

MAY 27, 1966

A MONARCHY FIGHTS FOR FREEDOM

# TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

*Bois Chalongin*



THE KING & QUEEN  
OF THAILAND

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# TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

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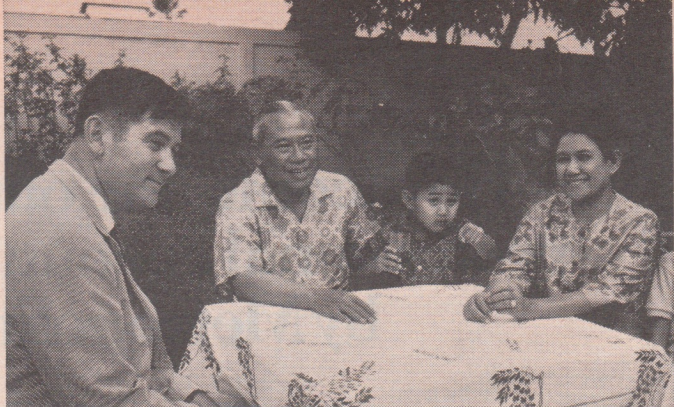
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KRAAR WITH THAI PRIME MINISTER AT HIS HOME

## A letter from the PUBLISHER

*Bernhard M. Auer*

SOME of our cover stories grow out of the fast pace of the news and must be researched, reported, written and edited in a few intensive days—or even hours. This week's story on Thailand, a land of constantly increasing importance in the pattern of world events, fits another category. Work toward it began months ago.

Not long after Correspondent Louis Kraar opened our new bureau in Bangkok last fall, he intensified the preparations for a cover story on the King and Queen.\* Among the sources he wanted to reach were, of course, top government officials, including Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn (whose garden ultimately was the scene of one interview). More complicated was getting an interview with King Bhumibol, who rarely holds conferences with foreign newsmen and even more rarely gives permission for direct quotation. That interview required not only the King's consent but also formal approval by the Thai Cabinet.

When the approval finally came, Kraar flew north 500 miles from Bangkok to the royal mountain villa. He was accompanied by a man who doesn't get to do much reporting

—Time Inc. President James Linen, who was traveling in Thailand at the time. The monarch talked candidly for an hour on subjects that ranged from Communist subversion to modern painting. The talks went so well that the TIME men were asked to stay on for luncheon and more conversation.

Last month Kraar was joined in Bangkok by Senior Editor Edward Hughes, who was then on his second swing in three years through Southeast Asia. For ten days Hughes and Kraar talked with Thai officials, business leaders, editors, bankers and diplomats in the capital. They also made two long trips into the interior, one to Chiang Mai, where Thailand borders on Burma, a second to Udon near the Laos frontier, where one of the U.S. airbases is located. In both areas the government, with U.S. cooperation, is carrying out extensive rural rehabilitation and development programs.

Back in his Bangkok office overlooking the busy Chao Phraya River, Reporter Kraar set to work putting on paper what they had seen and heard. While he was half way round the earth from New York, he was able to cover the last-minute points that Writer Jason McManus wanted for the story by means of the telex, which maintains instant communication between the Time & Life Building and the far-off banks of the Chao Phraya.

\* This is the youthful King's second appearance on the cover of TIME—the first was on April 3, 1950. While Queen Sirikit has not been on the cover before, she was an exquisite color page in our story about reigning beauties on June 8, 1962.

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## THAILAND

### Holder of the Kingdom, Strength of the Land

(See Cover)

Seen on a soft spring night, the luminous spires of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha seem to float over Bangkok scarcely touched by the blare of traffic, the neon slashes of bars and the ragged hurly-burly of mainland Southeast Asia's largest city. So too does the Kingdom of Thailand, proud heir to virtually seven centuries of uninterrupted independence, seem to soar above the roiling troubles of the region all around it. Neighboring Laos is half in Communist hands, Cambodia hapless host to the Viet Cong, Burma a xenophobic mili-

Thailand is that rarity in the postwar world: a nation avowedly anti-Communist, unashamedly willing to go partners with the U.S. in attacking its problems—and its enemies.

*The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* But it is Thailand's endowments that first attack the senses, opulent gifts of nature nurtured by a benign history. In the gentle air and lemony Siamese sunlight, rice, corn and coconut palms flourish, as do 28 kinds of bananas and 750 varieties of orchids. In the north, worker-elephants still pull the great teak logs from the forest with an efficiency no machine yet invented can match; mangoes, sugar and rubber plants thrive in the south. Along the great, glittering emerald rice fields of the fertile, canal-veined central

of 71% is among the highest in Asia.

