

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Thailand's Northeast Region:
In the Margins of Poverty and Chaos

Hse 1, 2660 Galvez Ave.
Pasay City
The Philippines
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Two years ago the Royal Government of Thailand published a new development plan for the Northeast, long considered Thailand's most depressed region. The stated object of the plan was to raise the level of living in the region to that of the rest of the country. Major emphasis would be placed on road building for communications, and dam construction for irrigation, flood control and power. Two major forces lay behind this concentration on the Northeast. Marshal Sarit, Thailand's forceful Prime Minister from 1959 until his death late in 1963, was himself from the region and naturally desired the uplift of his native area. In the second place, and this was far more important, the new military leadership began to realize that the Northeast was an isolated region not fully under the control of Bangkok. Many of the inhabitants speak a Lao dialect and are vulnerable to the growing agitation from the other side of the Mekong, the great river that forms a 600 mile border with Laos in Thailand's Northeast region. As the new states surrounding her, Thailand has discovered that, especially in the Northeast, she faces a major problem of consolidating political power, of making that part of the country truly a part of the nation. Events in Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam since 1960 have only made that realization more urgent.

Early in May I spent ten days wandering about this sensitive region that had become the focus of a modern development program. I wanted to see how much of the program's avowed urgency had been reflected in work on the ground. As a guide I was fortunate in having my good friend, Prasert Yamklinfung, a sociology professor at Bangkok's famed Chulalongkorn University and one-time fellow student in Berkeley, who was directing his students in village social surveys in the Northeast. Prasert has probably done more research in the region than any other single person and his fund of knowledge of and sympathy for the people of the region is extensive. I first followed the village surveys for a few days, then set out by bus to gain a wider view of the region. What I saw was both rewarding and tiring, exhilarating and depressing

We left Bangkok's central railway station at 7:30 pm (on time), travelling overnight about 250 miles northeast and alighting in the cold pre-dawn darkness at Nanphai. Sweet coffee and Chinese deep fried rolls at a tiny coffee stall provided breakfast while we waited for a taxi to take us to Mahasarakam, a provincial capital almost in the middle of the region. We shared the battered



Prasert

Opel station wagon taxi with an old village couple, two young Thai-Chinese, and mountains of assorted luggage. Through the cold breeze created by our speed I watched the countryside come to life and gained my first view of the Northeast and its development. The new wide and well paved road ran straight into the sunrise over flat country of red earth and sparse forests and rice fields, lying dry and barren before the coming rains. Small village clusters sprang up, shaded by great clumps of bamboo. Houses, built on stilts as in Malaysia, were of rough boards with corrugated iron roofs, or of grass matting with roofs of leaves. Large earthen jars of rain water stood on the open porches. As the sun rose and dispelled the cold morning air, we began to feel the strength of that dry heat for which the region is noted; hot, but less oppressive than the high humidity of Bangkok.

"ahasarakam is a small provincial capital whose two paved streets spring up out of surrounding dusty provincial roads and lead past temples and government buildings, all done in the same architectural style: high narrow structures with long steep roofs of bright green for the government and bright green and gold for the temples. The shops carry an impressive array of the artifacts of modern industrial life, most of which are now imported from Japan. Motorcycles, radios and electric fans attest to some local buying power, but the isolation and poverty are more evident in the dominance of inexpensive staples such as iron plow tips and kerosene lamps. There is apparently some road work going on in the town, for the main intersection is marked with a tar wagon and some fresh tarred surfaces. However, I saw no actual work being done while I was there.

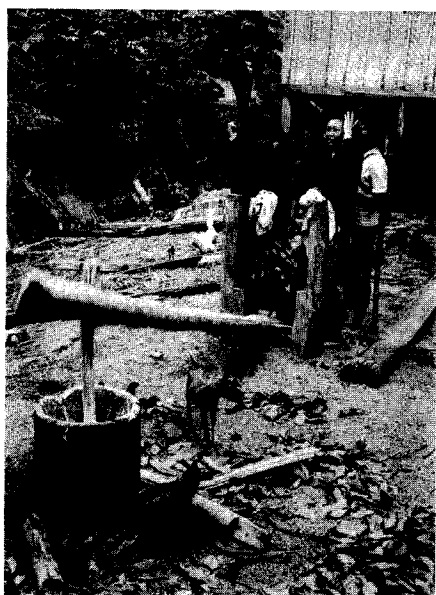
We stayed with the research team at the dormitory of the local teachers' college, itself an instrument of both progress and problems in the region. The students at the college come largely from peasant families and village schools. After a few years of advanced pedagogical training they go back to the villages as teachers. This is the first step up. Children of the teachers make the next step to secondary school and provincial government service, and their offspring finally make the great leap to Bangkok and the university. Among Prasert's students not one is a true village boy of peasant parents, though many are from the towns of the region. Often, of course, this upward mobility is not rapid enough for the new generation. Young teachers sometimes become frustrated with the slow pace of their advancement and with the conservatism of the local Buddhist priest and the village headman, with whom the teachers share or compete for influence in the village. In addition, the Communists in the region focus much of their attention on these young teachers, amplifying the problem of teacher discontent. The problem does not appear to be a serious one, but it is there nonetheless, another symptom of the old order giving way to increasing pressures for modernization, for economic development, and for a more equal distribution of wealth.

