

Report from Bangkok by Sophie Tanapura

Support grows for Kra Canal

The infrastructure project is gaining support in top military and banking circles.

Interest in construction of a major international waterway across the peninsula in southern Thailand, linking the Gulf of Thailand to the Andaman Sea—otherwise known as the Kra Canal—is gaining extraordinary momentum in the country itself. Thai military brass are now openly putting their weight behind the project, which has the potential to transform the country from a predominantly rural economy into an important agro-industrial power in the region.

Keen to hear what one of the top military officials presently has to say about the previously controversial project, the Parliamentary Committee to Study the Kra Canal Project invited Army Commander in Chief Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyundh to testify to the committee on Dec. 17, 1986. Since General Chavalit was in Indonesia at the time, Maj.-Gen. Panya Kwanyu, deputy director-general for civilian affairs for the Royal Thai Army, spoke in his stead.

Panya declared, "Up to now, the Army has only studied the Kra Project from the narrow, negative point of view, i.e., from the purely strategic standpoint and the problem of sending support troops in an emergency. However, the Army generally supports the Kra Project, and will be able to find substantial data in favor of the project."

According to Wattana Aşawa-haen, chairman of the parliamentary committee, General Chavalit had voiced his enthusiastic support of the project in a discussion with him, and was again invited to testify before the

committee. Defense Minister Air Chief Marshal Panieng Katarat was also asked to testify.

In an interview with the prominent Thai daily *Siam Rath*, former Supreme Commander Saiyud Kervpol, now special adviser to the prime minister, stated, "Stability in the southern region depends on the well-being of the population in that area. If they are prosperous, they will be loyal to the central government. A big development project like the Kra Canal would provide the right impetus. . . . Fear that the Kra Canal would encourage the secessionist movement in the south stems from archaic strategic thinking.

"A more modern strategic approach favors the strengthening of national sovereignty by developing a strong and prosperous economy. National security problems cannot be solved purely by military means. We must also rely on economic development. In fact, to not respond to the interest voiced by southern members of parliament might lead to a misunderstanding by their constituencies that the central government is not truly concerned about their welfare."

Until recently, active military officers had to exert extra caution when asked to comment on the canal project. While Gen. Arthit Kamlang-Ek was commander-in-chief of the army and supreme commander of the armed forces, the subject was taboo because of a strong personal, not political, conflict between General Arthit and Gen. Harn Leelanond, who has repeatedly spoken out for the project. General Arthit, who benefited from an

additional year of service after retirement, left active duty this fall, while General Harn resigned from active service to run in last July's elections, and is now currently agriculture minister.

Enthusiastic support for the project can also be heard from top banking quarters, such as Bangkok Bank President Prasit Kanchanawat, who believes the waterway would give a healthy boost to the Thai economy. A recent report by the Thai Farmers Bank, going against the official line that 700,000-800,000 jobs would be available in 1987 because of expected growth in the non-agricultural sector, warned that Thai workers in the Middle East would soon be returning home, worsening the unemployment problem. To solve the problem, the report suggested, "Certain major projects, such as the Eastern Seaboard Development Program, the establishment of the tantalum plant, and the Kra Canal Project, should be implemented because they will help increase employment opportunities."

The Kra Canal is a truly exemplary project of its kind, which would allow Thailand to play a strategic political and economic role in the region. The parliamentary committee will reconvene on Jan. 15 to study different possible routes.

Also on the agenda in 1987 is another seminar focusing on the economic impact of the overall project to be organized by the Chulalongkorn University. The seminar will be held on Feb. 6-7. Invited to address the seminar are Fusion Energy Foundation Director of Research Uwe Henke v. Parpart and a representative of the Global Infrastructure Club of DK-Kai. It is expected that, when the parliament reconvenes in April, and the Kra question comes up for a vote, the project is likely to pass.