
Southeast Asia

Soviets seek control of Indian Ocean

by Sophie Tanapura

Regional authorities in security matters are extremely concerned about Soviet efforts in the recent period to strengthen their presence in the Andaman Sea, following their access to the Vietnamese port at Cam Ranh Bay, which has already increased their leverage vis-à-vis the U.S. fleet in the Pacific. A better control of the Andaman Sea would enhance their ability to police the Indian Ocean and keep the U.S. Sixth Fleet in constant check. To achieve this strategic objective, the Soviets have moved decisively in three areas during the past year: 1) Thailand, 2) Burma, and 3) Andaman Islands.

Soviet moves in Thailand have been watched very carefully by the authorities. A top-level Soviet delegation led by Salimov Akil Oumourzavitch, vice-president of the Supreme Soviet's Presidium, arrived in Thailand on Oct. 21. The delegation visited the Thai Parliament and urged Parliament President Dr. Ukris Mongkhonawin to form a Thai-Soviet friendship association. Dr. Ukris, who had just visited the Soviet Union last July, told the Soviet delegation that the time was not yet ripe.

This Soviet tour was preceded by the unpublicized September visit of a three-man delegation led by Leonid Stepanovitch Svechnikov, president of the Moscow-based Soviet-Thai Friendship Association, who is also a deputy minister in charge of civilian aviation.

On the eve of the visit, National Security Council (NSC) Secretary-General Squadron-Leader Prasong Soonsiri in an interview to the *Bangkok Post* strongly warned against the Soviet moves. Russians in Thailand, he said, even when they pose as businessmen, are mainly engaged in gathering intelligence, spreading propaganda, and disseminating disinformation. Soviet support of the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Kampuchea threatens Thailand's security. Soviet artillery and ammunition fired by the Vietnamese in Kampuchea have killed Thai soldiers and villagers. Increased Soviet presence at Cam Ranh Bay only underlines their plans to expand their power and influence in Laos and Kampuchea. Setting up a Thai-Soviet Friendship Association would only encourage Soviet subversion of Thais, the national security chief stated.

In a move to upstage the United States, whose image has been tainted by the protectionist Jenkins bill against Asian

textiles, the Soviet delegation, which includes Soviet Commerce Minister Vashenko Grigorii Ivanovitch, will be visiting garment factories during their week-long stay in Thailand. Moscow is suddenly "very interested" in "trying to help" Thailand by buying more Thai garments and knitwear.

Between 1981 and the first half of 1985, the U.S.S.R. imported more than 800,000 tons of raw sugar from Thailand, about 500,000 tons of rice, more than 300,000 tons of tapioca flour, about 609,000 tons of tapioca pellets, and 1 million tons of maize. In 1984 alone, according to Mikhailov, Soviet imports of Thai tapioca flour and Thai maize represented 14% and 15% of Thai exports of those products, respectively. Soviet exports to Thailand during the first half of 1985 include more than 50,000 tons of fertilizer, 7,000 tons of newsprint, \$700,000 worth of chemicals, and \$600,000 worth of machinery. Exports to the U.S.S.R. reached \$56 million in the first half of this year, while imports reached \$9 million.

'Higher education'

Soviet officials recruiting Thai students for studies in unspecified higher-education institutions in the Soviet Union, without going through government channels, are making Thai security authorities nervous. Some 200 Thais have received Soviet government scholarships since 1982. Soviet embassy officials have, during the past two years, traveled throughout the northeastern provinces in search of potential Thai students with "grass-roots" sentiment, and apparently even run a recruiting center in Nakhon Phanom. Until last year, a total of 45 students left for the Soviet Union. This August alone, 53 students were sent to the Soviet Union for a full six-year undergraduate program, which includes one to two years of language training. In total, 73 Thais have received Soviet scholarships this year. Soviet ambassador to Thailand, Valentin Petrovitch Kassatkin, was recently told by the Thai foreign ministry to stop such recruitment practices, and that proper government channels have to be used from now on.

The Soviets are not only targeting Thailand but also Burma. An informed source reported that the Soviets have contacted the governor of Chiangmai—the principal city in the north of Thailand not far from the Burmese border—proposing that Chiangmai become the twin city of Leningrad. Access to the northern part of Burma is easier via the Chiangmai airport. The source adds that Chiangmai is also seen as a potential back door to China for the Soviets. Another source attests that over this past year, the Soviets have also been training top- and medium-level military cadre of the Burmese armed forces in the U.S.S.R.

Finally, Soviet moves have increased quite notably in the Andaman Sea. A well-informed source told *EIR* that Libyan arms and funds are being channeled to one of the Andaman Islands off the coast of Burma. In the Gulf of Bengal, the Andaman Islands and the Nicobar Islands form an archipelago belonging to India. The geographic position of these islands is highly strategic.