Bangkok bustles with evidences of the pursuit of *sanouk*, or pleasure, the mainspring of Thai life. Busy asphalt boulevards are supplanting the ancient, lettuce-clogged *klongs*—the canals where Thais still fish, drink, bathe and eat the lettuce. Venerable Siamese villas with cupolas like bowler hats squat cheek by jowl with neon-lit bars, cinemas and boxing pits. The jet age has made Bangkok the air hub of southern Asia, the halfway house for round-the-world trippers from the U.S. It is also rest and recreation for a carefully regulated 500 G.I.s at a time, on leave from Viet Nam. Some float down the Chao Phraya to visit Bangkok's Floating Market. A few are interested in watching the Thais fly their fighting kites—the national sport—or catching a Thai boxing match, where flailing feet are used as much as hands. Most make a beeline for Bangkok's myriad bars and massage parlors, carefully supplied by U.S. authorities with such useful mimeographed social guidance as "Never point your foot or your finger at a Thai."

A skyline once pierced only by the golden spires of the city's 300 Buddhist temples is now saw-toothed with multistory apartment blocks, but there is still a housing shortage in the \$250-\$500-per-month rental range. Flashing signs proclaim the virtues of Honda cycles, Philips TV sets, Coca-Cola and the Suzie Wong nightclub. For the gourmet, the Two Vikings offers Russian caviar in avocado pears for \$5. Any jewelry store on Oriental Avenue has star rubies for the asking—plus \$3,250. And instant antique Buddha heads are everywhere available to the unwary tourist, the corrosion of centuries being achieved by burying the newly minted statue in urine-soaked ground for three months. Equally abundant are instantly available women.

**The Craft of Kingship.** Rarer and more precious than rubies in Southeast Asia, however, is political stability and its *sine qua non*: a sense of belonging to a nation. The Thais have both. Though various ruling officers have come and gone since a 1932 coup gently displaced the King as absolute ruler, Kings and soldiers have combined, in a typical Thai equilibrium of accommodation, to provide a smooth chain linkage of government. The Thai sense of nationhood is partly the result of never having felt the trauma of colonial conquest. Even more, it resides in the charisma of the throne, reinforced by the nation's pervasive Buddhism. In Buddhist theology, the King is one of the highest of reincarnations, rich in his person in past accumulated virtue. Even in remote parts where spirit-worshipping peasants may never have heard of Thailand, they are likely to know—and revere—the King.

In an age when kings have gone out of style and the craft of kingship is all but forgotten, it is the good fortune of Thailand—and of the free world—that the present occupant of the nine-tiered umbrella throne, ninth monarch of the



HARRY REDL

BANGKOK BOULEVARD

*All the bounty of nature plus a nickel's worth of tical.*

tary backwater. The Chinese talons are less than 100 miles away, North Viet Nam a bare 20 minutes as the U.S. fighter-bombers fly from their Thai bases. Everywhere on the great peninsula, militant Communism, poverty, misery, illiteracy, misrule, and a foundering sense of nationhood are the grim order of the Asian day.

With one important exception: the lush and smiling realm of Their Majesties King Bhumibol (pronounced Poom-ee-pone) Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit, which spreads like a green meadow of stability, serenity and strength from Burma down to the Malaysian peninsula—the geopolitical heart of Southeast Asia. Once fabled Siam, rich in rice, elephants, teak and legend, Thailand (literally, Land of the Free) today crackles with a prosperity, a pride of purpose, and a commitment to the fight for freedom that is Peking's despair and Washington's delight. The meadow inevitably has its dark corners, notably the less fecund northeast, where Red insurgency is struggling for a foothold. But the military oligarchy that rules Thailand in the King's name is confident the Communists will not succeed. So is the U.S. For

plain where over a third of the 30 million Thais live, smiling, polygamous peasants lounge in boxy teakwood houses on stilts. Tethered beneath is a sinewy water buffalo, and tied atop is a television antenna, ready for *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* dubbed in Thai.

