



Building new bridges with a former foe

By Bertil Lintner

Thailand's long-standing policy of support to rebel armies along its border with Myanmar (Burma) ended early this year, after more than four decades, when Burmese government forces captured the last remaining Karen insurgent bases at Manerplaw and Kawmoora.

The policy had encouraged Burmese ethnic minority rebels to establish strongholds along the frontier as a buffer force. It began to change when Bangkok sought to pursue a more business-orientated relationship with its western neighbour.

Now, official border trade is being promoted, encouraged by Yangon's (Rangoon's) late 1988 decision to legalize transborder commerce that had been limited to blackmarket activities. Symbolizing the shift, construction began last October on the Moei River of a 'friendship bridge' between Mae Sot in Thailand and Myawaddy in Burma that should – on its planned completion next year – provide the first land link to an area plagued by decades of warfare.

Similarly, to the south, a pipeline is being built to connect Burmese gas fields in the Gulf of Martaban with the Thai grid. This should provide Thailand with badly needed energy and generate an estimated \$400 million annually in foreign exchange earnings for Rangoon.

Bangkok's concept of buffer zones along its western frontier dates from October 1953, when a Burmese aircraft bombed a Thai village, mistaking it for a camp controlled by renegade elements of Nationalist China's Kuomintang army (KMT). This relatively minor attack revived Thailand's enmity and concern toward a traditional rival state.

Thai Prime Minister P Phibunsongkram reacted with public bluster; privately, he invited Mon and Karen rebel leaders to Bangkok for the first secret negotiations between Burma's ethnic minority groups and senior Thai officials.

Any effort by Thailand to police the

porous 2400 km border with its historical enemy would have been difficult and costly, particularly given the army's deficiencies at that time. Instead, Bangkok threw its support behind rebel forces that operated along much of the frontier under a buffer policy that gained importance with Burma's economic collapse following the 1962 military coup and the growth in the early 1970s of communist insurgencies on both sides of the border.

The buffer policy also yielded economic benefits, with rebel-controlled areas serving as conduits for a flourishing two-way trade in a range of contraband goods from consumer items to commodities. Rebel elements at border checkpoints monitored this trade and exacted taxes to support their cause.

Strategically, together with guarding the frontier and providing Bangkok with invaluable cross-border intelligence, rebel armies also fought within Thailand. They provided troops for Thai army campaigns against Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) strongholds in remote regions and security for construction crews building roads in areas where the CPT was active. Further, the rebel armies prevented a link-up between communist insurgent forces in both countries through their control of border areas.

This arrangement was overseen by a network of Thai military liaison groups and intelligence agencies. Initially, elements of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) served as liaison with the ethnic minority rebels while a special unit of the Supreme Command, designated Unit 04, supported KMT remnant forces active in Shan State near the Chinese border.

Among their other functions, these Thai units acted as a channel for the sale of arms, ammunition and other supplies such as medicine and communications equipment to rebel forces. This often meant that the rebels were



A member of Khun Sa's private army guards a crossing on the Burmese-Thai border. Thailand is the most important conduit for the heroin market (Bertil Lintner)



The regular Thai Army is supported along the border by the paramilitary Thahan Phran, the Border Patrol and local militia

better armed and equipped than their Burmese Government adversaries.

The Thai organizational structure began to change in the early 1980s with the creation of locally based elements responsible for border security. That is, contacts with rebel forces were downgraded as command over liaison units was shifted from the national to local level. Unit 32 was established in Chiangmai province, Unit 33 in Chian-grai, Unit 34 in Mae Sot and Unit 35 in Mae Hong Son/Mae Sariang. Of these, only Unit 34 is effectively operational. Liaison with the KMT was meanwhile shifted to the newly-formed Unit 327, under the Third Army based in Phitsanulok.

Last year, this structure was adjusted with the creation of the Naresuan Task Force, a warfighting and co-ordination element under the Third Army. Naresuan's responsibilities theoretically cover the whole Thai-Burmese

border, but it is really operating over a limited area between Mae Sot and Mae Sariang opposite Burma's troublesome Shan State.

The buffer policy began to look obsolete in the mid-1980s, partly because of the collapse of communist insurgency. This collapse, in turn, was encouraged by Beijing's decision to end direct support of revolutionary activities and as it moved closer to Bangkok in the wake of Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia. In 1984, Rangoon launched its

The helicopter carrier *Chakri Naruebet* is being built by Spain's Bazan for the Thai Navy. When it enters service in 1997 its primary tasks will be surveillance of Thailand's EEZ and SAR co-ordination

first massive offensive against Karen rebel camps along the Thai border. Bangkok initially provided the Karens with covert support, but this began to change when Burma legalized cross-border trade in 1988. Thai timber companies obtained concessions in eastern Burma and Thai merchants began travelling directly to Rangoon, in the process hastening the collapse of rebel activities by undermining their economic 'tax' base. One price Thailand has had to pay for this policy shift is seen in the influx of over 80 000 refugees from areas formerly under rebel control.

The response to this and other security-related issues along the frontier has been the creation of a joint border-liaison committee formed with members drawn from Thailand's Third Army and Burma's Eastern and South-Eastern Commands. The effectiveness of this committee has not always been smooth. While the Thai military presence along most of the border is relatively light, Burma maintains a strong force on its side. The Thai response is often confused when Burma launches any co-ordinated military action against rebel remnants.

Suspicious remain evident on both sides and Bangkok may not yet have adjusted to the fact that the Burmese Army has the upper hand in its own territory for the first time. The rebel army buffers are gone and Burma's dependence on Thai consumer goods has diminished with the flood of merchandise from China and Singapore. Also, the Burmese Army is much better equipped than ever before due to military support provided by China since 1989.

Traditionally a poorly equipped light infantry force, the Burmese Army is now a force to be reckoned with after the injection of Chinese arms and decades of combat experience. Its leadership has yet to forgive Thailand for its long-standing support of Burma's rebel adversaries.

