

## CHAPTER VI

### **Nobels and the National Security Council**

Prime Minister Chuan Likphai and his coalition of "angelic parties" took office in September of 1992 as a direct result of the events of May of that year where the Thai middle class rose against the self-intalled premier General Suchinda Krapayoon. Thai policy towards Burma and the Burmese refugees, with some minor fluctuations, nonetheless continued along the same path. One significant departure from the past, however, was the increased influence on "local" foreign policy, including domestic policy toward the Burmese displaced persons, of the Thai National Security Council. The NSC has asserted itself, as do other Thai organizations, when a certain personality decides to do so. There is no set ideology for a group, but rather it follows its head, whose ideas may depart significantly from past leaders. In the case of the Chuan Likphai period, the secretary-general of the NSC was General Charan Kunlawanich but more importantly was the emergence and influence of an advisor to General Charan from, oddly enough, external to the council's staff and even external to the public sector. This advisor seized the reigns of refugee policy during the Chuan administration, and drove toward unmistakable cooperation with Rangoon.

#### **Bangkok and Rangoon**

During his election campaign, Prasong Soonsiri made various criticisms that there should be review of Thai policy toward Burma. This stance faded immediately upon his acceptance of the position of foreign minister when he stated in October that

there would be no change in Thai-Myanmar relations.<sup>1</sup> Prasong rebutted criticism by explaining that he was part of a coalition government which required consensus,<sup>2</sup> which may be interpreted as not wanting to interfere in the economic interests of certain individuals within the government. Regardless, the Foreign Minister reversed his stance once again just one month later. Analysts suggested that this about-face might have been a result of the Clinton victory in the United States and the American administration's emphasis on human rights, though it was not Prasong's personal opinion which was changing, but rather that government policy was under review.<sup>3</sup> Thai policy, nonetheless, generally followed foregoing patterns of improving relations with Rangoon. Perhaps the one major exception to this rule was the permitting of a visit to the country by a group of Nobel Laureates who had come to demonstrate support for their colleague, Aung San Suu Kyi.

The visit by the laureates in February 1993 was precluded by vigorous debate between the military led by General Wimol Wongwanich on one side and the Prime Minister's Office/Foreign Ministry on the other. The National Security Council remained behind the scenes, though was said also to have expressed concern.

Arrangements for the Nobel laureates to visit Thailand were made by the Canada based International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development and the Thai Confederation for Democracy with the affirmed intention to "attempt to secure the unconditional, immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nation*. 24 October 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with H.E. ACM Prasong Soonsiri.

<sup>3</sup> *Reuters*. 9 November 1992.

prisoners.”<sup>4</sup> Before its arrival, Foreign Minister Prasong cautioned the delegation not to embarrass Thailand by using it as a platform to express anti-SLORC views. The delegation assured the minister that they had no intention to do so.

One particularly sensitive issue surrounding the visit was the inclusion of the Dalai Lama - the *de facto* leader of Tibet. The People’s Republic of China urged Thailand to deny him entry but the Dalai was nonetheless granted a visa with the six other laureates though the government sought to distance itself from the visit and limit the Peace Prize winners’ activities.\* Nevertheless, the Prime Minister did praise the Foreign Ministry for its decision and said that Thailand “can not think about material gains only. We must take into account that a country must stand by a principle, the principle of correctness, honor, and prestige.”<sup>5</sup> The Prime Minister added that allowing the visit would boost the country’s image which had been damaged since May 1992. The House Foreign Affairs Committee Spokesman Sutham Saengprathum added his praise for the governments commitment to human rights principles instead of fearing to upset Burma.

The Thai military was not so commendatory. A day before the delegation was to arrive General Wimol and Air Force Commander in Chief Kan Phimanthip warned that the visitors could cause a strain in relations with Burma and China. General Wimol, expressing his concern, said:

The actions of this group could affect Thai-Burmese relations. We should not put ourselves into that position. Being a Thai, I do not want to see any trouble resulting from the group’s visit here. Having one more enemy will

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<sup>4</sup> Bangkok Post. 13 February 1993.

\* The granting of a visa to the Dalai Lama was unprecedented as he had twice, in 1987 and 1990, been refused entry.

<sup>5</sup> Radio Thailand Network. 15 February 1993, cited in FBIS-EAS-93-029.



be too much for Thailand.<sup>6</sup>

Though NSC Secretary General Charan Kunlawanich said he believed Burma would understand Thailand's decision, Major General Khin Nyunt, on a Burmese radio broadcast, equated the laureates with "evil forces" trying to create economic and political difficulty for the country by meeting with insurgents.<sup>7</sup>

The visit passed with the laureates visiting the Mae La and Huay Kalok refugee camps in Tak and meeting with representatives of the ethnic minority organizations, though the group was not permitted to meet with any NCGUB representatives as the Thai prohibited anyone from the parallel government to cross the border. Upon their return, the laureates repeatedly called for an international arms embargo on Rangoon with some members of the delegations calling additionally for economic sanctions.<sup>8</sup> The laureates later in the year presented testimony as to their findings for the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva and visited the United States and Europe to forward their recommendations.

