

Report from Bangkok by Sophie Tanapura

Kra Canal on parliamentary agenda

After months of "fact-finding," a House extraordinary committee in Thailand has just given the green light for the Kra Canal.

The Kra Canal project—a plan which consists of linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans by way of a canal to be constructed across the isthmus of Thailand—is back in local headlines again. Early in November, the Thai House Extraordinary Committee concluded a two-year investigation and recommended that the Kra Canal be constructed along Route 5A from the western coast of Satun to the eastern coast of Songkhla. The recommendation will be discussed in Parliament by the end of November.

Before concluding their investigation into the feasibility of a Kra Canal project, which includes the development of major deep-sea port facilities on both ends of the canal, as well as industrial zones, House Committee chairman Wattana Asawahem headed a 20-man group on a seven-day study tour early in November. The group wanted to study the traffic and navigation patterns of the region aboard a fishery research vessel which went from Songkhla through the Singapore Channel, the Strait of Malacca and back.

The House Extraordinary Committee members earlier went on a world fact-finding tour of the Suez Canal and the Nordost See Canal (also known as the Kiel Canal) at the end of August, where they were able to gather information on dam construction and the Euro-Tunnel project. They also met many businessmen and politicians interested in the Kra Canal project.

Over the past year, lobbying work in favor of the project has developed

to another phase. In October, an independent Kra Canal Club was founded by Police Gen. Amrung Sakulratna (ret.) and Fusion Society representative Pakdee Tanapura. Joining the Club are H.E. Konthi Supamongkol, former ambassador to London and Bonn; and several retired military officers representing all three branches of the Royal Thai Armed Forces. The club is headed by Dr. Arun Soratesna, a former cabinet member. The Club is a member of the Science Association of Thailand.

After only four meetings, the Kra Canal Club is getting down to the nitty-gritty of hard political lobbying work. A basic handbook in Thai on the Kra Canal written by the group will be out on the local market before the end of the year, and will be designed to build a broad base of support for the project. The Club has also issued a resolution following the Oct. 19 crash of the New York Stock Exchange. Referencing U.S. presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche, the Thai Club has called upon the Prem government to make the project the centerpiece of a New Deal policy "à la Roosevelt" to protect the country from the impending financial collapse.

The resolution states: "Presently, the construction industry represents only 5.68% of the total GNP of Thailand. . . . Expansion of the construction sector through urgent implementation of project as the Nam Choan Dam, the greening of the Northeast region, major water management and

irrigation projects, and electricity generation will not be sufficient. What is really needed is a great infrastructure project like the Kra Canal. . . . According to a Fusion Energy Foundation study, the Kra Canal project will necessitate an investment of some 300 billion baht (\$12 billion) and will be able to employ national raw materials and local labor for up to 65% of the total project construction work. In the span of the estimated 10 years needed to complete the project, there will be some 5 to 8 million new jobs."

The resolution ends by stating that the "present economic and financial crisis will have an impact on the economies of every nation, including that of Thailand. The present government's political stability will depend on its ability to successfully pull the country through the crisis."

Most recently, the Bangkok-based Asian Institute of Technology has founded a 15-person Kra Canal ad hoc committee, headed by Prof. Yves van Frausam, a Belgian economist. The AIT has one of the largest, if not the largest, computer facilities in Southeast Asia, and can be called in at a certain point for consulting work on the canal project.

Paradoxical as it may seem for Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda—himself a man from Songkhla—he might not be the one to go down in history for having given the green light to the Kra Canal, even though many of the parliamentary members of the House Extraordinary Committee on the canal are his close friends. Many in Thailand believe that at the crucial moment when the canal is put before him, Prem will lack the courage to put his approval behind a project that would benefit even his own region the most. Or will Prime Minister Prem surprise us all by breaking with his pattern of passivity?