

CHAPTER IV

Battlefields to Marketplaces and the

Arrival of the Students

The descriptive sections, of which this is the first, are divided into three periods. The first 1988-1991 of the Chatchai Choonhaven administration, the next, 1991-1992 of the brief NPKC/Anand I/Suchinda Krapayoon/Anand II administrations, and the last, 1992-1993 of the Chuan Likphai government, including some particularly significant events from 1994 and 1995. For this descriptive section and each thereafter, events shall fall under three common headings: **Bangkok and Rangoon** - the government to government relations between Thailand and Burma which contribute to the context in which decisions on refugees are made; **Border** - the events which cause refugee influxes along the Thai-Burma border as well as the directives aimed at the refugees there; and **Students** - the activities of as well as the policies and measures aimed at this group. Each chapter will conclude with an overall analysis of the period.

1988, the first year of the Chatchai Choonhaven government, was the pivotal year of transition from a policy of support to the ethnic minority armies along the border to cooperation with the Burmese government in Rangoon. This is the point where present day policy, commonly identified as constructive engagement, truly found its genesis. Because of its significance, the events and consequences occurring within this period demand close examination.

Bangkok and Rangoon

Perhaps the most pervasive characteristic of Thai foreign policy during the Chatchai administration was the competition between the prime minister's office headed by Chatchai, his group of Soi Ratchakhru advisors and the military led by General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh on one side and the foreign ministry headed by Sitthi Sawetsila on the other. Each of the leaders had his own agenda which often put him at odds with the other two. The main debates were not, however, over Burma policy but rather that towards Indochina. Prime Minister Chatchai called for a "battlefields to marketplaces" policy and an abandonment of support to the Khmer Rouge, while Foreign Minister Sitthi, a cold war strategist and diplomat, advised discretion, both in new relations towards Indochina and an abandonment of the Khmer Rouge as a traditional bargaining chip with the Vietnamese.¹ Despite cooperation over Indochina, the opinions of Chatchai and his advisors were somewhat at variance with General Chavalit over Burma but this never truly became an issue of public debate.

Discord began when on August 4, 1988, following the royal command appointing General Chatchai Choonhaven to the position of Prime Minister of Thailand, Chatchai, in a press interview stated "...there will be an adjustment in our policies towards our neighboring countries. We want Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as our trade markets, and not as a battlefield." Towards the end of August, Chatchai Choonhaven once again stated his intention of transforming the battlefields of Indochina into marketplaces; this time with an interest in negotiating fishing licenses

¹Buszynski. 1989.

and cooperation with Vietnam.² Thailand had depleted much of its domestic supplies due to overfishing and was looking to its neighbors for a future supply of marine products while the Vietnamese were experiencing their own economic woes and had decided to open to the world economy.

General Chatchai Choonhaven attempted to move the policy a step further when on February 23, 1989, while attending the funeral of the Emperor of Japan, he submitted an aide-memoire to United States President George Bush stressing intellectual property rights and trade, the rapprochement between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, and the switch in the world arena, including in Indochina, from a focus on military security issues to economic ones.³ The aide-memoire then suggested a strategy for reducing differences between the U.S. and Thailand through "substantive trade and investment" which was defined as

looking at area of investment, which can benefit both of us, but which have largely been neglected before, most notable high-technology goods and services and heavy industry development. This can also include common endeavours in trade with and investment in third countries, particularly the Indochinese countries and Burma.⁴

To accomplish this formidable task, a definitive plan of action required drafting. For this, Chatchai and his advisors suggested that instead of the comprehensive United Nations approach to peace in Cambodia, a step by step procedure be initiated instead.

General Chavalit was instrumental in bringing the factions together and acting as a mediator between them. When the day of the historic Tokyo meeting finally took

²The Nation. 26 August 1988.

³Bangkok Post. 25 February 1989.

⁴Bangkok Post. 25 February 1989.

place, the four factions proposed by the United Nations were lumped into two, one led by Sihanouk and the other by Hun Sen. The agreement that passed was the first time in any Cambodian negotiations that two signatures had been attained.

Despite the obvious focus on Indochina, Burma had been included in the *aide-memoire* submitted to President George Bush in Japan. Though more of a footnote, this action does reflect a certain change in mindset of some Thai officials from the traditional policy toward Burma of support for the ethnic minorities as a destabilizing factor pitted against Rangoon to one of cooperation with the SLORC.

After submitting the six-point memoire, Chatchai was accused of, amongst other things, moving away from ASEAN, behaving as a neo-colonialist, and having an interest in Thailand being a base for future U.S. investments in Indochina and Burma. Chatchai quickly denied the criticisms and members of his team of advisors responded in kind. Phansak Winyarat said the proposals were "attempts to find a role which is contributive without having to be neo-capitalists."⁵ While M.R. Sukhumphan Boriphath said that, "Certainly the prime minister is not advocating the US. trade with Indochina or Burma (now)," but "...he said that if it is politically and diplomatically permitted one day the U.S. will have to trade with Indochina and Burma."⁶ The U.S. response was simply that trade with Indochina and Burma was at odds with current U.S. policy.

Once Chatchai Choonhaven became prime minister, General Chavalit began to play a more proactive role in Thai foreign policy. Before Chatchai donned the mantle

⁵ Bangkok Post. 27 February 1989.

