

U.S. Reported Backing Thai 'Ruff-Puffs'

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BANGKOK, April 26 (UPI)

—Authoritative sources said today that the United States is providing weapons and other assistance to help Thailand set up a counterinsurgency militia similar to the Popular Force and Regional Force units it created in South Vietnam.

The sources said the local defense force—an expanded version of the present Village Defense Organization—would be centered initially in a four-province area of Thailand's impoverished northeast, where Communist guerrillas now control about 10 per cent of the villages.

The new units would widely expand the activities of present scattered village self-defense units and of hunter-killer teams, some of them trained by U.S. Green Berets, that are supposed to seek out and destroy Communist guerrillas.

There are believed to be about 1,500 well-armed guerrillas in Nakhon Phanom, Udorn, Kalasin and Sakhon Nakhon provinces of the northeast, with perhaps double that number of support personnel and active sympathizers. U.S. military installations are located in three of the four provinces.

Plans for the project have not been publicized by U.S. officials or the Thai government, partly to avoid criticism that the Communist insurgency situation in the country is only being aggravated by continued U.S. presence and involvement in Thailand.

The sources who outlined the project said it would be much smaller in scope than South Vietnam's militia force, which numbers in the hundreds of thousands. They said plans called for recruitment of between 7,000 and 15,000 villagers over the next five years. The long-range goal would be to have a self-defense unit in every village.