In the villages with the research team I followed interviews and wandered about watching the daily scene in its quiet and easy tempo. Although the land and the climate are gentle, the villagers are poor and isolated. On crude wooden looms under their houses women weave the coarse cotton cloth for daily clothing and the famous Thai silk for more festive occasions. The men plant rice and some canafe, a jute-like fiber used as a cash crop. They make most of their own implements, fashioning wooden plows that have not changed in centuries except for the addition of a cast-iron plow tip that is now purchased in the towns. In the houses, too, most implements are hand-made; little money is available. Contact with the

Northeast Village Scenes



Houses and carts;



Pounding and...



winnowing rice;



plow-making...



weaving.

outside world is limited. One village we visited was only about six miles from Mahasarakam, but it took our Jeep station wagon almost half an hour to cover the five miles of provincial highway to the turn-off and then another ten minutes to drag itself over the remaining mile to the village. Even this breakneck speed was only possible because the rains had not yet come. Within a month of our visit the rutted road from the turn-off would disappear in swollen streams and flooded fields and the villagers would take to shallow boats for their even more infrequent trips to town.

One village day started as we arrived and introduced ourselves to the headman. The students immediately fanned out for the interviews and I took to wandering. I returned later to find two students admiring pieces of beautiful Thai silk woven by the headman's attractive 17 year old daughter.

One of the students wanted to buy some silk but it was not for sale. As I admired it, more pieces were brought out and other village women began to bring in their best pieces for display. No, none of it was for sale. Then we began to play upon the deep Thai sense of hospitality, with the students interpreting for me. I was, after all, a visitor from far away and would like to take with me a reminder of the village and its people. The headman's daughter finally weakened and after two hours of discussion and indecision, allowed me to buy a handsome blue and red plaid. It was, she said, with a heavy heart that she parted with the labor of her hands, but having decided to do so, she raised the price I offered by 10 baht (50¢). Innocence??!!

We ate our lunches in the headman's house then stretched out on mats for a rest. A crowd had gathered, providing a gentle and lively banter, in which I participated while a deep sense of sleepy well-being enveloped me on my mat. An old granny with whom I had flirted earlier, much to everyone's delight, brought me a present of green mangoes for my dessert. The headman's brother came in, his lean, brown body marked with handsome tatoos. He asked if I would like to live in a house like this. I gave a drowsy but sincere affirmative reply, adding that I'd also like to work in the rice fields with the mom. "No, no," he said, "if I had you here, I'd keep you in the house and charge people money to come and look at you." Then pointing to the his niece, so skilled at weaving, he suggested that I take her as a wife.

"I'd be delighted, but I'd have to ask my wife first."

Hearty laughter was followed by my old girl friend, her handsome face framing protruding teeth blackened by beetle chewing, cackling delightedly that in Thailand I wouldn't have to ask my wife first. And indeed I wouldn't. In a recent "Asiapol" survey, Thailand was the only country polled in Asia in which a large majority of both men and women thought it perfectly all right for a man to have more than one wife.

Then on by bus....dirt roads with clouds of dust rising behind the 3/4 ton Japanese trucks converted for passenger carrying that are now opening remote parts of the region to the influence of the towns. As a foreigner, and therefore a guest, I was given a favored place beside the driver in all buses; the hard cushions in these places compared favorably for comfort only with the bare wooden benches in the back. This kind of preferential



A tempting offer...

The headman's daughter as a
second wife,



father-in-law, and...



the match-making uncle.

treatment disturbed me when it was offered in Malaysia, as it often was; here it was not disturbing. In Malaysia I had received preference because I was a white man (or so I thought), bearing in my skin color the high status of conqueror, of political, military, and economic superior. The preference there was uncomfortable because it was associated with an invidious distinction, a mark of inferiority based on the accident of skin color. In Thailand there was no such invidious distinction, partly explained by the fact that Thailand has not been colonized by a western power. Here the preference was extended out of genuine hospitality, the best is reserved for the guest. It was also based partly on the Thai love of beauty, for the Thais consider white skin beautiful in itself, an evaluation that long antedates sustained contact with the West.

From Mahasarakam we continued farther northeast, passing some new bridges for the first 20 miles. Then the road passed another hundred miles over rickety wooden bridges, indicating that the development program had not yet penetrated to this heart of the region. We finally reached the farthest northeast corner, Nakornpranom, a quiet district seat on the broad and beautiful Mekong River. The town was obviously more wealthy than Mahasarakam; there were more paved streets and its larger number of shops carried a larger array of both luxury and utilitarian manufactured

goods. A main street led along the river from government offices up river, along a line of flame trees, whose brilliant red blossoms formed a striking frame for the great river, through the center of town to the down river side, marked by a temple and a town market, where fat green beetles were sold by the handful for 10¢ and promised pungent succulence when deep fried or roasted.