⁶ Bangkok Post. 27 February 1989.

of premier of Thailand, General Chavalit travelled to Rangoon on April 21, 1988, as head of a 150-member delegation which included the commanders of the armed forces, the National Security Council chief, and deputy permanent secretaries of the ministries of foreign affairs, interior and commerce.⁷ The group was received by their Burmese equivalents; General Saw Maung, the defense minister, receiving Chavalit at the airport. One of the main subjects of discussion during the one-day visit was a proposal by Thai National Energy Authority Secretary-General Praphat Premani to jointly develop five rivers by constructing seven dams as follows: one dam in the Salween, Ruak, Kok and Klong Ka Rivers and three in the Moei.⁸ Rangoon did agree to one proposal in principle during Gen Chavalit's brief visit and that was to open five more border points for trade in timber and other goods in addition to the one already opened in Chiang Mai.

General Chavalit's second trip, this time during the Chatchai administration, was the most controversial. It was ill-timed in the eyes of many in the international and domestic community as it followed closely on the heels of Burmese military suppression of popular dissent. In the Burmese capital, he was once again received by General Saw Maung who was now head of the new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which had come to power during the tumult of late 1988.

The first trip was perhaps the first big step towards a change in relations between Thailand and Burma. The second trip perhaps served to further solidify the relationship and negotiate proposals made in April. Though the Chatchai government

⁷ Bangkok Post. 22 April 1988.

⁸ Ibid.

allegedly opposed the latter visit, they gave General Chavalit some leeway for his cooperation in the Cambodia negotiations.⁹

Chatchai was also a just newly elected prime minister with limited power. Foreign Minister Sitthi, a cold war diplomat, was opposed to the way Chatchai and his advisors were handling policy and only a month before the general elections, General Chavalit made a statement to the extent that a coup was technically feasible if it had popular support. With this in mind, Chatchai may not have wished to pit his fragile new civilian administration against the military, thus allowing some leeway for the Supreme Commander to visit Burma.

General Chavalit's trip to Rangoon was made in an interesting domestic context in that a timber shortage was becoming increasingly more evident in Thailand. One particular disaster, though falling after Chavalit's visit, punctuated this point and led to a new strategy towards accessing raw materials.

In November 1988, severe floods in the southern Thai province of Chumphon left thousands homeless. It was concluded that the monsoon flooding was the product of the forestry industry's deforestation of much of the country. In news clips of the disaster, washing along with the muddy brown water engulfing people's homes, upland logs were noticeable. Popular demonstrations by rural villagers against further logging and deforestation moved the Chatchai government, on January 8, 1989, to install a nationwide ban on logging at the initiative of Minister of Agriculture Sanan Khachonprasat.

⁹ Interview with a senior member of the Chatchai administration.

Nonetheless, Thailand's demand for timber did not decrease. General Chavalit approached the nation's neighbors, Cambodia, Laos and Burma, as alternative sources of natural resources. On January 1, 1989, Laos enacted a ban on the export of logs which Thailand viewed as detrimental to its domestic needs. But just two days later, Laos presented an invitation to Subin Pinkhayan, the Thai minister of commerce, for the Thai private sector to join the country in the logging industry.¹⁰ The Thai thus proposed that in exchange for the increased sale of oil by Thailand to Laos, that Laos provide an allowance to Thailand to export processed wood.¹¹ Conversely, Cambodia was somewhat more hesitant, though a flourishing trade with the Khmer Rouge already existed. Burma, however, was much more receptive to Thai needs as diplomatic and economic exchange provided both legitimacy and, more importantly, foreign capital to fill much depleted national coffers.

In February 1989, Sanan said that all Thai borders should be opened to combat the shortage of timber which had become a political issue.¹² The government had also formulated a plan to import logs from both the SLORC and the ethnic minorities but some in the Foreign Ministry warned of the potential repercussions on relations with Rangoon.¹³ During the same month, Praphat Phosuthon, a Chat Thai MP and chairman of the Committee on Elimination of Smuggling of Forestry and Mining Products, and a 14-person delegation including Thai businessmen visited Rangoon.¹⁴

The visit by Praphat was followed by those of:

¹⁰ *Bangkok Post*. 4 January 1989.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *The Nation*. 15 February 1989.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *The Nation*. 24 February 1989.

1. Sanan Khachonprasat to discuss logging concessions to compensate for the logging moratorium in Thailand;¹⁵
2. Montri Danphaibul, secretary to Foreign Minister Sitthi Sawetsila and Social Action Party Member of Parliament, and a delegation of 18 businessmen to discuss fishing with Major General Chit Swe and Trade Minister Col. David Able;¹⁶
3. Subin Pinkhayan, Commerce Minister, to discuss joint ventures and fishing;¹⁷
4. Lt Gen Than Shwe, Burmese Army Commander-in-Chief, at the invitation of Gen Chavalit to Bangkok with a 31-person delegation to discuss border affairs and the problem of stray shells.¹⁸

The largest official Thai delegation to Rangoon, led by Deputy Foreign Minister Praphat Limpaphan, traveled to Burma in mid-April 1989 to discuss border demarcation, trade and business cooperation.¹⁹ Border disputes remained one of the potential catalysts for future conflict between the two countries and officials concerned were eager to have a complete demarcation of their over 2000 kilometer shared border. The 40-person delegation consisted of officials from the ministries of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Commerce, Foreign Affairs, Industry, Interior and Public Health. To facilitate trade, Praphat requested the opening of three permanent border checkpoints in Mae Sai in Chiang Rai, Mae Sot in Tak, and Ranong. Additionally, the Deputy Foreign Minister discussed the building of an 80-million baht bridge, with bilateral funding from ESCAP, from Myawadi to Mae Sot and two highways from Myawadi to Rangoon and Mae Sai to China.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *The Nation*. 23 March 1989.

