

Thailand resists 'green' colonialism

by Lydia Cherry

Thailand had a bitter fight with the World Bank at the mid-October World Bank/International Monetary Fund meeting in Bangkok, with Thai Finance Minister Suthi Singsane leading the charge. At issue is the Pak Mun Dam, a \$100 million project in northeast Thailand that would generate 200 megawatts of electricity and irrigate 100,000 acres. The World Bank had announced that it was indefinitely "deferring" a \$54 million loan for the dam, with bank officials claiming the reason was that environmental groups and some of the bank's shareholders had sought new assurances about the ecological impact of the dam and the number of villagers who would have to be resettled. This is a project that has been on the drawing board for 10 years, and the Thai government has already acceded to major changes to accommodate the concerns of Bank officials and the "green" lobby.

Thailand is insisting that with or without the World Bank, the project will move ahead, and that the government will turn to other sources if World Bank funding is not forthcoming. Finance Minister Suthi used the occasion of the Bangkok meeting of the controlling financial institutions to call into question the "tyranny" responsible for the World Bank's decision to put the project on hold. In his speech on Oct. 16, Suthi sounded much like the outspoken Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, who regularly denounces the machinations of western environmentalists to curtail the industrial development of the Third World. Thailand shares membership with Malaysia in the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN), the grouping that in October announced joint action against western green groups.

Suthi noted the effort the country had expended in trying to balance "the needs of accelerating the supply of basic resources, such as water for irrigation and power to light rural areas, and creating new employment opportunities and their concomitant impact on the environment. It was because of this balancing act that Thailand had sought World Bank financing for the project to begin with, "to ensure that all adequate measures humanly possible would be taken . . . while simultaneously satisfying the basic development needs of the Thai people."

"There are no legitimate reasons for the inexplicable decision to postpone the issue," he said. "It is a most dangerous precedent that the tyranny of a few in other countries prevails over membership rights, as well as logical and sound devel-

opment objectives." Suthi identified the form of the new colonialism: Developing countries "need and rely" on loans and credits from the financial institutions; but developing countries are subject to stringent environmental standards imposed via these institutions by the developed countries.

A senior World Bank official told the *Bangkok Post* the day before Suthi spoke that the Bank had been scheduled to consider the Pak Mun Dam matter on Oct. 10, but the decision was postponed because certain board members, representing powerful developed nations, expressed concerns over the dam's environmental impact. The official mentioned the United States, Germany, France, Canada, and the United Kingdom as having "questions" about the dam.

A 'Green International'

According to the computerized "Environmental Bulletin Board," non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the world "had their eyes focused on the forthcoming bank decision" prior to the Bangkok meeting. Indeed, United Nations NGOs from Australia, Canada, the United States, and several European countries all descended on Thailand to attempt to influence the World Bank decision. The interlocked, international environmentalist movement funded by the Rockefellers and other families and foundations, has made it a high priority to sabotage the dam. Thai authorities maintain that Thai radicals who regularly demonstrate against the dam have close ties to these environmentalist groups, and that the demonstrators are paid 40 bahts a day by the Greenpeace organization.

The Washington Greenpeace office told a reporter that the environmentalists had succeeded in getting the location changed, lowering the height, and forcing other design changes that reduced the expected power output by one-third, while lowering the number of people to be resettled from 25,000 to 1,500. But the spokesman said that they would continue opposing the project because it may affect fisheries and the environment, and they don't like the Thais' record on resettlement.

'Mahathirism' spreads

With Bangkok the battleground, an interesting message was conveyed from a Thai group to one of the most active environmentalist groupings, the Rainforest Information Center of Sydney, Australia. Faxed into Sydney by a group supporting the Electricity Authority of Thailand (EGAT), the message warned that Australians cannot treat Thais as if they were "Australian aborigines." "Some white people think we do not know how to administer our country; that they must show us how," the message said. "Clearly imperialism is not dead yet. They are jealous of the success the country has achieved." Citing Mahathir's angry response to environmentalist attacks on his country, the message went on, "We represent EGAT people, 35,000 persons who feel like the Malaysian prime minister."