

THAILAND'S HILL TRIBES

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The Government of Thailand, like national governments everywhere, seeks to promote the welfare and ensure the security of its citizens. In its welfare projects, the greatest concentration has necessarily been upon the cities and lowland plains, because there the bulk of the population live. But there are special areas in the country with special problems demanding special forms of action. One of these areas is the mountainous northern frontier region bordering upon Laos and Burma. This region is inhabited by tribal peoples who are of ethnic origins different from the Thai. It is of special concern to the Government in both its welfare and security aspects and from the points of view both of the tribal peoples themselves and of the nation as a whole.

Because the region is mountainous and much of it jungle-covered it could, under the right conditions, offer ideal cover for the infiltration of foreign agents and the establishment of guerilla bases. It is the government's intention to make sure that these conditions never exist. One way we shall do so is by efficient patrolling of the area, the other way is by ensuring that the tribal peoples remain so well-disposed to us that they will give an enemy no sanctuary but instead will actively assist in repelling him. We intend to give every help to the tribal peoples in improving their living conditions. The aim of our policy is not simply security. We wish all the people of our country to have the best possible life. But we know that security and welfare can not be separated. The good life of the people must be protected against destruction and the better their life the stronger their will to resist.

We can move forward with our development plans from an excellent basis. Nearly all the tribal peoples have come into the region because it has offered them either new opportunity or refuge from foreign domination. They are friendly to the Thai people. If there has seemed to be little concern with the "tribal problem" until the last few years this is because

we could afford to leave them to make their own adaptation to the country of their adoption without disturbance to their social organisation and tribal integrity. The past policy of the Thai Government towards the tribes has been extremely tolerant. Most of them are recent immigrants. The Miao tribe for instance began to move into Thailand only one hundred years ago and the majority of them have probably entered the country within the last fifty years. They have been allowed to cross the border freely and to occupy land to which they have no legal right. Within the hill area of Thailand they have been permitted to move from place to place as they exhausted the fertility of one piece of land after another. They have been given the protection of the law but have not been required to fulfil any of the obligations of Thai citizens such as the payment of taxes or military service.

This policy was in tune with the wishes of the tribes. They were independent people who wanted to be left alone and even now interest in education and other forms of development has to be deliberately stimulated in them by the Government. But the policy of non-interference could not indefinitely continue. It was kind to the tribes and accorded with their wishes but it was expensive to the Thai people as a whole. Because of their inefficient methods of cultivation the tribes have been steadily despoiling the land of the region. Parts of it have been permanently ruined for agriculture. The removal of forest cover has not only depleted timber resources but has interfered with the watersheds of the rivers which irrigate the great rice plains on which the economy of the nation depends. Also, in the case of several of the largest tribes, their income has been derived from the cultivation of the opium poppy and the Government is determined to suppress opium growing for the sake of the welfare of its own people and of others in the world.

The third reason for the change from a relatively passive policy towards the hill tribes to one of active development brings us back to the security aspect. In their efforts to create disturbance in Thailand the foreign Communists are seeking to arouse dissatisfaction amongst the tribes. By radio propaganda and attempts to infiltrate agitators, they try to present our past tolerant policy as one of deliberate neglect, to create a sense of deprivation amongst the tribal peoples and to allure them with impractical promises. They suggest that they should form blocks with fellow tribesmen within Communist borders and transfer their loyalties away from Thailand.

Under less favorable circumstances such propaganda efforts could be a threat to Thailand. All the tribes in northern Thailand are sections of cultural groups of which there are larger sections in southern China, Vietnam, Laos and Burma. There are about a quarter of a million tribal peoples in Thailand altogether. The largest are the Karen, numbering about 75,000. There is a greater number of Karen in Burma. Other tribes of Burmese origin are also still represented in Burma are the Akha, with about 28,000 members in Thailand, the Lisu, with about 19,000, and the Lahu, with about 17,000. The next largest tribe in Thailand after the Karen are the Miao or Meo, with about 50,000 in Thailand. Members of the Miao tribe, which has many cultural subdivisions, are located also in Laos and Vietnam and there are nearly four million of them in southern China. The last of the main tribes are the Yao, with about 12,000 in Thailand. The Yao too are more strongly represented in Laos, Vietnam and China. Other smaller tribes and groups of people make up the total given above.