¹⁷ *The Nation*. 23 March 1989.

¹⁸ *Bangkok Post*. 14 April 1989.

¹⁹ *The Nation*. 12 April 1989.

Thailand was also in desperate need of new fishing grounds and had approached its neighbors, amongst others, for permission to fish in their waters. SLORC again responded positively awarding the highest number of fishing licenses for Burmese waters to the Thai.

There, thus, developed a *de facto* alliance between the SLORC and certain Thai traders. The beginnings of this could be seen in the 1988 siege of the Wa base after the Wa threatened to disrupt the timber trade. In January of 1989, Rangoon sent 1,000 more troops from the 66th and 44th Divisions to defend the trade route from Moulmein to Myawadi-Mae Sot and the Thai traders utilizing it from the KNU which had also vowed to target SLORC economic targets. Concessions granted to the Thai (mainly Bangkokians) by SLORC, pitted first the ethnic minorities against the Thai traders and second, the Bangkok businessmen against the border businessmen. It is important to note also that much of illicit trade by elements of the Thai military was organized with the ethnic minority groups with whom there existed a historical relationship. Consequently, the economic interests of some military traders and Bangkok businessmen were also initially incongruous.

During this period, the People's Republic of China enjoyed increasingly more cordial relations with the SLORC after the decline of the Communist Party of Burma. Thailand was concerned about a gradual warming of relations between the PRC and Rangoon as this was a danger both strategically and economically as cheap Chinese consumer goods could flood the Burmese market and undercut unofficial Thai trade.

On December 18, 1990, Foreign Minister Sitti was replaced by Athit Urairat, who, in his first day of office, said he wanted a review of Thai foreign policy towards

Burma stating that human rights should be emphasized with a genuine push for democracy. He even went so far as to suggest to U Nyunt Shwe, Burmese ambassador to Thailand, that Thailand arrange a meeting between dissidents and the central government.²⁰ Arthit had little time to push forward his initiatives as the Chatchai government was removed in February 1991 by military coup d'etat.

Border

The Burmese military, which had been engaged in a forty plus year civil war with its ethnic minorities, began their dry season offensive against the insurgents, launching attacks on the Karen National Union's Pha Lu Camp opposite Mae Sot District in Tak while other units initiated attacks on the area across from Mae Hong Son Province and further north in the Shan State.

As a result of the intensified Burmese offensive in Shan State, clashes between the Shan State Army and the Burmese military sent refugees fleeing into Ban Pa Long in Fang District of Chiang Mai. The Thai stated their intention to push them back into Burma and sent Task Force 32 to carry out the operation.²¹

At the same time as the combat, on February 10, 1988, a border checkpoint in Chiang Dao District of Chiang Mai was opened to accommodate the transport of Burmese teak to Thailand. This ended a 40-year ban on teak trade with Thailand.²² The Burmese Embassy in Bangkok meanwhile distributed 21 bidding forms from the state owned Timber Corp to Thai loggers for permission to extract previously cut logs

²⁰ Bangkok Post. 30 December 1990.

²¹ Bangkok Post. 22 March 1988.

²² Bangkok Post. 11 February 1988.

- not to engage in actual logging. The Burmese Army assured that it would provide protection for the shipments to the border.²³

When the time arrived for bidding, however, only two Thai companies, Thai Sawatdi Export and Import Co. Ltd. and Eap Huat Seng Saw Mill Co. Ltd., actually placed bids. Both bids were rejected by the Burmese government because the amounts were too low, though they stated that if the sale was successful, they might be open to granting logging concessions, the prize Thai companies truly sought.²⁴ The Thai companies countered that the logs had been cut fourteen years prior and had therefore declined in value.

In response to the possible joint-venture between the Thai and Burmese, Khun Aik, secretary of the Wa National Organization, made a statement from Kanchanaburi Province that any log shipments from Burma to Thailand would be attacked if it passed through Wa territory.²⁵ The Wa were acting partially in response to an offer by the Thai to Khun Sa to pay 6% to allow the logs to pass while they had not approached the Wa. In what may be interpreted as a move to assure the Thai of Burmese Army sincerity to protect the timber shipments, Rangoon launched an offensive on Wa National Army and Communist Party of Burma hilltop positions overlooking the route to be utilized by Thai companies for transporting teak into Fang District of Chiang Mai.²⁶ On March 29, Burmese troops overran the strategic Wa base at Doi Lolae.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *The Nation*. 17 March 1988.

²⁵ *The Nation*. 13 March 1988.

²⁶ *Bangkok Post*. 28 March 1988.

