

London noses into Indochina conflict

by Linda de Hoyos

Great Britain may soon be playing a central "mediating" role in the 10-year Kampuchea conflict. That was the news from Tiny Rowland's London *Observer* April 9. According to the *Observer*, Foreign Office Minister Lord Glenarthur is visiting Hanoi as the first Western government official to receive a direct briefing from Vietnam since Hanoi's early April offer to pull its remaining 50,000 troops out of Kampuchea by September. The news could give Glenarthur the opportunity to announce closer ties with Hanoi, the *Observer* said, claiming that Hanoi sees Britain as a possible co-chairman of a Kampuchean peace conference.

As an incentive for Hanoi's acceptance of a "mediating" role for London, British Petroleum and Enterprise Oil have signed agreements with Hanoi for oil exploration in the South China Sea, a contract Vietnam has long been seeking as a possible way to alleviate its 100% oil reliance on the Soviet Union.

Another factor in Britain's sudden and unexpected presence on the scene—given Britain's lack of a historical role in the Indochina-Thailand region—is the midwifing of a change in Thailand's foreign policy by the British Commonwealth, including Britain's surrogate operative in the region, Australia. The British role, of course, has been possible by the consistent U.S. attacks on Thai trade and U.S. passivity in the face of the Indochina conflict.

On Dec. 23, 1988, Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan announced that Thailand's policy toward the Indochina countries would be to turn the "battlefield into a marketplace." To prove his point, Chatichai, without consultation with any of the other ASEAN countries with which Thailand characteristically coordinates its Indochina policy, invited Hun Sen, prime minister of the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh regime, to Bangkok for talks. Kampuchea and Thailand have no diplomatic relations.

Upon the announcement of this policy, according to the *Bangkok Post*, the Australian Embassy in Thailand called up to offer its congratulations to the prime minister's adviser Dr. Sukhumbhand Paribatra. Sukhumbhand is a member of Chatichai's "kitchen cabinet" of advisers, who are believed to be responsible for the change in Thai foreign policy, over the objections of the Foreign Ministry and Foreign Minister Sid-

dhi Savestila.

In the last four months, as Thailand's interchanges with Vietnam and Laos especially have proceeded apace, so have Thailand's ties with both Britain and Australia.

On Jan. 20, the British announced that they would send a team of defense experts to Thailand to discuss a "comprehensive military procurement package to set up a massive total defense system," reported the *Bangkok Nation*. Among the British who arrived in Bangkok was Lord Glenarthur, who met with Chatichai and also offered "to locate sources of funding for the purpose as well."

The Australian role

Within weeks, it was clear that Australia was emerging as Thailand's partner in its efforts to turn Indochina into a "marketplace." The focus of the effort is the construction of a bridge on the Mekong River linking the Laotian capital of Vientiane and the Thai city of Non Khai. In early January, Prime Minister Chatichai had asked Japan to provide funding for the project; the offer was declined. The prime minister, during a visit to Beijing in March, also asked the Chinese to participate.

However, the driving force behind the project now is Australia. On April 4, Thai, Laotian, and Australian officials met in Vientiane to discuss the project. According to reports in the April 11 *Bangkok Post*, the entire project will be financed by Australia for \$35 million. A feasibility study will be carried out within the next two months, and an Australian firm is now calling for tenders for the study. The Australian Development Assistance Bureau has been appointed as the executing agent for the project.

According to the agreement signed by the officials on the scene, the three countries will maintain coordination through the creation of a Tripartite Consultative Group, which will be a permanent policy-level group comprised of top officials from Thailand, Laos, and Australia.

Added the *Post*: "Australia is also looking at the possibility of contributing to concrete and economic development in a more accessible Kampuchea."

Thai-Australian ties have also thickened in other areas. On April 14, Australian defense forces participated in a joint Thai-Australia military exercise in Thailand called Chapel Gold 89.

Among the biggest boosters of the Australians in Thailand is Supreme Commander Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who is also the head of the "Thai-Lao Implementation Committee," and on April 20 led an 80-person Thai delegation to Laos. On April 13, Chavalit called upon Australia to initiate a meeting of regional defense chiefs to promote understanding, reported the *Bangkok Post*. The idea is to "bring together top brass of ASEAN and the Mekong River groupings with Australia" to discuss regional military affairs regardless of political ideology. The leader of this enterprise, Chavalit made clear, is to be Australia. "Australia is a leading member

of the region by alphabetical order and I would like it to take a leading role. Thailand is last in the alphabetical order, and therefore, is ready to follow and join the meeting.”