Hard-top highways, built with U.S. aid and thick with speeding new cars and gaily painted trucks, reach out into the countryside to draw off the surfeit of Thailand's bounty for world markets. Trains of wooden barges riding low in Bangkok's muddy Chao Phraya River carry rice, corn, copra, reams of incomparable Thai silk, jute—and illicit opium—to export. With the Thai annual growth rate of 7% a year, the baht (formerly called the tical and still worth a nickel), backed by gold and foreign-exchange reserves of nearly \$650 million, is one of Asia's hardest currencies. The men who administer the Thai economy, and indeed the whole cadre of Thai civil service, are among the most competent that any developing nation can boast, often old-school Thais educated in Britain or the U.S. Nearly every Thai under 30 can read, and even counting the oldsters, the Thai literacy rate



184-year-old Chakri dynasty, not only takes the business of being a king seriously but has taken it upon himself to mold his emerging nation's character. In the musical five-tone Thai tongue, his full name rings like the roll of monsoon thunder on the Mekong: His Majesty the Supreme Divine Lord, Great Strength of the Land, Incomparable Might, Greatest in the Realm, Lord Rama, Holder of the Kingdom, Chief of the Sovereign People, Sovereign of Siam, Supreme Protector and Monarch.

**Le Jazz Hot.** The great-grandson of Anna's King of Siam, King Bhumibol is the world's first monarch to be born in the U.S.: in Cambridge, Mass., on Dec. 5, 1927, where his father, Prince Mahidol, was studying at Harvard. Mahidol died two years later, and Bhumibol, with his older brother Ananda and his sister, were taken back to Bangkok by his mother. After the 1932 coup, she moved them from the uncertainty of the capital to Switzerland, and there Bhumibol grew up in a modest villa in Lausanne, chauffeuring off each day to the Ecole Nouvelle de Chailly, where he learned English, French and German.

In 1945, Ananda, only 20, returned to Bangkok to be crowned King. His reign lasted just six months. Early one morning he was found dead with a bullet in his forehead. The gun was his own, but whether he or someone else pulled the trigger has never been known to the public. At the age of 18, Bhumibol, the most fun-loving of the royal family, suddenly found himself King of Thailand.

As a teen-ager in Europe, he had shown himself mostly interested in *le jazz hot*, Hitchcock thrillers and swift sports cars—one of which he smashed up on a Swiss road, very nearly losing an eye. To this day he seldom appears in public without tinted glasses. He had been studying science; when he assumed the throne in 1946, he went back to Switzerland to finish his studies and switched to law. He first saw his beautiful second cousin Sirikit when she was only 14, at a reception in Paris, where her father was the Thai ambassador. When he returned to Europe as King, he pursued her in earnest. The wedding took place in April 1950, one month before Bhumibol's formal coronation.

**A Tune on Broadway.** The early years of royal rule in Bangkok were quiet. Both the King and Queen learned to paint, and some of their canvases adorn the walls of Chitralada Palace. The King perfected his considerable skills as a saxophonist and composer; one of his tunes, *Blue Night*, made the Broadway scene in Mike Todd's 1950 production *Peep Show*. The royal couple had four children, three girls and a boy, Prince Vajiralongkorn, who is now studying in England, prepping for Rugby school and kingship as Rama X. And like his ancestors, Bhumibol in the tenth year of his reign shaved his head, retired briefly to a monastery, and went out at dawn's light to beg for his food.

Bhumibol's first big test came in 1957, when he tacitly supported Army Chief

Sarit Thanarat's takeover as Premier. Partly in gratitude, partly to rally public support for his own rule, Sarit consciously set out to build up the image of the tall, spare King and his comely Queen. He soon found the maturing King to be far more than a complaisant figurehead. When the World Court awarded a frontier temple to Thailand's traditional enemy, Cambodia, Sarit was ready to refuse to hand it over. Bhumibol said the court's order would be obeyed, and it was.

**Something of a Puritan.** During Sarit's five years of rule, he and the King worked closely together to boost the Thai economy, set up development programs for the troubled northeast. It was an unlikely partnership. Sarit, partaking

the courts. But with Buddhist reverence for life and typical Thai indirection, the condemned is concealed behind a curtain on which is painted a target—and it is the target at which the state's machine gunners fire.