Bo Mya, also responding to the forthcoming Thai-Burmese economic venture, said that the KNU would mark Burmese economic targets for attacks.²⁷ The log sales and the possibility of eventual logging concessions threatened one of the KNU's primary sources of income, timber trade and its taxation.

Rangoon stood to lose considerable foreign capital through attacks by the ethnic minority armies on Thai merchants. The threat was not only damaging to the generals in Rangoon but also to the Thai traders who stood to fill their coffers with money earned from Burmese timber. The action of the Karen and Wa organizations thus pitted them against both Rangoon and the Thai timber companies, the latter having links to Thai policy makers and military leaders.

In late July, fighting between the Mon and Karen broke out over control of trade passing through Three Pagodas Pass which crosses into Thailand in Sangkhlaburi District of Kanchanaburi Province. On July 29, the Karen razed Ban Phra Chedi village, a Mon stronghold opposite Three Pagodas Pass. Perhaps the most noticeable effect was the influx into Sangkhlaburi of people fleeing the combat. First Army Region Commander Lieutenant General Watthanachai Wutthisiri stated on Thai radio on August 18, that any hot pursuit would be repulsed and that the army was waiting for instruction on policy as to how to manage the refugee flow. He did note, however, that once the situation in Burma was normal, that Thailand would push them back.

Fighting did spillover into Thailand at the small trade village of Three Pagodas Pass. Thai soldiers from the 9th Infantry Division moved into the area to negotiate the withdrawal of the ethnic minority troops from Thai soil and did in fact succeed.

²⁷ Bangkok Post. 25 March 1988.

Neither group actually had any qualms with the Thai and to resist a Thai request would be to jeopardize the objective over which they were fighting, trade with Thailand, much of which was organized by or at least with the approval of officials in the military. The Thai actually utilized their leverage to bring an end to the fighting by threatening to close Three Pagodas Pass thus denying both parties much needed income. The Mon and Karen agreed to an August 18 cease-fire bringing an end to their round of conflict.

In late 1988 as the dry season approached, the Burmese Army's offensive against the border communities continued. Defeating the Karen National Union troops, the second largest resistance group behind the Communist Party of Burma, was central to the agenda of government forces at the time. Fighting was particularly heavy around Mae Sot District of Tak with a consequential flow of refugees into Thai territory.

The offensive began on September 26, 1988 and as mentioned earlier, after fierce fighting, government troops took Methawe region on December 24 of the same year. Because of the pressure exerted by the advancing SLORC troops coupled with limited supplies, the National Democratic Front issued an ultimatum to 300 students living in Kanchanaburi to join the ethnic armies by January 7, 1989 or be cut off from supplies. Students had been arriving at the border since August 1988 and some had actually contacted the Karen in that month to join in the armed struggle. At the same time the Karen were making demands on the students in Kanchanaburi, Thai authorities told 1,200 students taking refuge in Three Pagodas Pass of the same province to return to Burma before the January 31 SLORC deadline for repatriation

(see Student section) or be forced back. Consequently, Htun Aung Kyaw, ABSDF chairman, advised them to move to camps across the border in Burma to avoid forced repatriation.

On January 9, SLORC sent approximately 1,000 troops from the 66th and 44th Divisions based in Moulmein to Myawadi on the dual mission of supporting the assault against the Karen and protecting Thai traders along the road to Myawadi. After the taking of Methawe Camp, Burmese units were preparing to attack KNU Klerdey camp. The camp fell on January 13 and SLORC soldiers advanced to take Maetri camp just six days later. The fall of these camps, particularly Maetri camp, forced 2,000 Karen to flee across the border to Mae Sarit in Tak's Tha Song Yang District.

In retaliation the Karen decided to mine areas where pre-cut logs were to be extracted and taken to Thailand at the same time Burmese engineers were cutting a new road to the area. In reality, the Karen had two strategic concerns to consider in this action: first, the loss of 7.5 percent passage tax they formerly levied against Thai smugglers, and second, the cutting of roads into their territory was a serious threat to the security of their strongholds as Burmese government troops utilized new roads for logistical purposes.

On February 13, 1989, KNU troops based in Kawmura camp fired mortar shells into Myawadi during an annual temple fair in a further effort to disrupt trade in the government occupied town. Some 300 Burmese fled across the Moei River into Thailand during the initial bombing. Then again on February 21, 22 and 23 Karen fired mortars from Wang Kha camp into the town with another 2,000 Burmese fleeing into Thailand at Mae Sot to request temporary asylum.

The Burmese forces, nonetheless, continued their drive against the Karen strongholds with the 33rd Division laying siege to the KNU 7th Division's Tikerney camp killing a KNU commander, Lieutenant Bo Kol, and forcing 300 Thai who had been operating a timber mill to flee to the Chula-Thammasat School in Phip Phing village. On February 20, another KNU camp, Phaungmok, fell to SLORC units.

Later, as the dry season offensive drug on, Burmese troops captured Maw Po Kay camp and then attempted a maneuver to enable a rear assault on Karen positions at Tikerney by crossing into Thailand at Ban Mae Ok Phalu. Thai rangers approached the Burmese to request they move back across the border but were fired upon. The rangers withdrew and Task Force 34 fired mortars to dislodge the intruders.

