and freedom."

As part of its contribution to the collective security of the area under SEATO, Thailand gives U.S. forces access to certain of its bases for use in connection with the war in Viet-Nam. Recalling this and Thailand's assistance in other crises, especially in Korea, Secretary Rusk recently said:

> "In this connection, the President has asked me to express his deep appreciation, and that of the American people, for the very great contribution which Thailand is making to the common cause in Southeast Asia. No country has been stronger in its support for the concept of collective security, and no country has been quicker to recognize that collective security carries obligations as well as benefits . . . ."

When President Johnson was in Bangkok last October he acknowledged that the Thai contribution to the common defense involved risks for Thailand. At that time the President said:

> "Let me assure you in this regard that Thailand can count on the United States to meet its obligations under the SEATO Treaty. The commitment of the United States under the SEATO Treaty is not of a particular political party or administration in my country, but of America as a nation. And I repeat to you: America keeps its commitments."

PRINCIPAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Chief of State—King BHUMIBOL Adulyadej
President of the Privy Council—Prince DHANI Niwat (Krommum Bidyalabh Prutiyakon)
Prime Minister and Minister of Defense—Field Marshal THANOM Kittikachorn
Deputy Prime Minister—Maj. Gen. Prince WAN Waithayakon
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior—Gen. PRAPHAT Charusathien
Minister of Foreign Affairs—THANAT Khoman
Minister of Finance—SERM Vinicchayakul
Minister of National Development—POTE Sarasin
Minister of Economic Affairs—SUNTHORN Hongladarom
Minister of Agriculture—PHRA PRAKAS Sahakorn
Minister of Communications—Lt. Gen. PONG Punnakan
Minister of Justice—PHYA ATTAKARI Niphon
Minister of Education—M. L. PIN Malakun
Minister of Public Health—PHRA BAMRAT Naradun
Minister of Industries—Air Chief Marshal MUNI Mahasanthana Wetchayan Rangsarit

The Kingdom of Thailand maintains an Embassy in the United States at 2300 Kalorama Road, Washington, D.C. 20008.

PRINCIPAL U. S. OFFICIALS

Ambassador—Graham Martin
Deputy Chief of Mission—Norman B. Hannah
Director, U.S. AID Mission—Howard L. Parsons
Chief, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group—Maj. Gen. Hal D. McCown
Public Affairs Officer (USIS)—G. Lewis Schmidt

The United States maintains an Embassy in Thailand at 95 Wireless Road, Bangkok.

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