**Packing a Lunch.** Under Sarit's successor, Premier Thanom Kittikachorn, Bhumibol is more than ever the throne behind the power. He and Sirikit, working as a ceremonial team with all the pageantry that Thais love, take every opportunity to identify themselves with Thailand and its progress. Whether it be the dedication of a new dam or highway, the ancient ceremony of the first spring plowing, or the certification of a newly found royal white elephant (an auspicious omen in Thai mythology),

PRASONG FENGEM



BHUMIBOL & SIRIKIT AT TARGET PRACTICE

*An unshamed partnership rarer and more precious than rubies.*

more from the cup of corruption than is normal even in the Thai tradition of doing business *cum* government, harvested close to \$140 million, kept some 100 "minor wives" (i.e., mistresses). The King, in contrast, is something of a Buddhist puritan, as well as being totally devoted to his Queen—a monogamousness almost incredible in Siamese monarchs. His grandfather, for example, had 92 wives.

But then a good many things have changed as royalty has evolved over the centuries in Thailand. Obligatory prostration before the person of the King has long been abolished, and though no Thai would think of touching the King or Queen in normal circumstances, it is unlikely that they would let either of them drown—as happened to a 19th century Queen of Thailand. The royal barge sank after a collision, but no one dared offer a helping hand. When occasionally it was necessary to execute a royal personage, he was put inside a red bag, to avoid touching him, and beaten to death with a sandalwood stick wrapped in silk. Ordinary sentence of death in modern Thailand is meted out by machine gun following sentences of

Bhumibol uses each event to emphasize the rich heritage and unity of his nation. (One discontinued tradition: feeding white elephants from the bare breasts of young women.) Nearly every Thai household boasts a picture of the King. American information officials in Bangkok long ago concluded that USIS funds could not be better employed than in spreading the likeness of His Majesty.

On Chakri Day last month, celebrating the founding of his dynasty, Bhumibol set some sort of ceremonial record. First he was presented with a new car for state functions, a yellow Mercedes 600 limousine. As the day progressed, the monarch presented graduation swords to 68 police officers, unveiled a new statue of King Vajiravudh, who was Rama VI, handed diplomas to 868 graduates of two universities. Then, because it was also the anniversary of Bhumibol's first musical composition, some 1,400 Thai musicians put on an all-night concert of his works. The King stayed until 2 a.m., joining in at intervals on the saxophone with his own Royal Band—a congenial group of Thai sidemen, who four times



a week broadcast over Aw Saw, the palace radio station.

**Slacks & Sneakers.** His notion of nation building is by no means all panoply andante. Their Majesties make frequent forays into remote areas of Thailand. The King often drives his own Jeep and carries their lunch in a pack on his back. On these sorties, Queen Sirikit appears to be one of the few world beauties who look delicately lovely in slacks and thick rubber sneakers. And it has not affected her standing on the world's best-dressed-women list. One recent visit required walking five miles each way to reach a remote village, where the couple presented gifts of food and medicine to the primitive, opium-growing hill people, frequent targets of Red subversion campaigns. Their tribal leaders value nothing more than the tiny silver medals distributed by the King, and increasingly these days refer to themselves, thanks to the King's and Queen's evangelism, as "the children of the Thai."

After such arduous tasks, the King repairs to his equally strenuous hobbies. Not long ago he built a 13-ft. sailboat and sailed it across the Gulf of Siam, a 16-hour crossing. He was accompanied by a small flotilla escort of the Royal Thai Navy, and a motorboat using a new design of jet propulsion that Bhumibol himself had conceived. His current project: a do-it-yourself helicopter (see MODERN LIVING). Last week, as the King and Queen were enjoying the first of the monsoon rains, breaking the most torrid weather in years, news of the discovery of a new royal white elephant reached the summer palace at Hua Hin. It was the third one found in his reign.

**Jowly & Jolly.** "Our strength lies in our nationalistic feeling," asserts King Bhumibol, and the men who run Thailand are well aware that their youthful King is their—and the nation's—greatest living asset. Among the most important, military and civilian, members of Thailand's ruling oligarchy:

► **Thanom Kittikachorn**, 54, who was Sarit's deputy and took over after him in 1963 as Premier. Field Marshal Thanom has continued Sarit's basic policies of national development, anti-Communism and friendship with the free world. But his personal style is a bit different: a quiet homebody with no taste for nightclubs, he resigned from all his private businesses when word of Sarit's indiscretions leaked out. His greatest problem, he says, is "how to safeguard and ensure the security of Thailand" against Red insurgency.