Nonetheless, on April 20, 1989, Tikerney camp fell to the Burmese, forcing the KNU to flee to Mae Sarit. During the attack, nine Thai homes and a school in Ban Mae Ok Phalu were destroyed as a result of Burmese army shelling.

Operation Dragon King did not cease in the new year as nearly a half dozen other military camps were lost to the Burmese. Pha Lu came under attack during the first week of the year. The combat forced more Karen civilians into Thailand to take refuge in Phop Phra and Mae Sot Districts of Tak. When Palu Camp fell, it was the result of an attack emanating from Thai territory. Burmese troops crossed the Moei River into Thailand, with no resistance from the Thai, and assaulted the KNU base from the rear. With each victory, Rangoon sent more refugees spilling into Thailand.

On February 11, 1990 the twenty year old New Mon State Party headquarters at Three Pagodas Pass fell to the Burmese. Just two days prior, Burmese troops overran the black-market at Three Pagodas Pass as well as the Mon district

headquarters, its 9th Battalion headquarters, and the party's combat training school. Controversy arose when accusations of complicity by Thai timber traders were made by the Mon leader Nai Shwe Kyin.²⁸

Timber merchants working for an influential Kanchanaburi businessman were suspected of having brought Burmese troops across the border into Thailand in the bed of their trucks as they returned from Burmese territory. This allowed the soldiers easy access to the Mon stronghold which is extremely vulnerable from the Thai side.

During the assault, about thirty Burmese regulars were believed to have been trucked into the Thai village of Nam Kaeng near the World War II Death Railway site. Three columns began the attack from the front, but the *coup de grace* was struck by the platoon attacking from the Thai side.* The platoon approached Mon territory carrying M-16s and dressed as ethnic minority troops, not as Burmese regulars. They were thus able to pass through the Three Pagodas Pass valley to Mon headquarters without suspicion. One combined Mon, ABSDF and People's Defense Force platoon met the Burmese troops, but allowed them to approach too closely before realizing they were not Mon. The platoon was cut off by the infiltrators, unable to come to the assistance of the NMSP headquarters.

The result was a fallout between the Mon and the ABSDF, the loss of an important trade post and source of income for the Mon, and a flood of refugees into Thailand. Some Mon officials accused the students of planning the raid as they were suspicious of the students' Burman ethnicity. The ABSDF battalions, to avoid conflict

²⁸ *The Nation*. 11 February 1990.

* The following information is adapted from interviews with Win Naing, a soldier with the ABSDF 102nd Battalion based in Mon territory during the assault and from anonymous Mon sources.

with their allies, moved into Karen territory until the truth of the attacks could be unearthed.

The loss of Three Pagodas Pass was a serious blow to the Mon as its control had been their major source of revenue. The Mon were able to levy taxes on goods coming from or crossing to Thailand which provided the funds needed to supply their ongoing military exercises.*

Merchants in Three Pagodas Pass as well as Mon and Karen civilians fled to the Thai side in a group numbering by some estimates up to 10,000 persons in the first major exodus of Mon civilians to Thailand. Six main refugee camps were established and a relief program began shortly thereafter with assistance from the NGO umbrella group the Burmese Border Consortium.

Students

On March 12, a fight in a coffee shop between students from the Rangoon Institute of Technology and the son of a local bureaucrat provide the spark leading to the explosion that was the August 8, 1988 popular movement for democracy. Pre-existing tension, the product of a demonetizing of banknotes without compensation and a general state of unemployment for the urban youth, was mobilized and articulated following the March events.

The students of RIT were outraged by what they perceived as an injustice when the assailants of one of their comrades was released by the police without charge; a

* The Mon did still control the rich waters around Victoria Point where they also levied taxes on Thai fishing boats and did have some other minor blackmarket border posts, but the loss of Three Pagodas Pass was a serious one economically, strategically, and psychologically.

small group went to the People's Council office to complain and when they were told the council was not interested in their grievances, they began to stone the office building. Events built from this point resulting in another one of the original group of three students being stabbed and finally leading to a violent altercation with the *Lon Htein* secret police where dozens of students were injured and several died (one immediately and many others while denied proper care in custody).²⁹

In August 1988, the pro-democracy movement finally built to a fury. The demonstrations on August 8 began with students marching from the city outskirts to Shwedagon Pagoda, the foremost symbol of Burma. As they marched, citizens from all walks of life joined the procession. The movement was to end in bloodshed, however, as the military opened fire on the protesters.

The following day, the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok stopped issuing tourist visas. The violence continued with U Sein Lwin, the Ne Win replacement, retiring on August 12 to be succeeded by Dr. Maung Maung, another Ne Win favorite, a week later.

In response to the unrest, Ranong Governor Chaloeam Supphamon closed the border with Burma prohibiting both goods and persons from crossing and warning fishing trawlers to avoid Burmese territorial waters.³⁰ Burma responded in kind announcing that no cross-border contact with the Thai would be permitted until August 21.³¹ In Chiang Rai, however, Governor Aram Iam-arun instructed Mae Sai District officials to prepare for an influx of refugees and designated the Kuang Meng

²⁹ Lintner. *Outrage*. 1990. p. 3.

³⁰ *The Nation*. 12 August 1988.

³¹ *AFP*. 15 August 1988.

Foundation property as a holding center which could supposedly house up to 5,000 persons.

