

Thai minister tells Japan: Not only Thailand would benefit from Kra Canal

Thai Communications Minister Samak Sundarvej, who has shown a strong interest in the Kra Canal development project, was interviewed by the Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun on Feb. 8. Here are excerpts:

Samak: When we talk about the Kra Canal, it is an idea which has existed for 200 years. At the time of Rama I [in the 18th century], the canal was conceived as a way to defend the country against the Burmese. There was renewed interest in the Kra Canal during the reign of Rama V [in the 19th century]. But due to colonial powers of the time, the Kra Canal remained only an idea. Most interesting is the American report that came out in 1964. The Americans thought ahead of their time—20 years ago. Even though the distance saved would not be as great as that saved by the Panama or Suez canals, they foresaw that the maritime traffic at the Malacca Straits would become congested. Therefore, they thought the Kra Canal should exist.

When you look at the map of Thailand, you will see that the narrowest part is the Kra Isthmus itself. But this American team made a proposal supported with an aerial view map. Now, we have since learned that the TAMS [Tippetts-Abett-McCarthy-Stratton] engineering firm, 10 years ago, on their own initiative, did a more detailed study of the project. We learned that the best passage is not at Kra but further south, because the Kra Isthmus itself has a very high mountain range which would make it very difficult to excavate the canal.

TAMS made several other route suggestions but concluded that Route 5 is the most interesting and the best possible route. This is because almost half of the route is near sea-level and the rest is a low mountain range. If the Kra Canal were to be built, one could save up to four days in shipping time. Of course, compared with other routes, the time saved is not much. But compared with the Straits of Malacca, it would be good to save four days.

Role of Fusion Energy Foundation

Then came another American group, the Fusion Energy Foundation. It is quite interesting for us Thais to see interest by an American group in constructing the canal. We found out that when they organized a conference in the United

States, they were able to draw some 500 to 600 participants representing 46 countries. Then, they came to Thailand and organized two conferences, the first one in October 1983 and the last one just last October.

So, they came to the conclusion that there were possibilities of doing this project. When I got into office two years ago, people asked me if there was any possibility of the Thai government actually implementing this project. Some said the project is so huge. Others said that it was impossible. Here is what I always replied: Is it possible to do this project? If it is, then go right ahead. See to it. But if it is impossible, then why ask this question?

What I would very much like to see is a good relief map of the area showing the different elevations. If I could have such a map, I don't think it should be difficult to decide whether the project is possible or not. Many times I have said to myself that there are many passages from the Gulf of Thailand [Indian Ocean] toward the inland. There are many rivers going some 27-30 kilometers inland before coming up against small mountains or hills.

The hills we run into in this area are only 50 to 70 meters high, i.e., some 200 feet or more. So, that's all we would have to move, when we talk of a canal without locks. To have locks may make the canal expensive. Looking from the air, we might have to make some detours in the canal route to avoid the hills so that the passage can be made. If there is not much to excavate, only some small hills, then we can perhaps say that there is really no need to use nuclear explosions to excavate the canal. Normal technology, like TNT or any other excavation method, would suffice.

Now, the Bangkok representative of the Fusion Energy Foundation, Pakdee Tanapura, told me that Japan is also interested in this matter. I would like to take this occasion to inform you that in Thailand, some members of parliament interested in the Kra Canal project took this matter to the ESCAP [Economic and Social Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific, a U.N. agency] secretary general. These MPs would like to lift this Kra project to the status of a regional program. The ESCAP secretary general acted with wisdom, called me up and asked to meet. I met him. He told me that he is not in a position to deal with those members of parliament. He can

only talk to the government, not to members of parliament. He also asked me to stop these initiatives to regionalize the project through ESCAP because it could jeopardize ESCAP in the region. He told me that, in fact, this matter concerns the sovereignty of Thailand. This is because an eventual passage will only go through Thailand. If the project is done as a collaborative effort of all countries in the region, who then owns the airspace over the canal zone? What is Thai sovereignty over this area? So, he told me that the construction of the canal is a decision to be made by Thais. The two other countries that would be concerned by the project would be Japan and the United States, the two countries that would greatly benefit from the canal.

Benefits for Japan, U.S.A.

For Japan, they could move their tankers to the Pacific faster through the passage when transferring oil from the

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Middle East or goods from Europe. Since Japan would be a major beneficiary of the project, and she has the technology and financial resources to participate, she may be involved in it.

The other beneficiary country is the United States. We know that the U. S. Seventh Fleet uses the Cebu base in the Philippines. The United States also has her Sixth Fleet based on Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean. An eventual passage through the Isthmus of Thailand could help speed up and facilitate the deployment of these two fleets between the two oceans.

If collaboration from both Japan and the United States can be organized under Thai sovereignty, maybe investment could come from these two countries. If this is the case, then perhaps these two major beneficiary countries could pay for a certain period of time a lower preferential rate to the host country, Thailand. This is the general idea of what can be

arranged.

The Ministry [of Communications] is going ahead with the project. The Fusion Energy Foundation, TAMS, and the Global Infrastructure Fund (FIG) of Japan, are very interested in submitting a pre-feasibility study. TAMS has all the facts and figures of the area. The study will be provided free of cost, and Thailand will have the necessary preliminary information. Now if we are interested, we can move further on to a real feasibility study. Then, if the project proves to be viable, we will select ways to implement the project.

Yomiuri: A press article printed in our newspaper mentioned that "the Thai government asked Mr. Doko, honorable chairman of the GIF, about the Kra Canal case. What I want to know is whether this letter was an official letter because the Japanese paper mentioned "the Thai government asked. . . .""?

Samak: You can say that, because when you are called the minister of communications, you represent the Thai government. It is under my jurisdiction. It is under my responsibility. When we have to make the final decision, of course, we will then have to have the approval of the cabinet. But we are at a fact-finding stage, collecting data in order to have a pre-feasibility study. The pre-feasibility study establishes that it is possible, that it is viable to go ahead and do the feasibility study. At that stage, the project will still be under my jurisdiction if there is no public expenditure.

Benefits for Thailand

Yomiuri: Please say why you want to promote or accelerate this plan?

Samak: Actually the benefit is not for the Thais. The passage is for others. But we are the ones who own that corner. We will benefit from the business that will occur along the sides of the canal. Refineries must exist there. Water plants must exist there. Any kind of industry could exist there. I want to say that we did not think of doing it in order to just have ships come to Thailand. No, it is for others who will benefit from the canal passage. But since we are the ones who will own the passage, we will be the ones to do business. Thais will benefit from the industrialization of the area.

Yomiuri: What can the Japanese do?

Samak: I would like to pay a visit to Japan as a guest of some institution where I could deliver a lecture on this matter, and where I would be able to answer questions. As in this country, there are still pros and cons. Those who are in favor of the project may have no responsibility. Those that are against may have no responsibility. But they have the right to talk. This is a democracy. But as the one who has jurisdiction and responsibility, it should mean something if I talk on this matter. I might spend two or three days in Japan, because Japan has shown much interest in this project.