The Foreign Ministry, in an apparent effort to ameliorate any bad feelings, scheduled a visit by Prasong Soonsiri first to China, at the Chinese government's request, and then to Burma. During the visit of the Nobel delegation, Deputy Foreign Minister Surin Phitsuwan traveled to Rangoon for a joint border committee meeting where Khin Nyunt informed him that he was "slightly irritated" by the events.<sup>9</sup> Upon

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<sup>6</sup> *The Nation*. 15 February 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Burmese Radio. 18 February 1993, cited in FBIS-EAS-93-032.

<sup>8</sup> *The Nation*. 19 February 1993.

<sup>9</sup> *The Nation*. 20 September 1993.

his return, Surin expressed his dismay stating "Who has to pay the price for the visit? Thailand, not any group."<sup>10</sup>

The visit was an interesting diversion from policy toward Burma though the Thai motives were somewhat opaque. One explanation would be that Chuan Likphai had a sincere interest in human rights due to his experience in the 1970s when he was almost arrested by the military junta and additionally because of the events of May 1992, from which his party was able to emerge victorious in the general elections. There was perhaps a bit of Thai interest at play as well though, a reparation of image, as the Prime Minister stated, and at the same time a protection of image. The Nobel laureates placed the Chuan administration in a difficult position as had the government denied their applications, Thailand's, and the Prime Ministers, international image would have suffered, this coming at a time when Thailand was trying to play an expanded role in international politics.

The visit did however lead to a fallout between the Burmese and the Thai most obviously manifested in Rangoon's review of Thai logging and fishing licenses. Not long after the laureates departure the SLORC decided to examine Thai national resource interests in their country as they accused certain concessionaires of over felling and over fishing than concessions permitted.<sup>11</sup> Another interpretation could be the continued support for the ethnic minorities by elements of the Thai government and the visit of the Nobel laureates which drew international attention to the situation in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bangkok Post. 22 September 1993.

Burma. Regardless of the motive, the SLORC rescinded Thai logging licenses, allowing only the export of processed wood.

In May, in an apparent effort to quell any negative feelings, Interior Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh took a one day trip to Rangoon followed by visits of Defense Minister Vijit Sukmark, Army Commander-in-Chief Wimol Wongwanich and Navy Commander-in-Chief Vichet Karunyavanij.

Criticism did not cease with the departure of the Nobel delegation. The laureates traveled to the United States and took up the issue with President Bill Clinton who ordered a critical review of American policy towards Burma. Another laureate, Rigoberta Menchu, visited the border and the Karen refugee camps in September and Dr. Yozo Yokota, the UN special rapporteur on human rights for Burma, also did the same, each leveling more criticism at Rangoon.

At the same time that Menchu was visiting the border, Foreign Minister Prasong Soonsiri was in Rangoon for the first Thailand-Myanmar Joint Commission meeting. The purpose of the gathering was to strengthen ties, but the issues of new strict regulations on Thai fishing and the planned cancellation of Thai logging contracts were high on the agenda. Prasong, in an effort to ease tension between the neighbors, suggested that Burma attend the ASEAN ministerial meeting in Bangkok in July 1994, though the SLORC declined to give an immediate response.

In October, another voice was added to the criticism when UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, during a meeting with Prime Minister Chuan Likphai and Foreign Minister Prasong, expressed concern over the unsatisfactory progress made by the junta and over Rangoon's denial of a monitoring role to the UNHCR in



the repatriation of the Rohingyas.<sup>12</sup> The voice of disapproval even rang from home when the chairman of the House Committee on Justice and Human Rights, Dr. Suthin Nophaket, stated that ASEAN should set conditions on Burmese participation and that "Unless these conditions are met, Thailand should not invite Burma to attend the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok as an observer."<sup>13</sup>

### **Border**

The refugee population continued to grow during this period as more and more, newcomers were fleeing conscripted labor and anti-civilian maneuvers than actual combat; Sangkhlaburi being the area which witnessed the largest numbers of this new sub-category of displaced person. The construction of the Ye-Tavoy railway, an undertaking utilizing masses of unpaid workers, was the largest of the projects and main source of displacement, though road building and forced portage contributed significantly.

In the Sangkhlaburi area, during a February 1993 meeting between the National Security Council, the Ninth Army, district officials and the Mon National Relief Committee, it was decided that Loh Loe Camp would split into three sites: forty families to Pa Yaw, and the remainder to Halockhani near the border. The District Officer further complicated relief assistance to the Mon as he would not allow rice to be delivered until all the paperwork was absolutely correct. Nat E Thaung and

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<sup>12</sup> *The Nation*. 8 October 1993.

