

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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February 3, 1988

Sibling Rivalry:  
The Thai-Lao Border Conflict

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Dear Peter,

The Thai Army six-by-six truck strained up the steep, dirt road toward Rom Klao village, the scene of sporadic fighting between Thai and Lao troops. Two days before, Lao "sappers" had ambushed Thai soldiers nearby, killing 11. So, as the truck crept forward with the driver gunning the engine to keep it from stalling, I was glad that at least this back road to the disputed mountaintop was safe.

For the past three months, reports of Thai and Lao soldiers battling to control this remote border area have filled the headlines of the local newspapers. After a brief lull, the conflict has intensified following the Lao ambush on January 20. The Thai Army says that it will now take "decisive action" to drive the last Lao intruders from the Rom Klao area, 27 square miles of land located some 300 miles northeast of Bangkok. When Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda visited the disputed tract, the former cavalry officer dramatically staked out Thai territory by posing in combat fatigues, cradling a captured Lao submachine gun. Last week, the Thai Foreign Ministry escorted some 40 foreign diplomats to the region to buttress the Thai claim, but had to escort them out again when a few Lao artillery shells fell nearby. And in the past few days, thousands of Thai citizens in Bangkok and a dozen other cities have protested the alleged Lao incursion, calling on the Thai Army to expell the remaining Lao invaders.

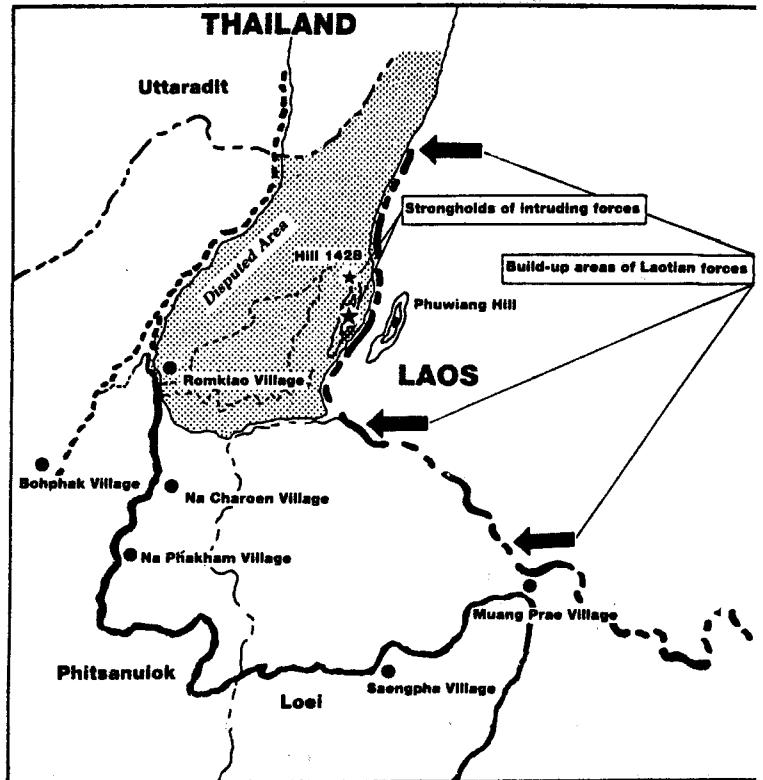
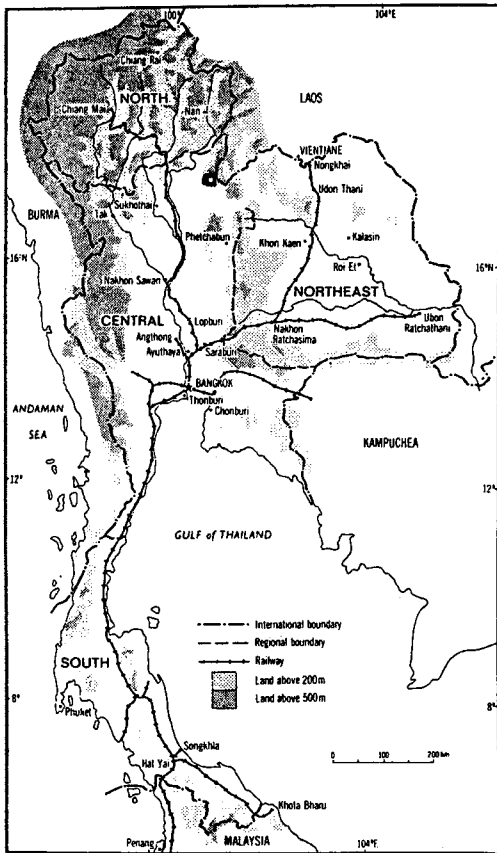
I visited the Rom Klao area on the day that Prime Minister Prem was scheduled to make his inspection tour, January 22. I had been informed by the Army public relations department that foreign reporters and researchers would not be accompanying

