

# New strides toward Kra Canal project

by Linda de Hoyos

The construction of the Kra Canal in southern Thailand, a great project which would become the nexus of industrialization for the region, is now seriously on the agenda before Thai policymakers. On July 5, the Thai parliamentary commission on the Kra Canal began hearings as part of its designated task to bring a recommendation on the project before the parliament by August. One of the first to testify was Fusion Energy Foundation (FEF) Bangkok representative Pakdee Tanapura.

The FEF, the TAMS engineering firm of the United States, and the Mitsubishi Research Institute of Japan, are now in the process of preparing a pre-feasibility study for the canal, the projected industrial zones around it, and the construction of a Southeast Asian superport at the eastern Thai port of Songkla.

In a two-and-a-half hour presentation, Pakdee informed the committee of the tri-group's initial findings. First, the FEF representative showed how the Kra Canal would help bring development not only to Thailand and its immediate neighbors, but would provide the context for the development of the Indian Nicobar and Andaman Islands and the east coast of India, as well as providing a shorter route for trade from the Indian Ocean through to the Pacific. The canal, he pointed out, is one of the five major projects suggested in a 50-year program for the Indian and Pacific Oceans Basin by Fusion Energy Foundation founder Lyndon LaRouche.

Based on preliminary findings, which will be subsequently thoroughly detailed by the FEF section of the pre-feasibility studies, Pakdee showed that the canal would shorten the trade route by approximately four days, providing an alternative to the narrow Straits of Malacca between Singapore and Indonesia. Even if world trade were not to rebound, Pakdee showed, the amount of traffic through the Malacca Straits can be expected to grow significantly, creating logjams that are both dangerous environmentally and extremely expensive to shippers.

The best and least expensive route for the canal, Pakdee showed, was projected by a 1973 TAMS engineering feasibility study on the canal. The report showed that the most efficient route is that known as 5A, slightly to the north of the shortest distance across the Kra isthmus. Digging the canal at the shortest interval is physically prohibitive and costly because of the high mountains in that area. The 5A

route is longer, but would require less time and manpower.

He then gave a detailed picture of the expected initial payback time for the canal, based on its revenues from the year 2000 to 2020. However, Pakdee pointed out, the greatest profit to be derived from the canal is not from tolls themselves, but from the industrial development the canal will spur.

Answering those who say the canal would sever the country in half and separate the largely southern Muslim population of Thailand from the Buddhist majority in the north, Pakdee noted that the canal would become the focal point for building brand new cities in the south, which is otherwise underpopulated and underdeveloped. This will in fact bring about the greater unity of the country. The canal would provide 3-5 million jobs, many of them highly skilled, which would provide the opportunity to train the workforce and rapidly bring up its standard of living. From this standpoint, the Kra Canal is the best insurance against internal destabilization and insurgency.

The committee is presided over by Admiral Sanong Nisalak, a Democratic Party MP and long-time supporter of the project. More than half the 25-man committee attended, many from the Democratic Party and the Thai Citizens Party of Communications Minister Samak Sundaravej.

Concerning the next step—the detailed pre-feasibility studies—Pakdee suggested that the Thai government itself should make at least 25% of the investment, so as to avoid a situation in which foreign firms take responsibility and also control of the project. The idea met with the approval of the committee, and was adopted.

The Kra Canal has now been pushed further down the road toward implementation than at any other point in the 200-year history of this idea. In November 1984, Minister Samak signed a letter of intent for the formation of the tripartite group now carrying out pre-feasibility studies, and the parliamentary committee will be making formal recommendations to the government.

The progress in the project's realization has not escaped the notice of those forces who are determined to maintain the underdeveloped countries in a state of economic subjugation. Early this month, the Thai daily *Siam Rat* fielded an article by one Michael Leiffer, an operative linked to the Heritage Foundation.

Citing authorities from London's International Institute of Strategic Studies, the article argued that the canal is unsafe environmentally, and that it poses a security risk for Thailand. Whose warships shall we allow to go through the canal first, the Soviets' or the United States', asks *Siam Rat*, which is controlled by the Socialist International forces in Thailand. This is a strange question, implying that Thailand has already become neutral. It is not expected to carry much weight among Thai policymakers or the military, where the consensus is emerging that industrial development is the only security insurance policy and that the canal can help bring the United States back into the region.