► **Praphas Charusathien**, 54, the jowly and jolly commander in chief of the army, Deputy Premier, Interior Minister and most visibly active and outspoken man in government. Given to bow ties and dark glasses, Praphas bridges when his extensive business dealings are mentioned. Since he controls both army and police forces, gossips whisper that Praphas (pronounced Prapat) could conceivably oust Thanom.

But that would likely produce an ugly family quarrel: Praphas' daughter is married to Thanom's son, and in fact the parents are close friends.

► **Thanat Khoman**, 52, the brilliant civilian Foreign Minister, who has represented the Thais for 20 years around the world, notably in Washington and at the U.N. Of Chinese ancestry, Thanat (pronounced Tah-not) speaks five languages, has played a key role in mediating the Malaysian-Indonesian dispute in recent weeks, ranks as anti-Communist as any statesman in Asia.

► **Pote Sarasin**, 59, the U.S.-educated (Wilbraham Academy) lawyer who is Minister for National Development. Briefly Premier, onetime secretary-gen-

HARRY REDL



GENERAL PRAPHAS

*Never point your finger or your foot.*

eral of SEATO, Pote, more than any man, has presided over Thailand's orderly growth in recent years. He is unabashedly pro-American—and notably popular at home.

Thailand's critics sometimes carp about the slowness with which the military are delivering on their promises of a constitution, elections and a return to civilian rule. Members of the Constituent Assembly have been at work on a constitution for seven years, and may go on with the job indefinitely. No one is rushing them. The fact is, the easy-going Thais simply do not care very much one way or another. Nor does class and status trouble anyone very much, even though titled aristocracy, thanks to Bhumibol's prolific forebears, abounds. Among the 22 Royal Highnesses and 132 Serene Highnesses are some very active types, in the tradition of Thai women, who like to go into business and to gamble. Princess Chumbhot of Nagar Svarga is vice president of a bank, benefactor of a Bang-

kok hospital, curator of her own palace-museum, patron of Thai artists, and inventor of the sport of tubing—going over rapids in an inner tube.

**Insect Sauce.** Collegium and King together preside over a land that, for all its advantages, is not without problems. By far the most troublesome region is the northeast, along the porous Mekong River frontier with Laos. There, nearly a third of the kingdom's subjects live in a swirl of powdery red dust. Ethnically and linguistically more closely related to the Lao than the central Thai, the northeasterners scratch out a subsistence living from the cracked earth, supplementing their diets of rice and rotten fish with such regional delicacies as eels, ant eggs, fried cicadas and fresh cucumbers served in a dark red insect sauce. Long a center of discontent, the northeast has lately erupted in infant guerrilla war, just as Peking Foreign Minister Chen Yi blatantly predicted last year.