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the Prime Minister on his helicopter trip, and that I would have to arrange my own transportation. That I did, catching the 11 p.m. bus to Phitsanuloke, the regional Army headquarters; hiring an early mini-van for the 60-mile climb toward the mountains; and finally boarding a pre-dawn local bus to Chat Trakan, the last town before Rom Klao.

In Chat Trakan, I asked a Mr. Somboon, who in more peaceful days regularly ferried passengers to Rom Klao village, whether he would take me. Wiping small drops of bright-red blood from his hands (he was preparing minced duck for breakfast), he reluctantly agreed to drive part way, but no farther. To bolster his spirits and provide extra company, he suggested that we also invite a school teacher from Rom Klao village to join us. But when we swung by the teacher's house, he merely peeped from his window and politely declined. With that auspicious beginning, we set off.



From The Nation, Bangkok.

Traveling along the gravel road toward Rom Klao, we enjoyed chatting and admiring the view of the rugged hills, now flecked with yellow and light green as the leaves turned in the cool season. But as we neared the Rom Klao area, and more Army trucks dropped off squads of troops to patrol the road, Mr. Somboon kept exclaiming with increasing frequency, "Oho, there're lots of soldiers. Oho, it's frightening." He had a villager's universal apprehension about large numbers of armed men, whether government or foreign. Efforts to convince him that more Thai soldiers made the area safer from the Lao enemy were in vain. He just repeated, "Oho, there're lots

of soldiers." Finally, he dropped me off at Bo Phak, a small village now converted into a supply depot.

Here, less than ten miles from my destination, I was stalled for the first time in my dash to reach the Rom Klao area before Gen. Prem and entourage departed. The colonel in charge of the depot tried to ring up the Army's forward command center to have a supply truck sent down to fetch me, but to no avail. The phone was dead, he said, perhaps Lao infiltrators had cut the line. Indeed, it was out of order, so I had to wait at the depot for several long hours. I passed the time chatting with the colonel and his men as little school children, barefoot and dressed in dirty grey tops and blue shorts or skirts, played on a makeshift swing set, oblivious of the nearby soldiers.

A look around the depot showed that despite the Thai Army's repeated vows that it will soon flush out the last Lao troops, the soldiers at the depot were in for a long haul. The depot was taking on an air of permanence with bulldozers carving out new storage areas.

Since the Army began its operations on November 3, it claims to have retaken about 70% of the ground allegedly seized by Laos. Hill after hill has reportedly fallen to the Thai forces, until now only 150 to 200 Lao troops remain dug in on hill 1428 (so called after its elevation), about 1½ miles inside Thai territory. The Thais have up to four battalions of regular troops, plus artillery, and about ten companies of irregular Thahan Phran (Jungle Fighters). The Thai military estimates that there are approximately 1,000 Lao reinforcements on the Lao side of the border. Both sides engage in sporadic artillery duels, with Laos reportedly firing hundreds of shells on some days. Although Thailand has the edge in airpower, with strikes by F-5E fighters against Lao positions, the Lao forces on hill 1428 are well protected by an extensive system of trenches, tunnels, and minefields. In addition, Thai troops literally have to fight uphill: Lao soldiers hold the higher ground and the Thai Army is hampered by poor resupply routes.