<sup>13</sup> *The Nation*. 9 October 1993.

Jawgadin camp relocated in January 1993, but Thai officials warned camp authorities in the latter to ask students sheltering there to leave.

Perhaps one of the most controversial moves by Thai authorities came in April, when troops from the Thai Ninth Army entered We Gyi and Dawgwin camps and gave the occupants just minutes to gather their belongings and evacuate before soldiers razed their homes. In two other Mon camps, Ah Ler Htso and Don Aw See, local military again told the refugees to evacuate. Though their homes were not burned, they moved into the forest to temporary shelters. Soldiers also went to the ABSDF's 101 camp, confiscated weapons and ordered the students to burn all buildings (Some weapons were found in a Mon camp north of 101 and these were confiscated and the people ordered to move across the border). When the UNHCR and US Embassy traveled to the border to talk with officers of the Ninth Army, they were informed that the military had received orders to move all camps being used by armed groups and to confiscate any weapons found in those sites. In a subsequent meeting between UNHCR and BBC, the Ninth Army displayed pictures of weapons found in some of the camps.<sup>14</sup>

The army did, however, agree that civilians should be provided asylum and on May 15, traveled to the border with the BBC and NSC to search for suitable sites and originally decided on Don Aw See. This area was inaccessible; therefore, instead of making an expensive new road, Halockhani, a village straddling the border an hour and a half walk from a *Tatmadaw* post, was chosen to be the location for refugees displaced from the Mon camps. Responding to questions over the initial lack of clarity

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<sup>14</sup>NGO sources.



concerning sovereignty over the site, the National Security Council stated that though the area had not been formally demarcated Thailand felt that it was in Thai territory. Responding to questions of safety, the NSC said that measures had been taken to insure that refugees would not face persecution upon return.<sup>15</sup> Officials, furthermore, reassured relief workers that assistance could continue and that should there be a resurgence in fighting, the Mon would be allowed to move back across the border. The Mon, however, remained skeptical and requested to stay at a location clearly inside Thailand which they had begun to clear before Thai authorities ordered them to stop. Despite the request, Thai security forces demanded that Loh Loe move to Halockhani by January 1994, citing reasons of the Mon damaging national forest reserves in which their camps were located.<sup>16</sup>

Karenni camps were put under similar pressures to move closer to the border or just across. In July 1993, Camp 2 was ordered to move by August 25 but did so shortly after the deadline to a site some two kilometers inside Burma. As in the case of the Mon, local Thai authorities reassured the Karenni that should there be resurgence in armed conflict, refugees would be allowed to cross the border again.

In September, Thai authorities enacted further measures to track and regulate the refugee population by, beginning with Mawker camp, registering all inhabitants and issuing an identification card. If arrested in an immigration sweep, the cardholder would not be deported to Burma but returned to the camp; however, those who

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<sup>15</sup> *The Nation*. 3 October 1993.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

claimed to be residents of the camp when arrested would need to show identification as proof.<sup>17</sup>

### **Students**

The students were put under increasing pressure to enter the Safe Area as only a dozen had reported since its opening. From 24-28 December 1992, a campaign by police officers familiar with the Burmese cases swept through Bangkok resulting in nearly fifty arrests, all of which were sent to the Immigration Detention Center. The Ministry of Interior had earlier threatened those who refused to report to the Safe Area before a November 30, 1992 deadline with arrest, detention and deportation, thus those captured were not sent to Ratchaburi but detained at the IDC. The UNHCR intervened in the cases of persons of concern so that they could be sent to the Safe Area, but those unregistered were treated as illegal immigrants.

The original intention of the camp was to house only the 516 students and 222 dissidents registered with MOI, but this criteria was dropped in February so as to attract more residents. Students remained distrustful of the Safe Area as General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh had become the interior minister within the Chuan Likphai administration and Safe Area administration fell under the auspices of the MOI. Many of the Burmese remembered Chavalit as the one who delivered their comrades into the hands of the SLORC in 1989 and felt that the Safe Area would become a similar staging ground for repatriation.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with an official from the Ministry of Interior.

By the end of April, the number of persons in Baan Maneeloy had increased to forty two and they were being permitted exit passes for trips to Bangkok.

Nonetheless, pressure in the capital continued with eleven students being arrested in front of the FISRAPT education center and a letter to NGOs prohibiting assistance to non-Indochinese immigrants without the consent of MOI. Moreover, the Ministry ordered that all students registered with them would have to report to the Safe Area by the end of May. UNHCR subsequently transferred this group's allowances to the Safe Area and reduced it from 2,500 to 800 baht (the camp provided housing and food thus justifying the reduction). In June, the MOI agreed to expedite the process for transferring refugees from the IDC to the Safe Area and a number of students agreed to go.