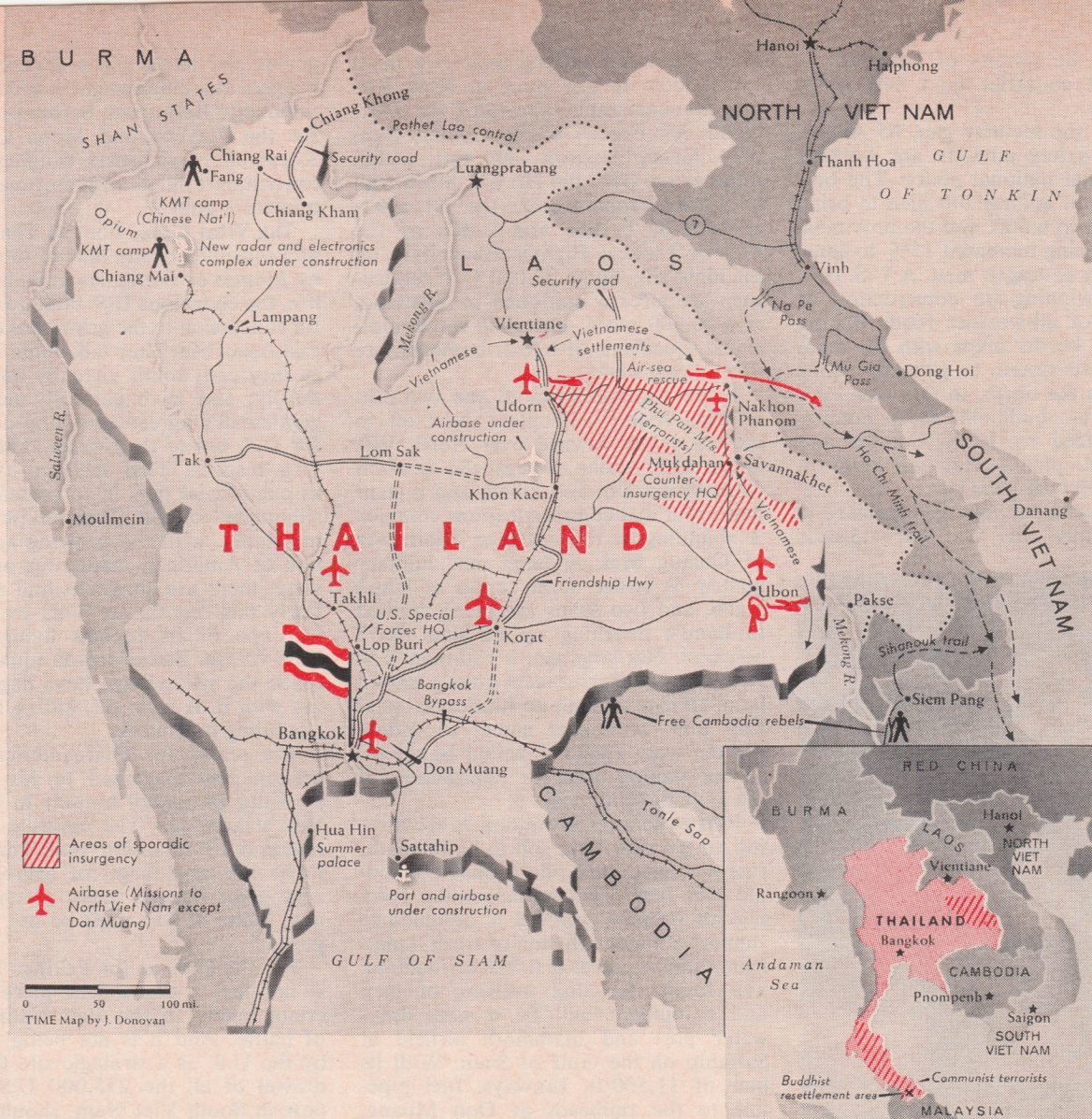
Soon thereafter, the Communists, who had been content with persuasion and threats in their efforts to enlist members, switched tactics and began killing schoolteachers and village leaders who refused to cooperate. In the past three months, more than 30 incidents of terrorism have hit the northeast, as many as occurred in all the last half of last year.

**Gouged Eyes.** The Red-carrot approach consisted of offering new recruits to the Peasants Liberation Party a salary of 500 baht per month and the promise of a new tractor for the village. Now the ante is far higher. In Nakhon Phanom province, the Red Chinese are offering a 50,000-baht reward for the murder of Provincial Education Officer Thavil Chanlawong, one of the northeast's most effective anti-Communist workers. In one Nakhon Phanom district, the terrorists have killed 16 villagers in the past year, kidnaped six more, and early this month shot the village doctor. The eyes and heart of an assassinated teacher were gouged out and stuck on sticks beside his corpse to intimidate other teachers.

With probably no more than 1,000 hard-core Communists in all the northeast, mostly based in the Phu Pan Mountains, Bangkok at first insisted it was no more than a police problem. But early this year, it moved the army into the northeast, set up joint civilian-military police command posts in each of the six most sensitive border provinces. Since then the Thais have killed 50 terrorists and captured 300, moderating the Red thrust.

**Old Soldiers.** Adding to the internal threat in the northeast is a community of some 40,000 to 60,000 Vietnamese who are refugees from the French Indo-China war and almost totally loyal to Ho Chi Minh. With their own cadres, schools and tight internal organizations, and their distinctive ground-hugging houses, unlike those on stilts of the Thais, the Vietnamese are a built-in springboard for future trouble. But thus





far the insurgency leadership is essentially Thai, some trained in China, bolstered by Pathet Lao, who slip across from Savannakhet in neighboring Laos.

In the north live some 250,000 nomadic hill tribesmen who have migrated into Thai territory from Burma and China over the past century, have little allegiance to anything beyond the profitable art of growing opium poppies. Helping them move the illegal raw opium are some 3,500 Chinese Nationalist soldiers, aging remnants of the Kuomintang's 93rd Division who fled from Yunnan into Burma in 1949. With tacit approval of the Thais, the heavily armed old soldiers maintain camps above Chiang Mai, work closely with Shan rebels, a Burmese tribe in revolt against Rangoon, who swap opium for food and weapons.