So far, the fighting between the two sides has been relatively restrained. The Thai Army commander for Northern Thailand, Lt. Gen. Siri Thiwaphan, has told the press that, "We want to keep the armed confrontation at a low level and do not want to enlarge it into a war between countries." Hostilities follow a 'tit for tat' cycle. The announcement of Prem's tour of the disputed area apparently angered the Lao, so to put a damper on what would have been a triumphant Thai visit, the Lao "sappers" had sprung their ambush two days beforehand. Embarrassed by the incident, the Thai Army has retaliated with its current, limited offensive. As one Thai officer described the shelling to me, "They fire ten [rounds], we fire ten [rounds]. If they don't shoot over here, we don't shoot over there."

With any conflict, it is difficult to determine how either side is faring. The Thai Army officially puts its casualties at 33 killed and hundreds wounded with Lao casualties at 80

dead and many more wounded. However, one Thai officer estimated Thai losses at 30 to 50 killed. Immediately after media coverage of the ambush, the Army spokesman Maj. Gen. Naruedol Dejpradiyuth warned the media "not to play into the hands of the enemy" by reporting Thai casualties. He also singled out one newspaper for printing that the Rom Klao area is 500 kilometers away from Bangkok because, he said, "that will scare away tourists."

Finally, after waiting for several hours at Bo Phak, a six-by-six truck rumbled by, heading toward Rom Klao village. At the end of the slow climb up to the ridge, I stopped off at a road construction camp about four miles east of Rom Klao. On the barren ridge, soldiers rested in the shade of their bamboo and sandbag bunkers while Thai guns in a neighboring artillery pit fired occasional rounds at the Lao positions. I spoke with a colonel, nearby were two soldiers who had returned from a patrol the day before: one was industriously cleaning his M-16; the other was sharpening a long Bowie knife. When I asked them if they had an opportunity to use their weapons, both grinned and nodded.

I then proceeded to Na Charoen village, the forward command post that Prem and his entourage had visited earlier in the day. Unfortunately, my attempts to interview the commanding general, Maj. Gen. Payroth, were unsuccessful. A colonel at the general's headquarters told me that foreign researchers, reporters, and others were not particularly welcome at this moment and that I would have to return to Phitsanuloke. Since there was no supply truck going back down the short, steep road to Chat Trakan, I hitched a ride with a woman who was taking the long route parallel to the Lao border. During my hour or so at Na Charoen and vicinity, Thai artillery fired almost a dozen rounds; no shells came in from the Lao side. Soldiers and employees of the road construction company called it a normal, quiet day.

The 27 square miles that make up the Rom Klao area form one corner of a sparsely settled region where international boundaries are hazy at best. Just before the recent escalation in hostilities, Gen. Naruedol told reporters that the area is not strategically important. The village that gives the disputed area the name Rom Klao is so new and small (less than 700 people) that it isn't even on most maps.

Rom Klao village was created in 1982 when the Thai Army resettled Hmong hilltribe people in a spot located about seven miles from what Thailand considers the Thai-Lao border. Last May, Lao troops attacked a Thai logging company, destroying equipment, abducting six Thais, and occupying hill 1428. Laos has since claimed that the company was encroaching on Lao territory. In August, Lao soldiers attacked Thai paramilitary units in Rom Klao village. Much later, on November 3, the Thai Army launched its operation to drive out the Lao. Various Thai officials have different estimates for how far the Lao soldiers originally intruded, ranging from six to twelve miles.