In the wake of the September 1988 crackdown on the pro-democracy protesters in Rangoon, thousands of Burmese students took to the jungles of the borders with China, Bangladesh, India and Thailand. The largest majority of these fleeing to the Thai border due to distance. Nevertheless, hundreds were suspected to have succumbed to a variety of dangers resident in the forest. Due to hardship, some turned back while others were captured by government forces. Those that did make it to Thailand were taken in, though reluctantly, by the ethnic groups for training, many eventually joining in the resistance.*

After their arrival in Thailand, the Thai Cabinet voted to grant them temporary asylum on humanitarian grounds consistent with Article 17 of the Immigration Act. Soon after his return from Rangoon, however, General Chavalit began a program for the repatriation of Burmese students. A message was sent to students stating that if they wished to return home, they should report to the repatriation center in Tak from which they would be flown home. The camp was run by the Thai Supreme Command and staffed by the Red Cross of Thailand and Myanmar. By its close, nearly 400 had passed through the camp. In some instances, those who could not afford the cost of transport to Tak were driven to the area by district officials. The student repatriation from Tak thus opened on December 21, 1988 and on December 26, the first group of 82 students returned to Burma. On January 3, a third group of 37 Burmese students

* The Karen were suspicious of the students as they were ethnic Burmans, the people they had been fighting for over forty years. They were also suspicious that *Tatmadaw* agents might have accompanied those fleeing and many students were killed by ethnic minority troops in the forest.

flew back to Rangoon reported by the Rangoon press to be waving Burmese flags as they descended the stairs of the plane. On arrival, Brig Gen Myo Nyunt, commander of the Rangoon Division Law and Order Restoration Council and commander of the Rangoon Military Command, gave a nationalistic speech claiming that students returned as they no longer wished to depend on foreign aid, his term for assistance from the NGOs at the Thai/Burma border, and that they recognized the ethnic groups as racist smugglers.

Thai students criticized General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's policy of returning the Burmese students as ambiguous, as Chavalit had not in fact assured the safety of the returnees. A request for provision of asylum for the students also came from the All Burma Students Democratic Front and Thai human rights groups with no official response.

In January 1989, Phyllis Oakley, the U.S. State Department spokeswoman, released a statement to the extent that students were being arrested on return to Rangoon, some summarily executed. Diplomats stationed in Rangoon refuted the claim as no hard evidence was available to support the announcement. Gen Chavalit and Gen Sunthorn also made statements that it was unlikely that a man of Saw Maung's position would break his promise of student safety while SLORC officials responded in kind labeling U.S. allegations as unfounded and slanderous.

Another group returned from Tak on January 7 with a similar response from the Thai and international press, one editorial claiming that Thai police were forcibly repatriating the students. Calls were made for the Red Cross to act as observers in Rangoon; however, Gen Chavalit and Army Chief-of-Staff Gen Charuai Wongsayan

countered that the issue was a matter of Burmese internal affairs and the international community should not interfere. Deputy Supreme Commander Phat Akkhanibut, meanwhile, refuted Amnesty International's release that students were being forcibly repatriated, citing a form of consent the youth had to sign before being flown back to the Burmese capital. An officer formerly with Supreme Command and present in the camps said that counter to the criticisms of some governments and human rights groups, students knew the camp was for repatriation and that they had in fact volunteered and second, that the Thai military had confirmed through visits to returnees homes with and without SLORC officials that there had been no detectable abuse of students upon return.³² In further defense of the repatriation process, Sein Win, a Rangoon based reporter for the Associated Press who had been arrested in the 1988 uprisings, said that he doubted U.S. allegations as journalists had investigated some of the returnees and found no maltreatment, just fear of arrest.*

Another three groups of students returned in the following days and on January 20, Brig Gen Khin Nyunt, in an interview with journalists from the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, said that no arrests, detention, interrogation, or torture of returnee students had taken place and that accusations were unfounded. Furthermore, the administration viewed them as their sons and daughters, happy to have them home. The secretary-1 of SLORC stated that the government would not

³² Interview with anonymous Thai military officer.

* It was unclear as to which group of students journalists visited as the Burmese government had set up 27 similar reception centers near the border from which nearly 2000 students had returned. These camps were not subject to any external monitoring so it is possible that all or some of those allegedly arrested or killed had come from these camps and not the Thai.

call students back after January 31, 1989, but they were always welcome to return with no action taken against them.

Towards the end of the month a student returning from Rangoon reported that three student returnees had been killed in Insein Prison and Aung Lwin, All Burma Student Democratic Front chairman, said that seven others repatriated were still missing. Correspondingly, the European Economic Committee released a statement condemning human rights abuses in Burma and raising the issue of students disappearing after return from the Burmese border.

On April 1, 1989, after initial international criticism and allegations of maltreatment of repatriated students, Tak reception center closed after 387 students returned to Rangoon.*

Students began arriving in Bangkok in early 1989, the first group being transported from the border to apply for UNHCR person of concern status. One relief worker said that Emergency Relief Burma, a group run by Aye Aye Thant, a Burmese activist and daughter of the former UN Secretary General U Thant, brought this initial group to the Thai capital in a political move to draw attention and lend legitimacy to her organization.** The initial granting of person of concern status, coupled with the hardships of the border life for urban youth, drew more students to Bangkok.