The tribe of most immediate political importance is probably the Miao. They occupy the most remote and mountainous parts of the border region. They are the most migratory of all the groups. They have been the most involved in opium growing and therefore must be most subject to economic redirection with the opportunities it will provide for malicious misrepresentation. The fact that by far the greatest number of Miao live within the borders of Communist China might seem to offer favorable conditions for a vigorous Communist propaganda effort utilising broadcasts in tribal language and the infiltration of Miao agents. The purpose would be to persuade the Miao that tribal conditions are better in China and to induce them to turn their loyalties away from Thailand.

Certainly the Chinese Communists will make such an effort. But the situation is not nearly as favorable to them as it might seem. The Miao in Thailand and the Miao in China are one people only in the sense that they share a common basic language and have a generally similar culture. There is no over-all tribal unity. There is no social or political structure linking the groups of Miao in Thailand with groups in other countries across the border. Furthermore the Miao have fought the Chinese, off and on, for three thousand years. Some of them are currently fighting the Communists in Laos and Vietnam. Insofar as they have any political sensibilities at all, those in Thailand consider themselves very lucky to be where they are.

Because the situation in the tribal areas is so favourable, the Thai Government has no need to think purely in terms of counter measures against Communist propaganda. If the Communists hope for widespread subversion in the hill tribes they are doomed to disappointment. The most they could hope to achieve is a passive, neutral population. What they should fear is one hostile to them. The Thai Government must counter the false propaganda certainly. But its policy is far more positive than that. It seeks to create a population highly loyal to it, content with its conditions and promise for the future, and forming a strong frontier barrier against the enemies of its progress. Practical measures to improve the conditions of the hill tribes have already been taken and the paces of them are being stepped up.

Our policy aims to improve tribal welfare while respecting tribal integrity. It is not the intention of the Government to force the tribal peoples to give up their own traditional ways of life and become exactly like the Thai people. They may continue to practice their own religions and distinctive customs as long as they wish. By doing so, they may make a contribution to the rich cultural variety of the Thai nation as a whole. There is no attempt to break up their social groupings or to disturb their residence in the hills. The sole political requirement placed upon them is that they have loyalty to the King and abide by the laws of the country. In return, the Government will make every effort to promote their economic and social development. Our policy is one of integration rather than assimilation, although no obstacles will be placed in the way of tribal peoples who do wish to identify themselves completely with the Thai.

Economic and social development of the tribes presents many practical problems. Some of these are physical. The tribal region is large and communications are difficult. The agricultural and pastoral possibilities have not yet been fully explored, and in any case are limited by the nature of soil and terrain. Other difficulties in the way of development are psychological. The Communists do not hesitate to use force, including at times extensive killings, to bring about the changes they want. Our method is persuasion. But to induce tribal peoples to give up age-old practices which are harmful and to accept new methods of agriculture and hygiene is often a slow process.

Teaching and example are the means used by the Government. For several years, the Border Patrol Police have carried out development work in the remoter areas and have maintained a number of school for hill tribe children. Since 1960 the Department of Public

Welfare, now operating through a fully organized Hill Tribes Division, has been establishing hill tribe Land Settlement Projects and Welfare Centers. There are now four of the former and two of the latter situated in some of the most densely populated parts of the hill tribe area.

The operational plan for the Land Settlement Projects was defined as:

1. To persuade the hill tribes living scatteredly to move in to the project areas and settle down permanently.
2. To promote livestock improvement and perennial crop cultivation as well as home industry and to organize marketing services for the hill peoples as well as to promote the health and education of those moving into the project area.

The Land Settlement Projects have resulted in considerable improvement in the conditions of the tribes in their immediate neighbourhood. Roads have been built into and through the settlement areas and thus have given tribal peoples better access to markets. At the Chiang Dao settlement area, an extensive scheme of tea planting by Lahu tribes people has been underway for four years. This will enable the people to adopt a settled mode of life harvesting permanent cash crops of value to the Thai economy. At the Chiengrai Land Settlement Project, members of the Yao and Akha tribes have been shown how to grow wheat during the off-season for paddy and have been assured of a market for their harvest. Similar developments have been fostered in the other two land settlement areas.

Substantial as the progress has been, however, the immediate success of the Land Settlement Projects has not measured up to the earliest hopes for them. This is because the tribal peoples are slow to abandon their old independent ways and move into the settlement areas. For this reason, although the Land Settlement Projects are being maintained and further developed, the emphasis has now shifted to the Development and Welfare Centers which serve as bases for mobile development teams operating out into the surrounding countryside. The Centers also maintain experimental farms for crop and livestock development. From each of the two Development and Welfare Centers so far established, several mobile teams are working. They comprise social workers and health and agricultural experts. They spend weeks and sometimes months in villages encouraging the people to improve living conditions and adopt better agricultural methods. A great expansion of this work is being planned.