Far to the south, amid the fertile plantations of pineapple, sugar cane and tapioca, lurks another band of old soldiers. Thailand's four provinces bordering Malaysia harbor more than 500 Communist guerrillas, remnants of the war that the Reds lost in Malaya. Though they claim that their enemy is still Malaysia and the British, the superannuated rebels harass the Moslem

Thais who live in the south for "taxes," and lately have turned up with the same propaganda leaflets as the terrorists in the northeast.

**Alphabet Soup.** Though in the northeast the Thais have found it necessary, as Thanom says, "to meet force with force," essentially, in all its backward regions, the government, with U.S. aid and advice, is attempting a far more ambitious solution. Its aim is nothing less than to transform the traditional pattern of Southeast Asian government, which is strong enough in the capital but hardly exists at the remote town and village level. "The villagers are often frightened," says one U.S. observer in Nakhon Phanom, "of what both the government and roving Communist bands will do to them." Since Thailand's burgeoning economy hardly requires the sort of pump priming typical of most aid programs, much of the \$400 million that the U.S. has given Thailand since 1951 has been targeted to fill two loopholes: the lack of police and civil authorities in the countryside.

The result of the joint U.S.-Thai effort is an alphabet soup of crash programs to bring Bangkok's concern for its "outlanders" to life. MDUs (Mobile

Development Units), 100-man teams of health workers, road builders and education officials directed by the military, are operating in nine provinces, and are out to make quick impact in the most threatened areas, then move on, building roads, schools, dispensaries—whatever most needs to be done. ARD (Accelerated Rural Development) teams do the same sort of work under provincial authority but move in to stay. Their goals range from providing rural electrification to potable-water systems for 1,000 communities within three years, to establishing community-development projects in 6,700 villages by 1968. One key ARD program: an academy for local government opened last year for district chiefs.

**Bawdy Refrains.** MIT (Mobile Information Teams) spreads the government message among the peasants. One popular means: sandwiching the anti-Communist word among the bawdy lyrics of the popular *mohlam* minstrels of the northeast, using both live singers and films in popular traveling road shows. After a *mohlam* refrain like "May I sleep with you, beautiful girl, may I?", the singers come on with "Our Thai brethren should not forget that Thai



people can be owners of land, but in Communist countries land belongs to the state."

To close the security gap, 45 American public-safety advisers are working with the Thai national police. The border police are adding 500 men to bring the force up to 6,500, and the provincial police are being increased 15% to some 35,000 fully equipped men. A U.S. contractor is winding up construction of 140 miles of all-weather roads linking two critical border areas with the main national road system to give the police mobility. In the north, to the same end, the U.S. has built 44 short landing strips, serviced by Helio Courier and Porter STOL planes that can land on less than 200 ft. if need be.

The government has also enlisted a powerful ally in its war against



KING & QUEEN VISITING HILL TRIBES  
To bring outlanders to life.

the Communists: Thailand's Buddhist monks. The Thais alone in Asia have made the Buddhist church an official establishment, with the government the legal owner of the nation's 23,000 temples—one for every 1,300 Thais. Monks in the northeast are helping in community-development projects and distributing medicine and clothes to needy villagers. In a cool mountain valley in Moslem Yala province, the government recently resettled 300 Buddhist families, plans to bring in 5,000 more within five years as a stabilizing influence.

**The Biggest Job.** In what amounts to a subtle, carefully unstated exchange for U.S. help in heading off the Communists at home, the Thais have tacitly permitted the U.S. to establish sanctuary and a second front in Thailand for the war in Viet Nam. From four Thai airfields, flying the Thai flag and guarded by Thai soldiers at Takhli, Korat, Udorn and Ubon, eight squadrons of U.S. Air Force F-105s and F-4Cs fly more than 125 missions daily—80% of all the U.S. bombing of North Viet

Nam. Peasants tending their rice fields rarely look up any more as sleek RF-101 reconnaissance planes of the Thirteenth Air Force's 632nd Combat Support Group scream off and within minutes are over the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. From Korat, the jet afterburners of F-105s and F-4Cs of the 6234th Tactical Fighter Wing light up the night sky. Some 20,000 U.S. servicemen are already stationed in Thailand, and 10,000 more, including three additional squadrons of fighter-bombers, are due by year's end.

