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THAI INSURGENTS SEEN INCREASING

Rebels Are Also Reported to Be Better Armed

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BANGKOK, Thailand, March 22—The number of armed insurgents in Thailand has grown 15 to 20 per cent over the last year and a half, according to Thai military officials and Western diplomats.

The Communist-led insurgents are still believed to be a long way from posing a serious threat to Thailand's national security, but they are reportedly receiving better arms through Laos and becoming more energetic in organizing in the countryside and contesting Government efforts to rout them out.

"They are still in phase one, building their organization, infrastructure and secure areas, and this is difficult for them because they had to start from scratch in Thailand, unlike Vietnam," Lieut. Gen. Saiyud

Kerdphol, director of the Command for the Suppression of Communists, said in an interview. "But they are moving close to phase two—launching guerrilla offensive operations against us."

There are still many diplomats and foreign observers in Bangkok who discount the size and growth of the insurgents despite Government pronouncements and newspaper articles about their increasing threat.

Said one Japanese businessman here:

"The only people who talk about insurgency here are in the military and the American Embassy. I think they are trying to take attention away from other problems."

By other things, he said, he included the slump in economic growth amid rising prices and the lag in development in the countryside compared with the conspicuous wealth in Bangkok.

The insurgents in Thailand are grouped into three areas of the countryside and have operated in the past without coordination. But analysts see signs of an increasing liaison between groups in the hilly north composed of Meo hill tribesmen and those in the northeast, made up of lowland and ethnic Laotians.

Armed strength in the north is now estimated at 3,000 Meo tribesmen, led by Thais and ethnic Chinese born in Thailand. A thousand other villagers are believed to be armed and used as security forces in "liberated areas."

Their arms include AK-47 rifles, B-40 rocket launchers, 60-mm. mortars and plastic mines undetectable with standard mine-detection devices, said one diplomat.

While the insurgents in the northern provinces are now considered to be the most serious threat because most armed clashes with Government security forces occur there, analysts believe the real long-range threat is in the northeast.

hand, the number of insurgents that have been killed, according

General Saiyud said the main guerrilla effort in the northeast in the last two years has been to organize village committees and associations much like those in South Vietnam.

The number of armed insurgents in the northeast, centered around the Phu Phan Mountains, is put at 1,500, but their armament is a mixture of American carbines, M-16 rifles and explosives made from dud shells, with a few Chinese-made rifles but not enough to suggest a supply link through Laos such as those utilized in the north.

The Thai guerrillas in the south, near the Malaysian border, are believed to number about 500. They have increased their clashes with Thai police in recent months.

Throughout the country, the insurgents have taken a steady toll of policemen and soldiers during the last three years. According to statistics made available by diplomats, the Government lost about 300 killed and 550 wounded in 1969, 450 killed and 500 wounded in 1970, and nearly 500 killed and 500 wounded last year. On the other hand, the number of insurgents that have been killed, according to these same statistics, has ranged from only a third to a fourth as many, so that for every guerrilla killed the Government is losing three or four men.



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Guerrilla activity is in the hilly north (1), the northeast (2) and the south (3), near Malaysia.