On October 6, 1989, an incident occurred that would be the beginning of a strained relationship between Thai authorities and the students; a Myanmar Airways

* A group of students had requested to remain an extra 14 months until the general elections in Burma were finished and were allowed to stay.

** This organization moved back to New York in early 1989 as Aye Aye Thant's husband, a UNHCR officer, was transferred.

Fokker F-28 plane en route from Mergui to Rangoon was hijacked by two students and flown to Thailand. The hijackers originally requested clearance to land at Don Muang airport on the outskirts of Bangkok but were routed instead to U-Tapao Air Base. The students presented the following list of demands they wished fulfilled before they released the passengers and aircraft:

1. The release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi;
2. The release of all detained prisoners;
3. Formation of an interim government with persons nominated by the United Nations;
4. The lifting of martial law;
5. Governing the people leniently;
6. Ordering soldiers back to the barracks;
7. Freedom of the press.³³

The students threatened to blow up the plane along with its four crew and 79 passengers if their demands were not met in five hours.

General Thianchai Sirisamphan, deputy prime minister and chairman of the government committee on anti-international terrorism; General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh; Air Chief Marshal Kasem Rotchananin; U Nyunt Swe, Burmese ambassador to Thailand; Colonel Ba Hein, military attache to Thailand; U Aung Gyi, counselor; and U Ye Myint, third secretary, accompanied by an Air Force commando team went to the airport to negotiate. The hijackers surrendered quickly and the plane and its passengers returned to Rangoon. General Thianchai, however, commented that "We [Thailand] are not going to take any drastic action against them [the students]. Indeed, it is very difficult to send them back to Burma because we are fully aware that they would be killed there" while another anonymous source said that if they were

³³Burmese Domestic Radio Service. 7 October 1989, cited in FBIS-EAS-89-194.

returned, Thailand would face international condemnation.³⁴ Instead, the two students, identifying themselves as Ye Yint and Ye Thiha (Ye, meaning "blood" in Burmese, is a title that the Burmese students take and incorporate in their codenames), were interrogated and held at Sathahip Naval Base in Chonburi Province while on October 9, a special meeting of the Committee on Policy and Control of International Terrorism was held with the National Security Council to decide their fate.

As previously stated, the committee decided that the students would not be returned to Burma but would be subject to legal persecution for their actions under Article 5 of the 1978 Aviation Act of Thailand and under international law which prohibits hijacking. The two students were thus transferred to Bang Khen Special Detention Center to await trial.* The Thai media's, opinion as expressed in articles in the Thai Rat and Naeo Na newspapers of October 10, was in harmony with the decision not to send the students back as they were only trying to bring attention to their cause, but concurrently to uphold domestic and international law by prosecuting them. Neither did the Burmese government make a formal request for their extradition, instead Saw Maung sent a telex to Thailand thanking them for their assistance.

On October 12, a special investigative committee concluded that the students were in fact in violation of the aforementioned Thai law which was punishable with no less than 10 years imprisonment or at the maximum, the death penalty.** The next day,

³⁴ *The Nation*. 8 October 1989.

* The Special Detention Center is a holding center for political detainees such as the old Communist Party of Thailand or security related prisoners.

** Khamnuan Chalopatham, former president of the Lawyers' Society of Thailand offered to provide counsel to the two students.

Suwit Yotmani, the government spokesman, said Thailand would assist the two in seeking asylum in a third country though some questions were raised about how this could be accomplished while they were standing trial.

The court eventually found the students guilty and sentenced them to six years in prison, though they were released before their full term during an amnesty to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's birthday.

On November 10, a group of dissident students dealt another critical blow to the student movement and eliminated all remaining Thai good will. Three students, demanding an end to SLORC rule, hijacked a Thai plane and forced it to Calcutta in what would generally be recognized as an act of terrorism.³⁵ The three students were arrested and the plane was returned to Bangkok, but from this point onward Thai authorities cracked down on student activities in Bangkok.

Four days after the hijacking, the Secretary General of the National Security Council threatened legal action against students engaging in anti-SLORC political activities in Thailand. This statement was echoed by Chamnarn Pochana as he waved deportation in the face of NGO and UNHCR officials if they did not discontinue support for Burmese students.³⁶ Both officials said the new policy would be to keep the refugees in a holding camp.

It was in this context, that under Section 17 of the Immigration Act, the Ministry of Interior proposed setting up the Safe Area at Ban Maneeloy in Ratchaburi Province,³⁷ despite military opposition to Thailand bearing the burden for what it

³⁵ *The Nation*. 11 November 1990.

³⁶ *Bangkok Post*. 17 November 1990.

³⁷ *The Nation*. 20 November 1990.

considered illegal immigrants. Many relief workers and refugees alike were opposed to the idea as there was concern that, noting the environment at the time, the students could be conveniently returned across the border to Burmese authorities.³⁸

Throughout 1990, Thai authorities pushed students back across the border at a number of points, though in many of these instances students had been arrested and deported in illegal immigrant sweeps. One serious instance was the deportation of 24 persons of concern to UNHCR through Ranong in September of 1990 in a blatant case of *refoulement*. Earlier though, in August, Thai authorities approached the UNHCR and requested that they cease granting person of concern status as the practice was disrupting good relations with Rangoon upon which Thai access to natural resources depended.³⁹ The move was also in concert with an effort to have the students register for the Safe Area. If they were carrying POC documents, they would be allowed to live in Bangkok under UNHCR protection. UNHCR agreed to stop issuing the POC documents on the condition that it would be allowed to continue its assistance program. Chamnarn Pochana, the deputy permanent secretary of interior, said the conditions would be acceptable until the completion of the newly proposed Safe Area and on November 20, 1990, UNHCR ceased issuing official POC papers for Burmese dissident students though screening continued.

