

Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

Soviets 'guarantor of peace'?

Kapitsa's recent tour spread discord among the ASEAN countries, offset by offers of imperial beneficence.

You knew something was afoot when it was announced that Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa would extend his stay in Bangkok to almost two weeks. Following a visit to Australia, Kapitsa's Thailand trip was to allow him to attend the 41st annual meeting of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

To the surprise of everyone there on March 19, Kapitsa brought up the question of "Star Wars"—"the right time but the wrong place," many felt, as the ESCAP meeting was supposed to deal exclusively with social and economic problems. But Kapitsa had decided to use the ESCAP session as a propaganda podium from which to blame the "American imperialists" for "an arms race in space." Through an unofficial translation provided by ESCAP facilities, he complained of the militarization of space, and declared that unless the United States stopped pursuing the Strategic Defense Initiative, there would be no possibility for the two superpowers to reach an agreement on arms reduction.

Strangely enough, the U.S. delegation's attempt to respond was overruled by the Nepalese chairman of the session.

The Soviet obsession with the SDI unmistakably revealed their panic over the fact that the Japanese may soon officially join the American defense program. The United States sent an invitation to Tokyo in March to assume a role in the technological development of beam defenses. A reply

should be forthcoming within the next 60 days.

Such cooperation between the United States and Japan, "with Europe joining in eventually," would tremendously accelerate the five-year research and development program foreseen for the SDI, while launching a technological boom into the 21st century in the Western world. The Soviets have but 60 days to act in the Pacific.

Kapitsa himself is scheduled to visit Japan in May to prepare for Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's official visit there.

Soviet pressure has already been brought to bear on Japan and China. The U.S. Defense Department in its annual report on Soviet military capability released in early April, revealed that the greatest additions to the Soviet Union's military fleet are being made in the Far East. The most modern surface vessels, as well as the most modern submarines, have been added to Soviet naval and air strength in the region, including the China Sea.

After the ESCAP meeting in Bangkok, Kapitsa, an expert in Asian affairs, had the nerve to declare upon his arrival in Jakarta, Indonesia that the Soviet Union was ready to assume the role of "guarantor of peace" in Southeast Asia. "The Soviet Union will make a positive contribution and is willing to be one of the guarantors for peace, harmony, and stability in the region. Southeast Asia has long been haunted by conflicts and the Soviet Union has never exploited the

conflicts and will not," he announced.

Earlier, in Bangkok, Kapitsa had rejected the Thai request to stop Soviet military aid to Vietnam, without which Vietnam would not be able to prolong its occupation of Kampuchea. In Jakarta, he conferred with President Suharto, Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, and Armed Forces Commander Benny Murdani.

In an attempt to sow discord and distrust among ASEAN nations on the sensitive question of Kampuchea—immediately after the recent and serious Vietnamese violation of Thai borders in an attack on the stronghold of Prince Sihanouk at Tatum—Kapitsa, during a short stopover in Bangkok en route to Hanoi from Jakarta, announced to the press that a good part of ASEAN was seriously considering the five-point Vietnamese proposal. In so doing, he trained suspicions on Indonesia, whose Foreign Minister Mochtar had just visited Hanoi before going to the United States. It was one of those rather unsophisticated Soviet diversions.

More important among Kapitsa's moves in the Southeast Asian region, is a recent trade deal signed in Bangkok between the Soviet Union and Thailand. Kapitsa signed a 500,000-ton tapioca deal with the Thai government, benefiting essentially the METRO group of tapioca producers. The value of the deal was estimated at \$22 million, with the possibility of eventually exporting up to 2 million tons of hard tapioca pellets over a period of two years.

The trade deal—representing more than half of the export quota to the European Community—is welcomed by the Thais. It comes in the aftermath of the IMF-World Bank-instigated devaluation of the Thai baht, whose austerity impact is just beginning to be felt.