At all the hill stations, medical dispensaries and school for tribal children have been established. The Department of Education hopes soon to initiate a much larger program of

tribal schooling and in preparation for this has been holding discussions with experienced officials of the Border Patrol Police and the Department of Public Welfare upon the subjects of the most suitable curricula, timetables and modes of establishing the schools. Handicaps are the shortage of trained teachers willing to work for long periods in the hill and a lack of knowledge of hill tribe languages.

Hill tribe persons themselves will be trained as teachers for tribal schools as soon as education in the tribal areas has progressed sufficiently to make this possible. It is intended that in all spheres of development tribes should be involved to an increasing extent not simply as subjects of the programs, but as active agents in administering them. The Government wishes to give the maximum possible degree of local self-government to the tribes and is actively engaged in encouraging the growth of a capable tribal leadership. All villages already have their own headmen elected by the villagers and confirmed in office by the Government. In some cases, these headmen already have the same status and receive the same emoluments and privilege as Thai village headman in the general administrative system of the country. In one case, a Yao tribesman holds the position of 'kamnan', or Sub-District leader, with authority over a number of villages of his own tribe and of other groups. In order to promote the further development of local leadership, the Border Patrol Police runs frequent courses at its headquarters for headmen and other selected persons from remote villages. The Department of Public Welfare also gives training to local persons to enable them to carry on with projects initiated by the Department.

Experience to date with all development projects has shown the urgent need for fuller understanding of hill tribe cultures and languages. There is also need for greater knowledge of existing agricultural conditions in the hills—both the physical conditions of soil and climate which affect crops and the agricultural practices and extent of land use of the tribal peoples. For the efficient promotion of new developments, these matters must be taken out of the realm of speculation and superficial observation and into the realm of science. In their own ways and with their own crops, the hill tribesmen are often skilful agriculturists even though their methods may in the long term be harmful to soil potentialities. If he is to secure the confidence and cooperation of the people, the agricultural instructor from the lowlands must first appreciate local knowledge and build on it rather than seek to make a quick change of crops and methods which may not suit the local environment.

To fill the gaps in our knowledge of hill tribe cultures, languages and economics the Government has established a Hill Tribe Research Center at Chiangmai. The Center will begin its work by carrying out basic socio-economic surveys of all the six main tribes and will also prepare dictionaries and grammars of the tribal languages. In addition, studies will be made of special issues related to development projects and projects which are already underway will be evaluated.

The socio-economic surveys to be carried out by the Center will take eighteen months or two years to complete. This is because the investigators must first learn the tribal languages and then they must directly observe social and economic behaviour and crop yields throughout a complete year's agricultural cycle. It is intended that the permanent staff of the Center will be Thai. But because of an insufficient number of trained Thai graduates for this type of study—anthropology being a new subject in our universities—it is probable that some of the initial studies will be carried out in cooperation with experts from other countries. In the course of these studies, the Center will give training to junior research workers who will conduct later studies on their own.

Development projects will not, of course, be delayed until the studies are concluded. But the results of the studies, when they are completed, will be used to improve the projects. Interim results of the research work also will become available continuously. The Center will pay particular attention to agricultural research. With the aid of the Colombo Plan, it is hoped to engage the services of one or more world experts on pastoral development in order to investigate the possibilities of utilising large areas of grassland which have resulted from harmful practices of shifting cultivation by the hill tribes.

As a supplement to its main tasks, the Research Center at Chiangmai is establishing a museum of tribal cultures. It has also already acquired an excellent library of publications on hill population of South-East Asia and general works on social anthropology and tropical agriculture. Assistance has been given to the Center by the Government associated with Thailand in the South-East Asia Treaty Organization, and it is hoped that in time the Center will become an institution of great value not only to Thailand but to other South-East Asian countries similar problems.

To counter Communist propaganda and for the education and entertainment of the hill tribes, the Government hopes to establish a strong radio station broadcasting programs

both in Thai and in tribal languages. Already a start has been made with the programs by utilizing existing radio stations but the difficult reception conditions of the mountainous regions make a special station essential. Radio Peking through its relay stations in southern China and Communist stations in Laos are attempting to poison the atmosphere for development by broadcasting false rumours and lying perversions of the Government's intentions. The trust must be clearly stated. And the magnificent facility of radio for remote areas should be employed to encourage the people in their development efforts and to give them an increased sense of participation in the national life of Thailand.

