

# Soviets orchestrate border conflagration against Thailand

by Linda de Hoyos

While the international press featured front-page headlines on Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov's offer to begin withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan May 15, the Soviets were pressing on another theatre in a conflict that has been carefully hidden from the world's view. Since the first week in February, a Thai-Lao border dispute has been escalating into the most serious fighting in Southeast Asia to take place since the December 1978 invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam.

In mid-December, Laotian troops entered Thailand in the area of the village of Ban Rom Klao in the province of Phitsanulok near the Hoeng River, a tributary of the Mekong, and seized a 27-square-mile area of Thailand that juts into Laos. Laos claimed the area was Lao territory. Attempts by Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila to negotiate a settlement were of no avail, but Thailand took no decisive military action until the end of January, when former Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj publicly decried the military's low-key policy.

On Feb. 1, Thai jets began bombarding Lao troop positions, sending out five sorties a day. Laotians claim they have downed three Thai F5s, using SAM-9 missiles. In addition, the Laotians Feb. 4 began artillery shelling of Thai villages along a 50-mile stretch of the border to the north and south of the battle zone. Laos is now lobbing 800-1,000 artillery shells into Thailand daily. Bangkok papers feature front-page pictures of Thais scurrying for cover from shelling, and evacuating their villages. On Feb. 11, in an area several hundred kilometers from the battle area, 30 Laotian troops attacked a Thai village, killing several civilians before they were driven back by Thai border police.

As of Feb. 12, Bangkok announced that all Thai forces along the entire 1,000-mile border with Laos were on full alert. The Thai permanent secretary of the interior also reported Laotian troop movements along the Mekong River opposite the Thai city of Nong Khai. On Feb. 9, the Thai military said that it had killed 69 Vietnamese troops in the border war, and had sighted Russian military advisers.

At the same time, the Thais reported they had killed 200 Laotians, wounding another 300-400, in addition to the Vietnamese casualties. The Laotians are well-entrenched in bunkers and tunnels on Hill 1428, which adjoins Laos on its back side. This places Thai troops in the disadvantageous position of attempting to storm up the hill under a rain of fire.

On Feb. 9, Thai Defense Minister P. Kantarat reported that the Thai military was "carrying out new tactical plans, which will take time but will minimize our losses." Those losses can be estimated to be three to four times as many as on the Lao-Vietnamese side—that is, up to 2,000. Thai military officers are referring to the battle zone around Hill 1428 as a "killing field."

## Soviet testing point

These facts make the Thai-Lao border conflict the most significant fighting in the region since 1978 and one of the bloodiest conflicts in the world today. Yet not one Western correspondent in Thailand has filed a report from the battle area.

Military analysts in Bangkok, Japan, and the United States view the Lao border provocations not as a local conflict, but as a Soviet testing of Thailand's political will and its military-response capabilities. Speaking to ASEAN foreign ministers Feb. 10, Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila warned that the dispute was an act of aggression by the Soviet Union and Vietnam against all the ASEAN countries.

That a green light from Moscow was given to the Laotian operations is beyond a doubt. During the height of the fighting, on Feb. 3-6, General of the Soviet Army A. D. Lizichev, chief of the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Army and Navy, was in Laos, as part of a tour of Indochina.

The Soviet Union, according to the consensus of Indochina watchers in Southeast Asia, has directed operations in Laos for at least the past two years, although 40,000 Vietnamese troops remain in the country. The Laotian capital of Vientiane, not Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City, is regional KGB headquarters in Indochina. There are 3-5,000 Soviet advisers in Indochina, according to the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) in Bangkok, with 500-1,000 of them operating in Laos.

In the last five years, Laos has become a drug-financed country, producing both heroin and marijuana, with the Thais charging that drug production is sponsored as Laotian government policy.

Since 1976 and the withdrawal of the United States from Southeast Asia, Thailand has been the number-one Soviet target in Southeast Asia after Indochina. Both Japanese and U.S. analysts say that Moscow is not interested in testing

Western political will and military capabilities on the Korean peninsula, since the response would be immediate war-fighting from South Korea. To the west, the Soviets are working for a settlement over Afghanistan designed to prop up the image of Mikhail Gorbachov as the reasonable reformer with whom the West can negotiate, and to secure the domination of the appeasers in Washington. Southeast Asia, where U.S. policy has been one of neglect since the withdrawal from Indochina, is the soft underbelly of Asia now.

