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Thailand Seeks Soviet Help

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BANGKOK, Nov. 26—Thailand is quietly seeking the assistance of the Soviet Union to defuse a spreading crisis on the Mekong River border with Laos.

The crisis has the potential of expanding swiftly into renewed fighting in Southeast Asia, involving not just Thailand and Laos, but North Vietnam as well. The Thais are asking the Soviets to help them establish contact with the Laotians and the North Vietnamese while their foreign minister is in Washington seeking increased U.S. military supplies.

Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, who met with U.S. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger today, contends along with other Thai leaders that Hanoi is behind Laos' tough new anti-Thai policies.

They reason that the Communist Pathet Lao now governing landlocked Laos, population 3.3 million, is no match for Thailand, a nation of 42 million people. But with North Vietnam behind it, the Pathet Lao can afford to be bellicose.

The current crisis arose Nov. 17 when Pathet Lao gunners fired on a Thai patrol boat on the Mekong and killed one crewman. Thailand responded by closing the border and moving more military units into the area.

Just before leavin for Washington, Chatichai met with the Soviet ambassador to Thailand for three hours and, according to a Foreign Ministry source, "made it very clear that we want to talk to the real authorities in Laos."

Some in the Foreign Ministry think the Soviets will help, but most Thai diplomats feel that Moscow would prefer to leave the Thai government shaky and uncertain.

Laos has been almost entirely reliant upon Thailand for critical imports such as rice and gasoline. But in the next few months all-weather roads linking Laos with Hanoi and the port of Haiphong are expected to be completed. This will enable the Pathet Lao to turn to Vietnam and the Soviet Union for supplies and lessen if not entirely end the dependence on Thailand and the West.

When the shooting on the Mekong River occurred, the

Thais said their patrol boat was in Thai territorial waters. The Laotians said the boat had crossed into their territory and fired on a group of bathing Pathet Lao soldiers.

The gunboat, one of 30 given to Thailand by the United States, has been aground since the incident on a tiny dot of land known as Don Tam Island. Both governments claim the island.

Today, according to a reliable source, Laos informed Thailand that it could retrieve the craft if it first informed the Laotian Foreign Ministry of its plans. This would imply acceptance of Laos' ownership of the island. The source said Thailand plans to announce that it will retrieve the boat from its own territory.

Since the Nov. 17 incident, both sides have built up their armed forces along the river which forms a 525-mile border between the two countries. In Bangkok, students have demonstrated outside the Laotian and Soviet embassies. Newspapers report the latest military developments with screaming headlines.

The Thais think the real enemy is not Laos, but North Vietnam. Most Thai and

Western analysts say Hanoi exercises control over Laos through close personal and ideological ties with Communist Party leaders.

The Soviet government has not yet responded to the Thai request for help although the Soviet ambassador has met with senior Thai Foreign Ministry officials in the last few days. Some observers say the Soviets want to play a role in negotiating a settlement as a means of increasing their influence in Thailand as they have done in Laos.

The basic Soviet goal in

to Defuse Crisis With Laos

Southeast Asia is to retard the growth of Chinese influence on the region's governments.

Last month China orchestrated a reunion between Thailand and the new Communist rulers of neighboring Cambodia. The Chinese flew Cambodian Deputy Premier Ieng Sary into Bangkok from Phnom Penh. Sary and Chatichai agreed to reestablish diplomatic and trade relations—a blow to the Soviets who still do not have ties with the new Cambodian government.

Western diplomatic observers in Bangkok and Vientiane believe that the Soviet Union is determined to disrupt China's diplomatic success by encouraging the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao to keep Thailand ill at ease.

These observers note that a certain amount of border tension short of open war helps the Pathet Lao unite Laotians behind the new Communist government.

The Thais say the Laotians

and the North Vietnamese have cooperated to increase the flow of arms to Communist insurgents in northeast Thailand.

Chatichai is seeking an increased arms supply commitment from Kissinger in part because of the threat of that insurgency.

"The main point of his visit to Washington is to ask the United States to equip our military forces, particularly the army, to full strength," said a Foreign Ministry source.

Although the United States is closing down its air bases in Thailand and withdrawing the bulk of its troops, at least 2,000 military advisers are expected to remain in the country.

Thai sources say they have been assured by "senior U.S. officials," that the United States has no intention of abandoning their country. As one Foreign Ministry source put it, "the U.S. government doesn't want to see Russia and China fighting a war on the Southeast Asian mainland."