Thailand supports its claim to the area with a plethora of maps, treaties, and statements by the Foreign Ministry. The most important of these is the 1907 Franco-Siamese Treaty, which designates the Nam Hueng river as the boundary. That much is accepted by both sides. But where the Nam Hueng splits into two branches, Thailand takes one branch as the border; Laos, the other, the Hueng Pakman. As additional evidence, the Thai Foreign Ministry cites a "correct, revised edition" of a Thai map and a 1987 Soviet map of Laos. Thailand accuses Vietnam of prodding Laos into invading in order to sour Thai-Lao relations. Some non-Thai observers also see a Vietnamese hand: while talking peace in Kampuchea, Vietnam seeks to embarrass and discredit Thailand--the strongest critic of Vietnam's continued occupation of Kampuchea. An Asian diplomat told me that the conflict was an "extension" of Vietnam's policy in Kampuchea. He called it a "propaganda exercise to blacken the image of Thailand," and paint Thailand as bullying tiny Laos.

The Lao side of the story, however, has been more difficult to obtain. My appointments with a Lao Embassy spokesman have been postponed because of the large, anti-Lao protests outside the Embassy. Laos cites the same treaty, an unrevised edition of the Thai map, plus a 1960 U.S. Army map. Lao radio broadcasts claim that Gen. Siri is involved with a local logging company in an alleged scheme to grab Lao territory and lumber.

In this cartographical battle, there are no clear winners. The 1907 treaty text and accompanying map do not unequivocally delineate the border, the Soviet maps are on a scale of 1 to 500,000, and the U.S. Army map comes with the caveat that it is not to be used for demarcating international boundaries. One Western diplomat told me that the maps are "too vague" and that, "it is not possible to give a definite answer whether it is Thai territory or not."

When Thailand invited almost 40 foreign diplomats to visit the disputed area last week, a Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman quoted the West German Ambassador as saying that the area is clearly Thai. But while some diplomats did return convinced that the land is Thai, so far no foreign diplomat has publicly seconded the Thai claim. And when Gaston Sigur, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, paid a short visit to Bangkok in mid-January, he made an interesting comment. Instead of supporting the Thai position, as one might expect from a close ally, Sigur merely stated that he hoped that the conflict could be resolved. As one knowledgeable observer noted, "How can you have a position [on who's right], with the border so unclear?"

As for Laotian motives, although Vietnam's influence is pervasive, it does not appear that Laos is simply acting as Vietnam's "puppet," as some Asian diplomats claim. The Western diplomat tended to dismiss the notion that Vietnam is behind the conflict, emphasizing that small states are often insecure, especially small, newly-formed communist states. Before the conflict heated up, a high-ranking Thai Foreign Ministry expert

on Laos stated publicly that, "There is no evidence that Vietnam is directly behind the attack." He suggested that Lao belligerence arose from a desire to renegotiate the borderline.

In addition to the problems posed by vague boundaries, the squabbling and personal attacks that have characterized the dispute ensure that it is likely to continue for some time. Both sides are quick to trade well-calculated petty slights. Laos has attacked repeatedly the person of Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila, the latest and most fantastic accusation is that he too, is in on the alleged logging scheme. Thailand has called Laos's chief negotiator rude, demanding that he be excluded from future talks. Thailand has also suggested that such talks be relegated to a minor, Northeastern Thai city. A few weeks ago, 300 Lao students demonstrated in front of the Thai Embassy in Vientianne, vowing to put down their pens and take up the sword of war. In retaliation, the Thai government supported the recent series of demonstrations outside the Lao Embassy in Bangkok, as well as in several other cities. And a December meeting between the Lao Ambassador to Bangkok and the Thai Army Commander, Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, touched off another diplomatic exchange. When the two met at a funeral for a member of the Lao royalty (the departed was a relative of Gen. Chavalit's), the Lao Ambassador invited Gen. Chavalit to participate in future talks. Stung by what he saw as an attempted end-run, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi said the Lao Ambassador "lack[ed] diplomatic etiquette" and suggested that the Ambassador be withdrawn.