Another measure aimed at convincing the students to enter the Safe Area was the requirement that anyone wishing to resettle abroad would have to intern at the camp prior to departure, though a specific time period was not specified. Many of those reporting to Baan Maneeloy, thus, were awaiting resettlement to Australia, Canada or the United States. UNHCR also informed students receiving scholarships for education in Bangkok that they would need to register with the Safe Area or funding would cease.

As a result of the aforementioned strategies, and because the Overseas National Students Organization of Burma, which represented a substantial portion of the students in the Thai capital, reversed its initial stance of objecting to any students wishing to report to the Safe area, the numbers passed 150 by August.



But as more students arrived in the camp, a serious sequence of events spelled trouble for their reputation in Thailand. On September 16, students broke into the UNHCR office in the Safe Area, burned some official documents, and vandalized the office. On the wall, they painted a threat to the UNHCR Representative to the Safe Area "Vilaiwan, can you change basic principles? If you cannot change for our affairs, notice, you'll be kill(ed)" and signed it "Our Liberation Association, Chairman Fremin." UNHCR Representative Dan Conway, in a memorandum to the residents of the Safe Area, wrote

It is a strange thing that in the name of "liberation", people sneak in the night into the office of a United Nations agency which PROTECTS THEM and ASSISTS THEM and threatens to kill a woman who spends all of her time trying to help the population of the Safe Area.

The statement advised the students that the UNHCR did not accept threats and that now it would indeed take action. Conway wrote that UNHCR would withdraw from the Safe Area and would only return on the conditions that either those responsible identify themselves or that a police investigation was complete. He added that because the UNHCR would no longer be involved with the Safe Area that regretfully, it would not arrange for any student to leave to attend UNHCR-sponsored educational activities nor would it be providing assistance payments. Students protested in front of the United Nations building to no avail.

Maneelay's commander, Chaithawat Naimsiri, responded by installing a 9:00 pm to 6:00 am curfew and by defining the Safe Area official's residences as a restricted area. Eventually UN participation in the Safe Area was resumed, the guilty party

prosecuted, and the curfew lifted but not without serious damage to the standing of the students with the Thai.

Yet another event at the end of November further marred their image. On November 21, a group of policemen, in an illegal immigrant raid in the Pratunam area, discovered a cache of explosives with a group of four Burmese students. After the arrests, Thai authorities quickly strengthened security at the Burmese Embassy and at the ESCAP building, two sites they deemed to be potential targets. Of the four arrested students, one, Sann Hlaing (alias Ye Thi Ha) was a member of the Lion Group and had planned to travel to Rangoon to assassinate the SLORC generals on Independence Day as they celebrated (January 4).<sup>\*</sup> Ye Thi Ha was also one of the students who had hijacked the airplane from Burma to Thailand and had been released during Her Majesty the Queen's amnesty. Police found that his three colleagues were only visiting on the day of the raid and released them, all three eventually resettling in Canada. Sann Hlaing was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison and remains in the Special Prison in the Bangkok Central Jail.

### **Period Summary and Analysis**

During the initial months of the Chuan Likphai administration, the new government appeared to be taking a more sympathetic line towards the democracy movement by allowing the visit by the Nobel laureates. Nonetheless, with exception of

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<sup>\*</sup> The Lion Group is a faction of the Blood Group and had a membership of only four persons. The Blood Group was established at Three Pagodas Pass in 1989 where its members received demolitions training from two former American Soldiers affiliated with the New Mon State Party. The group mostly conducted demolitions missions in towns close to the border. The Blood Group was dissolved in 1993. "Ye" or Blood is also a title commonly used by students in their codenames.

minor objections from government employees and academics, Thai policy toward Burma continued as normal. Burmese relations, however, cooled from the Nobel trip and opportunistic practice by some Thai businesses operating in Burmese forests and seas.

Thai refugee policy during the period is best described as linked to political needs. The National Security Council orchestrated this policy by a series of moves aimed at a permanent move of the border camps from Thai soil. Refugees also became a bargaining chip in an intensified campaign to bring the Mon to the negotiating table and though they were never forcibly repatriated, they were forced to move their camps to a site on disputed territory and close to a Burmese military outpost. The Karenni also were moved across the border out of Thai territory to an area that was clearly not safe. The Karen, for the time being, were left out of the pressure equation as approaching the Karen was more problematic than the smaller groups.

Thai authorities also attempted to lessen student presence in Bangkok - another politically charged issue. Increased pressure was leveled against this group in the form of arrests and limiting UNHCR access and assistance. A series of events by students, especially the plot to take explosives to Rangoon, did not help to enamor their image in the eyes of the Thai and only served to fortify opinion that they should not be permitted to stay in Bangkok.