

## Report from Bangkok by Sophie Tanapura

### AIDS crisis breaks out

*The government has been put on the spot, thanks to wide circulation of information from EIR's news bureau.*

**B**roader sample testing for the HIV virus that causes AIDS has been conducted in recent months by the Thai Ministry of Public Health. The results—increasing numbers of HIV infected—indicate that AIDS is breaking out of the usual high-risk groups. The main vector for the spread seems to be prostitutes, plus heroin addicts who share needles. Farmers, fishermen, and soldiers are among those recently found to be HIV carriers. HIV-infected military personnel are declared unfit for military service, and infected new recruits are systematically refused.

In June, random surveys among prostitutes in 14 provinces showed that more and more prostitutes are carrying the HIV virus. In some tourist areas, the number of females infected has gone up 44% compared to previous surveys. Increases in other provinces are 1-5%. The surveys also show that 60% of the HIV-infected prostitutes are under 20. Since Thailand has around 100,000 prostitutes officially, and perhaps hundreds of thousands, according to some private figures, public health officials are suddenly realizing that this may be one of the fastest tracks for HIV to spread.

However, AIDS is not a sexually transmitted disease, and earlier testing among heroin addicts showed that the virus is also spread fast by needle-sharing. It is believed that the capital city of Bangkok alone has 200,000 heroin addicts. A Bangkok metropolitan public health official says it is feared that 50% of addicts may already be HIV carriers. The latest official figures show the total number of

HIV carriers in Thailand at 8,691 and AIDS cases at 23—of whom 14 have died.

Public Health Minister Chuan Leekpai, however, has declined to give the most up-to-date count of AIDS carriers, believed to have increased sharply in recent months, saying that it is a closely guarded secret in almost every country.

Under the Prem government, 1987 was declared the "Year of Tourism in Thailand," and public health officials were given strict orders not to publicize any alarming health information. This applies to AIDS as well as to cholera, a health official told *EIR* recently. But Deputy Public Health Minister Suthas Ngermmuen thinks that with rapidly growing numbers among prostitutes, it is high time the government change Thailand's image as a sexual paradise. Starting early in August, the Department of Communicable Diseases made it policy to broaden the blood tests for HIV infection in brothels across the country.

Increased public awareness of AIDS danger has been aided by the fact that two Thai-language dailies carried information on various means of HIV virus transmission provided by the Bangkok *EIR* office. The most important daily, *Thai Rath*, with a circulation of 700,000, printed Dr. John Seale's contribution as a commentary, and *Siam Rath*, with a circulation of 85,000 and widely read among intellectuals, also quoted extensively from Dr. Seale's article, which had appeared in *EIR's* Thai-language newsletter *Off the Record* in July.

Dr. Seale, a member of the British

Royal Academy of Medicine, stressed that AIDS is not a sexually transmitted disease and that condoms are not efficient in stopping the spread of the HIV virus. He also said that oral salivary contact and blood-sucking insects represent possible means of HIV transmission.

An avalanche of denials of Dr. Seale's assertions began to appear in the local press and "local experts" on AIDS lined up, one by one, to insist that transmission by saliva and mosquitoes was out of the question. A high-level U.S. health official was even deployed to underline as "impossible" HIV transmission by saliva and mosquitoes.

Dr. Bruce G. Weniger, assistant chief for epidemiology of the Center for Disease Control's HIV-AIDS Division, met with Thai public health officials during the third week of August to propose a joint Thai-U.S. project to study AIDS problems in Thailand and assess means to prevent the spread of the disease. Dr. Weniger also took the opportunity to dismiss fear that the AIDS virus may be transmitted via food, toilet seats, and mosquito bites. Perhaps this can be an opportunity for U.S. officials to learn how to more efficiently fight AIDS from their Thai counterparts.

As for the Thai government, the outcome of the Sept. 8 meeting of the Council of Social Ministers will be a first signal of how seriously the AIDS epidemic is being taken. Mrs. Yencht Rapeepat, an opposition parliamentarian of the Thai Citizens's Party, has warned Public Health Minister Chuan, of the Democrat Party, that a censure motion will be brought to the floor when the parliamentary session resumes. The minister had better have some successful results to show during the next six months or he may lose his seat in the cabinet.