From Nakhon Phanom and two other Thai bases, helicopters swirl off to recover pilots downed over North Viet Nam. U.S. radar sweeps the horizon from Mukdahan and Ubon, and a giant new radar and communications complex is abuilding at the northern boom city of Chiang Mai. A large new military airstrip is under construction at Khon Kaen, and two strips are being readied to handle anything up to giant B-52 bombers. Not long ago, a 130-man U.S. Army Special Forces team quietly moved from Okinawa to set up headquarters at Lop Buri. If it ever comes to widening the war, Thailand would be an excellent staging area for interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Everywhere, U.S. bulldozers are turning up the rich Thai soil to build roads, fuel pipelines, stockpile depots, communication nets. This mushrooming complex of support facilities is designed to support a major infusion of fresh American military power if it is ever required. The funnel for that infusion of men and equipment will be a new deep-water port and mammoth airfield at Sattahip on the Gulf of Siam. With its pair of 11,500-ft. runways, fuel pipeline to the railheads at Don Muang, giant ammunition storage piers, the \$75 million Sattahip complex is the largest military construction job in all of Asia, phasing into operation over the next two years.

**Route to the Interior.** The airfield itself will be ready this summer, large enough to hold at one time three squadrons of fighter-bombers, 20 KC-135 jet transports, one squadron of air-defense fighters and 120 C-123 transport planes, not to mention the B-52s which could fly from its extra-thick runways. Sattahip's fuel pipeline system will eventually extend to Korat, where the U.S. Army's 9th Logistical Command has already stockpiled enough guns, tanks, trucks and ammunition for a full division. U.S. and Thai engineers are constructing the Bangkok Bypass, a strategic highway to carry vital traffic northward past the capital. It will have the side effect, as did the \$20 million Friendship Highway completed two years ago, of opening up vast interior regions of the nation to the capital's culture and economy.

Everywhere the Americans settle in provincial Thailand, a miniature boom inevitably ensues. Bars, nightclubs, tailor shops and bowling alleys sprout. Udorn boasts the slick new Udorn Hotel;

across the street G.I.s munch cheeseburgers and chicken-in-the-basket in the Silhouette Restaurant before pushing off for the Playboy and Mona Lisa bars. Korat offers pleasures ranging from a town square filled with fortunetellers to miniature golf.

**The Vital Core.** For the Thais, proud and sensitive to any hint of interference by *farangs* or foreigners in their national life, the enormous U.S. buildup is a painful concession to the grim facts of Southeast Asian life. They talk about it as little as they can, admit virtually nothing officially, and have carefully made only gentleman's agreements, one at a time, for U.S. use of their bases. The U.S. in turn respects Thai feelings by trying, as one official puts it, to present a "low silhouette" on the Thai landscape. But inevitably, with the growing accumulation of American manpower and hardware, there are abrasions and mistakes. Early this month, an F-4C from Ubon lost one of its rockets flying over a Thai village. Before search squads could reach the site, village boys began playing with it. It went off, killing four and wounding four more.

The reason for Thai-American cooperation was explained to his subjects by King Bhumibol himself in his New Year's message. "The opposite side has revealed its intention that Thailand is to be the next target of aggression. A very great danger might reach us any day. None of you must be put off your guard."

For the U.S., as for Peking, Thailand is not just a convenient piece of real estate handy to the Viet Nam theater of battle. And it is not being built up by the U.S. as a strategic site for withdrawal of all the 255,000 U.S. troops now in South Viet Nam, should such a thing be demanded by some future Saigon government. For one thing, the Thais would not allow that many *farangs* roaming about for any reason. More important, throughout their history, the Thais have survived by shrewdly siding with the stronger. For all their genuine anti-Communist convictions, the Thais might well develop serious second thoughts the day the U.S. began to pull out of Saigon.

Thailand's importance really rests on its key position in the heart of Southeast Asia, and in the promise of its resources to create a genuine revolution before the Communists can dig in. If Viet Nam has reached Mao's Stage 3 of massed battles in the revolutionary manual, Thailand is still in Stage 1. That is the organization of insurrection of the grass roots—and the Thais have a chance to arrest it there. Though the gunfire now resounds in Viet Nam, the vital core on which all Southeast Asia depends, as a glance at any map shows, is in reality Thailand. So long as the Land of the Free remains in the province of free nations, Southeast Asia is secure. And given enough time, its example of stability and security might ultimately spread out to heal and instruct its troubled, less favored neighbors.