

Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

Soviets court Thai government

Thai leaders are angry with Washington—and Moscow is moving into the breach.

As President Reagan embarks on a visit to Southeast Asia, meeting with the foreign ministers of the ASEAN countries in Indonesia, the Soviet Union has launched its own diplomatic drive to woo American allies in the region. This is the goal of the extended Southeast Asian tour of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa, which brought him to Thailand for, among other things, the April 22 opening of the 42nd annual session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

Prior to Kapitsa's arrival, Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok Valentin Kasatkin had announced to the press that his country might soon decide to buy more Thai rice. Thailand is the world's top rice exporter, but the industry is now facing bankruptcy due to the effects of the U.S. Farm Act, which knocked the export price for American rice below the cost of production, as a service to the grain cartels. The consequences of this for the Thai economy have made Thai leaders furious at the United States, as Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger found out when he visited Bangkok in mid-April. Weinberger was greeted by an angry "student demonstration," which sources report was organized by the government itself.

Last year, the Soviet Union bought 193,883 tons of A-1 special grade broken rice as food aid to Vietnam. The export of Thai rice last year totaled 4 million tons. Already in the first two months of 1986, the Soviet Union has bought 59,428 tons of rice, making

her the number-one buyer of Thai rice. In the meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Arun Panupong, Kapitsa expressed the desire to buy more products from Thailand, such as tapioca, sugar, fluoride, rubber, and tin. The Soviet Union is also short of textile and construction materials.

Following closely upon the meeting of the U.N. Security Council on a resolution that would have condemned the April 14 U.S. air attacks on Libya, Kapitsa seized the opportunity created by the ESCAP meeting to praise Thailand for voting to condemn the U.S. raid on Libya.

"Thailand took a very serious and independent step," Kapitsa said. "Whether the Americans like that or not, it is a demonstration of wisdom and independence." ESCAP delegates from both India and Sri Lanka piped in their support for the Thai condemnation of the U.S. military raids, calling it "a show of independence and willingness to uphold principles."

The Thai vote "deeply disappointed" the U.S. government, State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb said. The Reuter news service reported that Washington was particularly disappointed, because the vote came in the midst of negotiations to finalize setting up a war reserve stockpile in Thailand.

However, many senior active and retired Thai foreign-affairs officials are not all in agreement with the Thai U.N. vote. They say that the vote in fact condoned the Libyan regime, with its acts of terrorism and subversion

worldwide. These senior Thai officials regret that Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila had not instead chosen to abstain from condemning either side.

As for the "Qaddafi connection" in Thailand, it is interesting to note that in an interview with the Thai-language *Daily News* published on April 22, the Muslim leader Khunying Saengdao Sayamvāla made an elaborate attempt to whitewash the Libyan leader's profile as a terrorist controller, portraying him as a genius, a leader loved by the Libyan people. Decorated with a royal title for her charity work among Muslim children, Khunying Saengdao is considered to be the person closest to Qaddafi in Thailand, so close that he refers to her as "mother." She has met with him four times.

In his address to ESCAP, which is widely regarded in Bangkok as a nest of Soviet spies anyway, Kapitsa attempted to portray Soviet policy toward the region as a counter to the "militarism" of the United States. "The arms race imposed by militarism instead of development," he said, "should be replaced by the reverse order of things—disarmament for development."

Following Kapitsa's meeting with Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi, the former accepted in principle an invitation to visit Moscow. Apparently the Kremlin is willing to arrange a meeting between him and Soviet party chief Mikhail Gorbachov, Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, and other senior Soviet officials.

As a gesture of good will, Kapitsa promised Siddhi that Moscow would stop direct recruitment of Thai students to study in the Soviet Union. Kapitsa also offered to send a famous Soviet painter to draw portraits of the King and Queen here "as a gift from the Soviet people to their majesties."