Meanwhile, on the “marketplace” side, Prime Minister Chatichai declared April 12 that Thailand will consult its ASEAN partners—who are miffed at Thailand’s about-face in Indochina policy—on forming a “mechanism of regional cooperation in trade and economics” as proposed by Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke. The occasion for the call was the visit to Bangkok of Hawke’s special emissary, Richard Woolcott. According to Woolcott, the regional cooperation body would start with 10 countries: ASEAN’s six members, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The participation of Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea would be expected after the settlement of the Kampuchea conflict. “Australia would consider China’s involvement an advantage because of its economic importance and its role in the region.”

British axe to the Kra Canal?

Commensurate with its “marketplace” policy, the Chatichai government has initiated proposals for a “land bridge” across the Kra Isthmus in southern Thailand, as an alternative to the construction of the Kra Canal, despite the fact that the prime minister’s political party, the Chat Thai Party, was an early promoter of the canal project and despite the fact that parliamentary committees have passed resolutions calling upon the government to begin feasibility studies on the canal. The canal, with a deep-sea port constructed at the southern city of Songkla, would facilitate ship travel from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and on to the Pacific, and serve as a hub for regional industrialization.

According to sources in New Delhi, Prime Minister Chatichai, during his early April visit to New Delhi, was explicitly asked by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi about Thailand’s plans for the canal. The canal would also be a focal point for the development of India’s eastern coast and the port city of Calcutta. The Thai prime minister answered that the Kra Canal was a dead letter.

This apparent decision by the government is interesting in light of Thailand’s new-found friendliness with Great Britain. In the aftermath of World War II, the British had declared that Thailand—which had been within Japan’s orbit as a measure of self-preservation while it simultaneously created the Free Thai guerrilla operations—must sign an unconditional surrender treaty with London, which would have effectively made Thailand a British colony. (Thailand was never colonized during the 19th and 20th centuries.) With American intercession, this disaster was avoided. However, in the final treaty, the British insisted on the inclusion of a clause that would prohibit the construction of the Kra Canal. The treaty was abrogated in the 1960s. Is London making a veto of the Kra Canal a condition of its new bid for a caretaker relation with Thailand?

The Nepal-India tiff: the shadow of the

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

A spurt in anti-India demonstrations in Kathmandu, Nepal and oft-repeated belligerent statements issued by the Nepalese authorities have given rise to speculation whether the Chinese dragon is casting its shadow across troubled Tibet. Although Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, at a recent press conference in Chandigarh, categorically ruled out any Chinese involvement in the souring of bilateral relations between India and Nepal, it is nonetheless evident that those who are too eager to blame India for the impasse happen to be individuals and groups—such as the demonstrators in Kathmandu—who are known to be blatantly pro-Chinese. They are apparently using the opportunity to establish themselves as Nepali “nationalists.”

A series of seemingly minor events occasioned to the fear that China is not altogether a bystander. First, in July 1988, a significant quantity of Chinese arms was brought into Nepal in a convoy of 300 trucks, along the Kodari-Kathmandu highway constructed earlier by the Chinese. Nepal justifies its Chinese arms procurement on the grounds that India had failed to respond to prior requests to supply the same. What surprises India, however, is that Nepal acquired anti-aircraft guns from China and reportedly placed those along the Indian border.

The Indian government points out that this constitutes a violation of the 1950 India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, on which the relations of the two countries rest and of which Nepal has recently shown some reservations. Article 5 of the treaty states that although the government of Nepal “shall be free to import, through the territory of India, arms, ammunition, or warlike matériel and equipment necessary for the security of Nepal,” it would do so “by the two governments acting in consultation.” Subsequently, two Indian ministers, Foreign Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and his junior, K. Natwar Singh, have visited Kathmandu, but without much success.

In September 1988, the issue was discussed in the Indian Parliament. One Congress (I) parliamentarian pointed out that Chinese AK-47 assault rifles and shoulder-fired missiles have shown up in large numbers with terrorists in Punjab, implying a transfer of arms from Nepal to subversive elements in India. The MP also expressed concern about the possibility of these arms finding their way into the hands of Naxalites in Bihar and Gorkhaland secessionists in the hill districts of West Bengal—areas close to the India-Nepal border. Foreign Minister Rao assured the House that the