Now almost due west, paralleling the river but south of it, our route led to Udonthani, on the main rail line from Bangkok. This one hundred and fifty miles of road carried more evidence of the new development program. It was raised high above the monotonous rice fields and sparse forests, and was well levelled, prepared for asphaltting after the coming rains. Practising Thai numbers, I counted 138 bridges (between 35 and 50 feet long) spanning small streams and rice swamps. All showed the U.S. shield with two hands clasped in friendship, marking the part U.S. aid had played in the program. Here, again, I met the same curious impression of development I had gained in Mahasarakham. Although I saw many signs of completed work, and some bits of machinery lying about, not once in my entire ten days in the region did I see any actual work in progress on the roads.

I stopped at Udonthani for two days to talk with some Thai government officers. My impressions were strong and unmixed. These officers were capable and intelligent administrators, with a deep sense of responsibility for the development of the region. The Northeast has long been noted as something of a land of exile for officers without powerful patrons in Bangkok. Now that has changed and the region is getting some of the best of the new young officers and governors. They were generally critical of the U.S.-backed community development program and saw their greatest need as more heavy machinery for road and dam building. (With this I was in general agreement.) I found here a familiar echo of the Malaysian development programs, where there was an impatience to get on with the new building and a lack of interest in programs designed to change human values.

From Udonthani it is just a few miles north to Nongkai. There I jumped across the river to Vientiane - for a good meal. Vientiane seemed a mixture of old American frontier town and French provincial town with sidewalk cafes. A few spent cartridges in the dust were all that remained of the latest coup, and the big drive of the Pathet Lao had not yet started; peace reigned supreme.

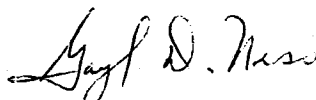
Our AID officials were happy to tell me of their work, but it was depressing in the extreme for anyone looking for signs of development. Most of our work there is a sheer handout, necessary as that may be. In one program we, together with the French, British and Australians, pay for all Laos' imports, a program euphemistically dubbed monetary stabilization. In another we air drop 40 tons of rice a day to hill tribes and refugees from North Viet Nam. There is also a bit of road building and what seems to be a hopeless attempt at bureaucratic and tax reform. At the bottom of the list comes an infinitesimal program of village development. The sense of frustration lay deep in most people with whom I talked, though a few dedicated souls were plugging away trying to tie down bits and pieces of human life, casting only an occasional backward glance at the utter chaos of the larger scene.

The food, rather the cuisine, was excellent, providing in addition a sense of stability that goes with a great civilization. I could almost hear the crashing and crunching attending the falling of the old order, the colonial order with its by-product propped-up feudal anachronisms, and the violent struggle to establish some kind of a new order. Amid the ruins and the dust of battle, I could envisage the figure of the French waiter and the French chef, and of Marcel the French hotel owner and international money broker, for the correspondent a friend, confidant, procurer of all things and money lender. (And why not! His hotel was built with correspondents' money, just as at times the country's greatest single source of foreign exchange apart from aid was from news agency cable dispatches.) Here one finds the real strength of a real civilization. With bullets whining overhead and the holocaust spinning around one, there would still be the glass of Pernod, artichokes would still arrive from Viet Nam, one could still get a good steak and a bottle of wine that, if not the best, was still sufficient to withstand the rigours of journey and climate and emerge with the better part of a gallant bouquet still intact.

The food and the sense of civilization, especially to my hopelessly biased western nose, were invigorating, but I found little else of interest in Vientiane, especially since I am too much the coward to play at being a war correspondent. As I was leaving, the brave newsmen, hoping their information on who held the airfield was correct, were up at dawn to fly out and watch the Pathets begin their vigorous offensive. I preferred to sit with a cool beer beside the great Mekong, waiting for a launch to take me back to Nongkai for the train to Bangkok.

The fourteen hour train trip from Nongkai to Bangkok gave me ample time for reflection. The monotony of flat rice land and forests provided a little distraction, as did the station stops where we could buy succulent broiled chicken, cooked rice and prawn crackers, but for the most part the past ten days marched before me. Here was the great Mekong River, one of those mighty tropical waterways that I have come to love, winding through a land of poverty and chaos. On one side the chaos was dominant. It produced poverty, intensified poverty already present, and frustrated any efforts to increase man's productivity. Across the river, on the Thai side, there was poverty, but there was also a sense of order, and a broader organization of government in which something could be done, and was being done, to eradicate the poverty. The pace of development was far from feverish, perhaps it was not even very steady. But there was some of that development, especially in communications, that brings wide ranging changes so inexorably. The human material of this development impressed me considerably. Perhaps because the land is not as rich as the great rice producing central plains, the people of the Northeast seem energetic and enterprising. The swarms of food sellers at rail and bus stops was only one indication that the people will take any opportunity to turn their time and energy into cash. With every mile of road built or improved more of the energies and talents of these people will be released. This will certainly bring many different things, not all of them peaceful, perhaps not all of them healthy, and certainly not all of them foreseeable. Probably the only thing of which we can be certain along this stretch of the Mekong is that poverty and chaos are explosive ingredients, and change is definitely a part of the region's life.

Sincerely,



Received in New York July 30, 1964.

Gayl D. Ness