The sibling rivalry between Thailand and Laos stems from their intertwined culture, history, and royal families. Despite the communist victory in Laos in 1975, in which Vietnam supplanted Thailand as Laos' domineering patron, Thais still consider themselves older brothers (Phi) to the younger (Nong) Lao. Thai resentment that Laos is not behaving as a proper younger sibling should, as <sup>Laos</sup> once did, is only sharpened by what many Thais see as Vietnam's intrusions to spoil the relationship between 'blood brothers.' But while diplomacy among siblings makes slights and personal affronts sorely felt, thus prolonging an emotional clash, the brotherly nature of the dispute has, at least until recently, kept it within certain bounds.


For all the saber rattling by the Thai Army, it still does not appear to be willing to shed sufficient blood to dislodge well-entrenched Lao troops. The Thai Army faces a particularly acute dilemma. Stirred-up public opinion means that the Army will eventually have to live up to its three-month old promises of driving out the Lao invaders. A recent accusation by former Prime Minister-turned Army critic, Kukrit Pramote, that the Army is not brave enough to beat a few hundred Lao soldiers, has especially stung the Army. Yet, local sentiment does not seem to support the doubling or trebling of Thai casualties that would be necessary to flush out the remaining Lao. The Army's solution has been to use more artillery and bombing, hoping that one of the planes doesn't get shot down.

The Thai Foreign Ministry has also imposed some limits on the conflict. Government spokesmen repeatedly emphasize that they do not want to irreparably damage relations between the two countries. There is an odd dynamic to the escalating conflict. For most countries, economic and diplomatic sanctions precede armed confrontation; here, the opposite is true. Throughout three months of on-and-off hostilities, Thailand has continued to purchase electricity from Laos (a major source of Lao foreign exchange), and brisk trading continues across the Thai-Lao border. Indeed, small border-crossings 15 miles away from the fighting were closed only last week. Meanwhile, the Thai National Security Council is still deciding whether to close the three main border-crossings, but only "temporarily." Laos, for its part, has kept open its offer to send President Prince Phoumi Vongvichit to Bangkok to participate in the celebrations honoring the 60th birthday of Thailand's King Bhumiphol Adulyadej.

These attempts by Thailand to limit the scope of the conflict hold out the promise that the issue may eventually fade away, as did a similar border dispute in 1984 over three, small villages less than 50 miles to the north. Then, as the Western diplomat described it, the Thai Army, citing a U.S. map, "charged in" to retake the villages from Laos. But after some waffling by the Thai Foreign Ministry as to whether the villages were Thai or Lao, followed by the discovery that the U.S. map was incorrect, the Thai government privately apologized for the mistake and the Army quietly retreated.

One hopes that the present crisis will also subside as Thailand turns to more important political and economic issues on its national agenda. However, there are two factors pointing toward a prolonged confrontation. Unlike in 1984, all branches of the Thai government are firm in their belief that this is Thai territory. In addition, this time around, there is more Army prestige on the line. The Army is seen by some as backing down to Laos in 1984, and last year was criticized for its initial delays in expelling intruding Vietnamese troops on the Thai-Kampuchean border.

The dispute between brother nations over the interpretation of a river reminds one of the tragic tale, Phali Son Nong (Phali Teaches His Younger Brother). Well-known to all educated Thais, the story comes from the Indian epic, the Ramayana, which is the fount of classical Southeast Asian drama. Because of differing interpretations over the meaning of a river, in this case a river of blood, Phali mistakenly accuses his younger brother of seeking to usurp their common throne. In the ensuing fight, Phali is mortally wounded, but on his deathbed is reconciled with his brother, teaching him the nature and purpose of life. Yet, unlike the breadth and majesty of the classic tale, the current dispute is not over a throne, but a tiny bit of land so insignificant that it isn't labeled on anyone's map.

Sincerely,  
  
Erik Guyot

Received in Hanover 2/19/88