The Laotian provocations against Thailand coincide with public Soviet desires to reach a settlement of the Cambodia conflict, an apparent condition required by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping for a Sino-Soviet summit. Thailand has acted as a transit point and sometimes conduit for Chinese arms and supplies to the Khmer Rouge guerrillas, which continue to maraud in Cambodia against its Vietnamese-installed government.

For the Soviets, the Laotian border escalation—occurring just as Vietnamese and Thai troops had pulled back from the Cambodian border—serves to pressure Thailand. As a testing of Thai response capability and political will, if Thailand fails the test, then Moscow has a new bargaining chip over China. China has so far issued no statement on the conflict.

The Soviets, however, have implored Thailand to begin talks with Laos to negotiate a border settlement. On Feb. 5, Thai Ambassador to Moscow Prajit Rojanapruk was called to the Soviet Foreign Ministry where spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov warned Thailand to start talking: "An escalation of military actions might lead not just to a sudden deterioration in relations between Thailand and Laos, but could also worsen the situation in the whole of Southeast Asia," said Gerasimov, as reported in the Feb. 5 *Bangkok Post*. "We regret these border incidents all the more because they are happening at a time when a real prospect of a political settlement in the region is emerging." Gerasimov claimed the current tension "was a vestige of the colonial division of Indochina." Moscow has thus worked to place itself in the position of "superpower mediator" of a "local conflict."

### **Pattern of provocations**

The current conflict is similar to a border battle that occurred south of Ban Rom Klao in the first half of 1987, when Vietnamese troops occupied several strategic hills at the Chong Bok Pass, in Nam Yuen district of Ubon Ratchathani province. The Vietnamese came into the area in January, and a slow Thai response permitted the Vietnamese to entrench themselves in the hills. Not until April did Thailand begin major operations against the Vietnamese, resulting in heavy Thai casualties on the order of several hundred. By June, the Vietnamese had been dislodged.

At the end of the incident, Commander of the Thai Second Army Issarapong Noonpakdee informed envoys to Bangkok that he considered the border incursion a step in the plans

of Vietnam's "L Operation." This plan, devised in 1976 by Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap, would annex the 17 provinces of Thailand that curve into Indochina to strengthen Vietnam's geopolitical position.

Before that point, there was a conflict with Laos over three border villages in Utaradit province to the north of Ban Rom Klao, which was eventually settled for Thailand. Other incidents occurred during 1986, in which Pathet Lao forces crossed the border chasing refugees who had settled in Thailand.

After the Chong Bok Pass operation, Thailand and Laos began a rapprochement of sorts, in which Thailand opened border crossings and trade relations were increased. Laos primarily sells electricity to Thailand, accounting for 80% of Laos's foreign exchange earnings (excluding drugs).

During the same period, relations between Thailand and Moscow opened up, including the visit to Moscow of Thai Army Commander-in-Chief Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh in August. On Dec. 5, Soviet Commander in Chief of Land Forces Gen. Yevgenii Ivanovski paid a visit to Bangkok.

The Lao penetration into the Ban Rom Klao area in mid-December coincided with the visit to Bangkok of Deputy Foreign Minister Valentin Nikiforov, who came to brief the Thai government on Soviet intentions to forge a settlement of the regional conflict. The signal for the Laotian military move came from Moscow, where the Laotian ambassador to Russia charged that Thailand was bombing Lao border areas in an effort to maintain tensions. The Thais had evidently been told by the Russians, however, that Laos would soon depart, as on Dec. 24, Armed Forces Commander in Chief Sunthorn Kongsompong declared, "Laos may pull out soon." By the end of December, Soviet Politburo member and KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov was in Laos, as the Laotians used the period of Thai inaction to fortify their positions.

Negotiations may begin on the border conflict Feb. 16 when a Lao military delegation is due to arrive in Bangkok to meet with General Chaovalit. The visit is the result of a note sent to Thai Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda by Lao Prime Minister Kaysone asking for talks to end the "great loss of lives and property." A Thai military delegation will also visit Vientiane.

To militarily dislodge the Laotians requires Thailand to take flanking action by crossing into Lao territory in order to attack Hill 1428 from behind and cut Laotian supply lines, an action which the government appears as yet unwilling to undertake. According to Bangkok sources, pressure is coming from the U.S. embassy not to take such action. The embassy, report American sources, has labeled the dispute a "local disturbance" and a near-total press blackout has been placed on the conflict in the U.S. press. On Feb. 10, a day of heavy fighting in Ban Rom Klao, there was no reaction from Washington. However, the State Department did issue a rebuke to Thailand for its refusal to take in more refugees from Vietnam.