Students on the border, meanwhile, angered another group of Thai when on December 29, a group of twenty ABSDF soldiers under the command of Kyaw Ya seized a Thai fishing trawler, the Daengsiri-udom of NCC Narong fishing company,

³⁸ Interviews with Burmese students and NGO relief workers.

³⁹ *The Nation*. 18 August 1990.

and demanded that they receive 1.5 million baht in four days or they would destroy the boat and kill the 38 crew members. It is normal for ships operating in Burmese waters to pay a tax to the Karen or Mon or sometimes to be pressured to pay 10,000 to 20,000 baht "protection fees", but the actions and demands by the students were unprecedented.

On January 1, a representative of the company traveled to the ABSDF Minthamee Camp and delivered 500,000 baht - one million short of the original demand. Four days later, as promised, the ABSDF demolished NCC Narong's one year old 25 million baht tuna boat when the remaining million baht failed to materialize. They did not kill the crew members, but instead let them off on a nearby island. The company, not knowing how to recover its loss, said it would sue the ABSDF in both Burmese and Thai courts of law.

This hijacking differed from that of the first in that this was not meant to be spotlight for the student's cause but a possible source of revenue and counter to companies cooperating with the SLORC. The students, as well as the ethnic groups, saw economic cooperation as threatening to their interests - the Thai therefore becoming a convenient strategic target. Why the ABSDF chose to take such drastic action is difficult to determine. In an explanation linked to social justice and nationalism, the students claimed that Burmese fishermen had been complaining of technologically superior Thai boats depleting fish stocks, but whatever the justification, the move stemmed from a fundamental lack of political experience.

On December 18, 1990, Dr. Sein Win and a group of former MPs made their way to the border and established a parallel government. Sein Win and Peter Lin Pin,

dissident prime minister and foreign minister respectively of the alternative government, then traveled to Bangkok to visit embassies in an effort to secure diplomatic recognition. Diplomats agreed to talk with them but did not go as far as recognition. These visits, coupled with the student presence, were of serious concern to the Burmese.

Period Summary and Analysis

The years 1988 to 1990 were the *anni mirabiles* for Thai/Burma relations. During this period, a number of unprecedented events occurred which altered Thai policy toward its neighbor. The Burmese military was for the first time able to take essential trade gates along the border on which an enormous portion of the Thai border economy was dependant. The supply of logs, necessary for Thai construction, decorative tastes, cooking fuel, and export, was threatened for the first time as the military government took control of supply points. General Chavalit, recognizing the gains to be made in natural resource contracts with Thailand's neighbors, visited Burma despite international criticism. Though the Chatchai government was publicly opposed to the September bloodshed in Rangoon, it allowed Chavalit some leeway with his visits to the military government and with the return of students from the Tak Repatriation Center because of his indispensable cooperation on the other border in the much more strategically important issue of Cambodian reconciliation and because of the resource predicament Thailand found itself in at the beginning of Chatchai's term.

It was in this period that a change from a policy of buffer states to diplomatic relations came to pass if not on the border, at least among some groups in Bangkok

and Rangoon. This was a fundamental switch in decades long Thai support for buffer states along all of its borders. A changing regional political and domestic economic environment influenced a new security agenda along the Thai frontier. On the Burma side, this change came during a particularly sensitive juncture in Burmese political history which led to Thailand coming under considerable international criticism.

As assaults on the ethnic minority territory intensified, an undesirable effect was that the increased size of displaced person populations as civilians fled across the border. The SLORC offensive from January to March 1988 alone sent approximately 20,000 new refugees to seek asylum in Thailand (See Graph), presenting a serious obstacle for relief organizations accustomed to much smaller populations.

The Thai government responded with calls for more aid while it granted the new comers temporary asylum on humanitarian grounds. The focus of Thai refugee efforts was not yet on their western border while peace in Cambodia and repatriation of the Khmer refugees remained the principal objective.

Events in Rangoon also sent Burmese students seeking asylum in Thailand for the first time. Though numerically small, this highly educated and visible group made their presence felt in their host country. The actions of a few of their number jeopardized the sympathy they had initially been extended by the Thai. These activities, bordering on terrorism, and a legitimate Thai national security concern, came at a time when Thailand was trying to cultivate relations with Rangoon for access to economically significant supplies of natural resources. The students embarrassed both the Burmese and Thai leaders and forced the hand of their hosts to better regulate

student movement, especially in Bangkok. Towards this end, the Safe Area was proposed to which all students resident in Bangkok were to report.

Thailand's relations with Burma could be characterized by a keen interest to access natural and energy resources as well as gain access to a massive untapped market. Thai behavior towards the displaced persons reflected this as economic security interests clashed with the refugees political interests.