Although good progress has been made with hill tribes development and the work is expanding fast, some of the problems are enormous in their difficulty. The full extent of these problems is often not appreciated and the work of the Government may therefore be underestimated and its intentions misrepresented. To conclude this article, I should like to speak frankly of one or two of these problems by way of example, considering first the problem of opium cultivation.

Opium has been a traditional cash crop of the major tribes for many generations. The exact amount grown in the tribal region of Thailand is difficult to assess accurately because this region is only the southern extremity of a very large opium growing area and much of the opium that does appear in Thailand has been filtered across the border. The Government of Thailand is fully aware of the evils of opium and is determined to suppress both its cultivation and the trade in it. The question is simply of the speed at which complete suppression can be effected and of the best means to use.

To an outsider, a simple answer might seem to be to destroy the opium fields of the tribes. On some occasions, the Government has done this in order to make quite clear to the tribes its disapproval of the crop. But on a large scale, such attempt would be both impractical and inhumane. So long as the growing of opium remains profitable, people will always find some places to grow it. American readers have but to think back to the times of Prohibition in their own country when it seemed equally simple to prevent alcohol consumption by destroying the breweries. But because the American thirst for alcohol remained strong, new illegal breweries sprang up like mushrooms faster than the old were destroyed. If the source of supply could not be destroyed in urban America, how much more difficult it must be in the opium growing area of South-East Asia which is one of the most mountainous regions of the world. The real culprits in the opium trade of Thailand are the consumers in London, Sydney,

New York and perhaps even a few still in Thailand itself. It is these people who keep the price up. If the price is lowered so much that the growing becomes unprofitable, the tribes will give it up. The Thai Government is making its contribution to this end by rigorous suppression of trading in the drug.

Even if immediate destruction of all the crops were practical, it would be a ruthless policy to apply to tribes. People such as the Miao developed their economy in more tolerant days upon the poppy. The cash income which it yielded provided them with money to buy much of their food, their clothing, the silver objects used in their marriage exchanges, and those other things needed to maintain their social and religious activities. Unless they may have suitable replacements for the opium crop they would in some cases starve.

Much of the development and research effort of the Government is directed towards finding such replacement crops for the tribes. The task is not easy because most of the alternative cash crops which will grow in the hills are far more bulky and require better communications than at present exist for getting them to the markets, or else means of processing them in the hills. But progress is being made. Whenever a suitable alternative is found, pressure is put on the tribes to abandon opium cultivation. The policy of the Government in regard to opium is two-pronged—to extend the cultivation of other crops and to lower the profitability of opium by suppressing the trade in it.

Other difficult problems concern the granting of full citizenship to all the tribal peoples and the granting of permanent land rights. It is the wish of the Government that all people dwelling permanently within its national borders should have citizenship rights. But citizenship imposes obligations as well as rights, particularly the obligations to pay taxes and render military service. Some of the tribal peoples who are not yet citizens could afford to pay taxes but they do not wish to do so. It is not the policy of the Government to force them to do so at the present stage of their development.

The policy of the Government is still in fact extremely tolerant towards the hill tribes. This tolerance is nowhere more clearly manifested than in regard to land rights. Practically all the land inhabited by the tribes belongs to the Crown. The tribes people have been permitted to move over it more or less at will despite the cost to national resources. If they are to be granted land rights, these rights must be to a fixed place. The semi-nomadic pattern of many of the tribes and their methods of shifting cultivation are not suited to fixed

residence. Until the pattern and methods are changed the granting of land rights with the concurrent obligation not to use land illegally elsewhere, would be felt as a severe restriction by them.

Far from being deprived, the tribes have in fact been privileged. They have had the protection of the State without being obliged to render it money or services. They have had free access to Government land without being classed as trespassers. It is no wonder that they feel friendly to Thailand.

The Government is building upon that friendship. It wishes to receive all the tribes into fuller association with the rest of the Thai nation. If for no other reason than the depletion of the natural resources formerly available to the tribes, the earlier policy of non-interference cannot be maintained. In preparation for ultimate full citizenship and permanent land rights, social, economic and educational development is being pressed—not through force but through persuasion. The programs outlined above are but the beginning. The response of the tribal people is highly encouraging. Wisdom and tolerance and appreciation of the special problems of the tribal peoples are still required and we shall keep them as features of our policy. In the future as in the past the tribal peoples shall be treated with respect. We may count on this being repaid with loyalty. Enemies of the country who seek to find in the tribal area a haven are more likely to find it a hornets' nest.
