

Thai Insurgents Step Up War

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Washington Post Foreign Service

NA KAE, Thailand, Nov. 4—Here in the heartland of Thailand's Communist insurgency and throughout the troubled northeast of the country, guerrillas have been stepping up the intensity and scale of their attacks on government outposts since military leaders seized power in Bangkok a month ago.

Government and military officials in a number of provincial towns are convinced that the increased activity is being carried out in direct response to the toppling of Thailand's short-lived democratic government.

Most officials in the impoverished northeast, which is bordered by the Communist-governed states of Laos and Cambodia, anticipate that the insurgency will become steadily more difficult to cope with as dissident students and other leftists who have joined the guerrillas in recent weeks become trained jungle fighters.

They expect that Laos and its major ally, Vietnam, which began upgrading the quality of their support to the Thai insurgency more than a year ago, will increase their aid now that they are faced with an anti-Communist regime here.

Although most local officials seem pleased by the Oct. 6 coup because it has freed them to take strong action against the insurgents and their supporters, there is general agreement that the struggle will take on major proportions within six months.

"In five or six months, those students who have the nerve to remain in the jungle will be trained combat troops and that's when we'll really have to worry," said Pisal Moolsartsathorn, the governor of Nakhon Phanom Province on the Mekong River border with Laos.

Pisal, like civilian and military officials throughout the northeast, cited intelligence reports of an undetermined number of students linking up with insurgent units and at least 200 others crossing the Mekong into Laos.

Authorities have monitored Communist radio broadcasts advising students how to survive in the jungles, what sort of clothing to wear, how to make contact with guerrilla groups and, if necessary, "To be prepared to sacrifice your lives" if captured by police or military units.

There are thought to be some armed guerrillas in the northeast, bolstered by active Communist supporters who raise the overall strength to 10,000.

Several regional officials expressed concern that even if the majority of students did not remain in the jungle, those who did could add a new level of intelligence and leadership ability to the insurgents,

some of whom have been at war with the government for more than a decade.

Others feared that, perhaps more dangerous to the government, the students would return to Bangkok and other cities where they would wage an urban terrorist campaign.

This week, in an extraordinary broadcast on the clandestine Voice of the People of Thailand radio, a group of six top former leaders of the now-illegal National Student Council of Thailand declared the beginning of a "people's war" against the military-backed regime in Bangkok.

"We have unequivocally drawn the con-

clusion that because the enemy has guns we also must have guns . . . Our people must also have their revolutionary armed forces to overthrow the reactionary administrative power," the students said.

The broadcast called upon farmers and workers to cooperate in a basic Maoist program of "using the rural areas to encircle and finally seize the cities."

At the moment, the insurgency is limited to a number of fairly well-defined rural pockets in the northeast. The area surrounding the small district town of Na Kae is one of the most severely affected.

Dominated by Phupan Noi, a heavily forested hill constantly patrolled by troops of the Thai army's 3d Regimental Combat Team, the area is one of those parts of the country described recently by Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien as "Communist-infested."

The few roads criss-crossing Na Kae are intercepted every mile or so by barricades manned by heavily armed police. Local police stations, favorite targets of the insurgents, are ringed by sandbags.

At the home Virat Rasmitas, the Na Kae District chief, even the gardener digging weeds in a flower bed, wears a revolver on his hip.

"In an infested area like this," Virat told me, "we divide the villages into three categories: first are those where government officials can enter with no trouble; second are those where there's trouble some of the time; and third are those which are totally under Communist control, where we can enter only after we've staged an armed operation in advance."

This contradicted claims by other officials that the Communists had no so-called "liberated" areas in Thailand. "I suppose it's all a matter of semantics," observed a Western counter insurgency specialist in Bangkok. "If the government can get into an area after putting up a fight, maybe that's not a liberated area."

There are 140 village in Na Kae district and of these 50 are in the third category, Virat said. "The government is putting its greatest effort into Na Kae because it is the

most infested district in the northeast," he said.

The thrust of the government's efforts, which began even before the military takeover, is to locate what Virat termed "village hard cores," that is those villagers who supply guerrillas with information, food and medical supplies, and to "re-educate" them.

In the four months he has been district chief in Na Kae, Virat said, he was stressed "re-education and played down violence." Like other local officials I met during a four-day tour through the northeast, covering more than 700 miles. Virat saw no irony in the government employing the same "re-education" technique as the new Communist regimes in the neighboring Indochinese states.

Col. Aroon Siuthai, commander of the 3rd Regimental Combat Team, received me in an underground bunker outfitted with detailed maps. Two young lieutenants in crisply starched jungle fatigues pointed out spots on the maps where Communist terrorists—"CTs" in military parlance—have lost recent battles against police and armed village volunteers.

Throughout the northeast, the police and the village volunteers are on the cut-

ting edge of the struggle with the guerrillas. The army steps in only when a particular struggle gets out of hand. In the last few weeks, the military has had to come to the rescue more and more frequently.

"Our object is to get the CTs to surrender," Aroon said, "not to kill. We have no desire to kill. We're all Thais."

Southeast of Na Kae, in the provincial capital of Ubon, Vice Governor Saisit Pornkaew is closer to the cutting edge.

A few minutes after I entered his office he received a report of a predawn attack on a police station in the village of Ban Kam Duey. The result: Three policemen killed, six wounded seriously; Communist casualties unknown.

"This is a very, very red area," Saisit said. "Two weeks ago there was attack in the same area and two village volunteers were killed. And just a few days after the coup, one village hardcore killed another volunteer. This is definitely revenge for the takeover."

Half an hour later, he received a report of yet another attack, this one south of the provincial capital.

Saisit, a northeasterner by birth, seemed keenly aware of even the most minor alterations in the insurgency picture. "It's too early yet to really know what effect the military takeover has had on the guerrillas," he said. "But it's definitely clear that since the Communist victories in Indochina, the CTs here are far better organized."

Saisit said he was hopeful that the government would take more armed action "and stop wasting time talking."

"I believe in the principle of political solutions," he added, "but only in principle. Sometimes it's necessary to establish security first and talk later. As a northeasterner, I believe that the majority of our people cooperate with the Communists only because they're frightened. If we can separate them from the CTs, they'll stop supporting them."

There's no question that villagers in the so-called infested areas are frightened. Wherever I stopped to discuss the insurgency with people, in rice paddies, on the steps of tiny rural general stores, cooking food in the shade of their stilt houses, they quickly denied that there was any trouble.

"Oh, we have a few cases of cattle theft," said Pramul Peungpo, a farmer in the village of Ban Moh Tong. "But that's all. We have no Communists here."

Col. Haan Linanada, chief of staff of the 2d Army Forward Command at Sakon Nakhon, is a firm believer in isolating "infested" areas. What he would like to see is a resettlement program like the one practiced in neighboring Malaysia to break the link between villagers and the guerrillas.

Although Haan said such drastic action would be required "in just a few locations," he said the costs would probably be prohibitive.

As an alternative, during the last year the government has "taken over" 222 villages in nine of the most seriously "infested" of the northeast's 16 provinces. By "taking over," Haan explained, he meant that the government trained villagers in self-defense, established paramilitary forces and "taught them to help themselves."