

# Southern Thailand goes for the Kra Canal

by Sophie Tanapura

Plans for the construction of a Kra Canal through the southern isthmus of Thailand are very much in the spotlight in southern Thailand and in the nation's parliament. The canal project would link the Andaman Sea on the west with the Gulf of Thailand on the east, speeding the transit time for ships voyaging from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and into the Pacific. And as has been put forward by the Fusion Energy Foundation (FEF) of Thailand and its allies, the Kra Canal would also become the site for a super-port at the southeastern port city of Songkla, and a nexus for an entire array of manufacturing of semi-finished and finished products.

The new impetus to the project, since its revival by *EIR* and the Fusion Energy Foundation in 1983, has been the publication this year of an entire book on the project, the first authoritative source on the Kra Canal in the Thai language. The book was produced by the "Kra Canal Club" of the Thai Science Society, which has operated out of the Chulalongkorn University and includes Dr. Boonrod of Chulalongkorn, former ambassador Konthi Suphamongkhon, and the FEF's Pakdee Tanapura. The book features an appendix of excerpts from the speech delivered by American statesman Lyndon LaRouche for the canal in 1984.

At the same time, although Thailand's Prime Minister Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan has twice announced that he sees no necessity for the canal project at this juncture, the canal is now the focus of investigation by a special parliamentary committee headed by General Anek Boonyathi, former commander of the Lopburi Special Forces.

Last March 26, the Thai Parliamentary Committee on the Kra Canal headed by its chairman, Gen. Anek Boonyathi, former commander of the Lopburi Special Warfare forces (parachute commando unit) together with five other members of the Kra Canal Club of the Science Society of Thailand, among them Pakdee Tanapura, left Pukhet island on a ship provided by the Royal Thai Navy to inspect the Straits of Malacca. Mr. Pakdee is the official advisor to the parliamentary committee.

On March 28, the ship reached Singapore, where the delegation was welcomed by officials from the Royal Thai Embassy, and where discussions were held with Singaporean leaders on the Kra Canal project. Singapore has traditionally opposed the canal project, out of fear that the canal would draw traffic away from the Strait of Malacca, controlled by Singapore. However, many Singaporeans also point out that

the canal's construction would boost the entire economy of the ASEAN countries, and therefore Singapore's as well.

On March 30-31, the delegation traveled to southern Thailand, where the Engineering Faculty of the University of Songkhla hosted a conference on "The Kra Canal and the Development of Thailand." Ambassador Konthi Suphamongkon and Pakdee Tanapura were invited to address the conference on "The Impact of the Kra Canal on Security and International Relations" and "The Technical and Engineering Feasibility of the Kra Canal," respectively. There were 120 participants from all over Thailand, with everyone taking home a copy of the Kra Canal book. The overriding consensus of the conference is that southern Thailand, long underdeveloped and underutilized, requires the Kra Canal as the pivot of its industrialization.

The Parliamentary Committee on the Canal, which is composed mainly of southerners from the Songkhla area, is now drafting a final report on the economic feasibility of the canal project, which will go to the entire parliament and then to the government. Although the prime minister is currently opposed to the project, many in his own Chat Thai party were among the earliest supporters of the Kra Canal as a boon to Thailand's economy.

## Outside interference?

Given that the Kra Canal would boost the economies and therefore the political independence of the ASEAN countries, it has not been a favorite with the larger powers active in the area. The postwar treaty with Great Britain, for instance, specifically prohibited Thailand from building the canal. (The treaty has since been abrogated.) But the British are spreading the line in Thailand that the project site of the canal zone should be checked for faults, and warning that the geological region cannot sustain canal construction.

Despite initial interest of the Japanese Mitsubishi Research Institute in the Canal project, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has offered to build—free of charge—a translift by rail linking the Andaman Sea coast of Thailand to the coast of the Gulf of Thailand. The translift system would apparently be able to lift 8-ton ships (fishing vessels) by crane onto the rails. This "landbridge" is to be built at Suratthani.

The People's Republic of China has also quietly offered a joint venture to build an oil pipeline called the Transpeninsula Project, to cut across the isthmus of Thailand. The P.R.C.'s selling point appears to be that through the project, Thailand can benefit from China's technology and cheap labor.

As for the United States, Henry Kissinger came to Thailand in 1985 and personally declared his animosity to the Kra Canal project. All such opposition from foreigners, however, disguised or not, serves as a backhand message to Thailand of the degree to which the canal would benefit Thailand and the other ASEAN countries.