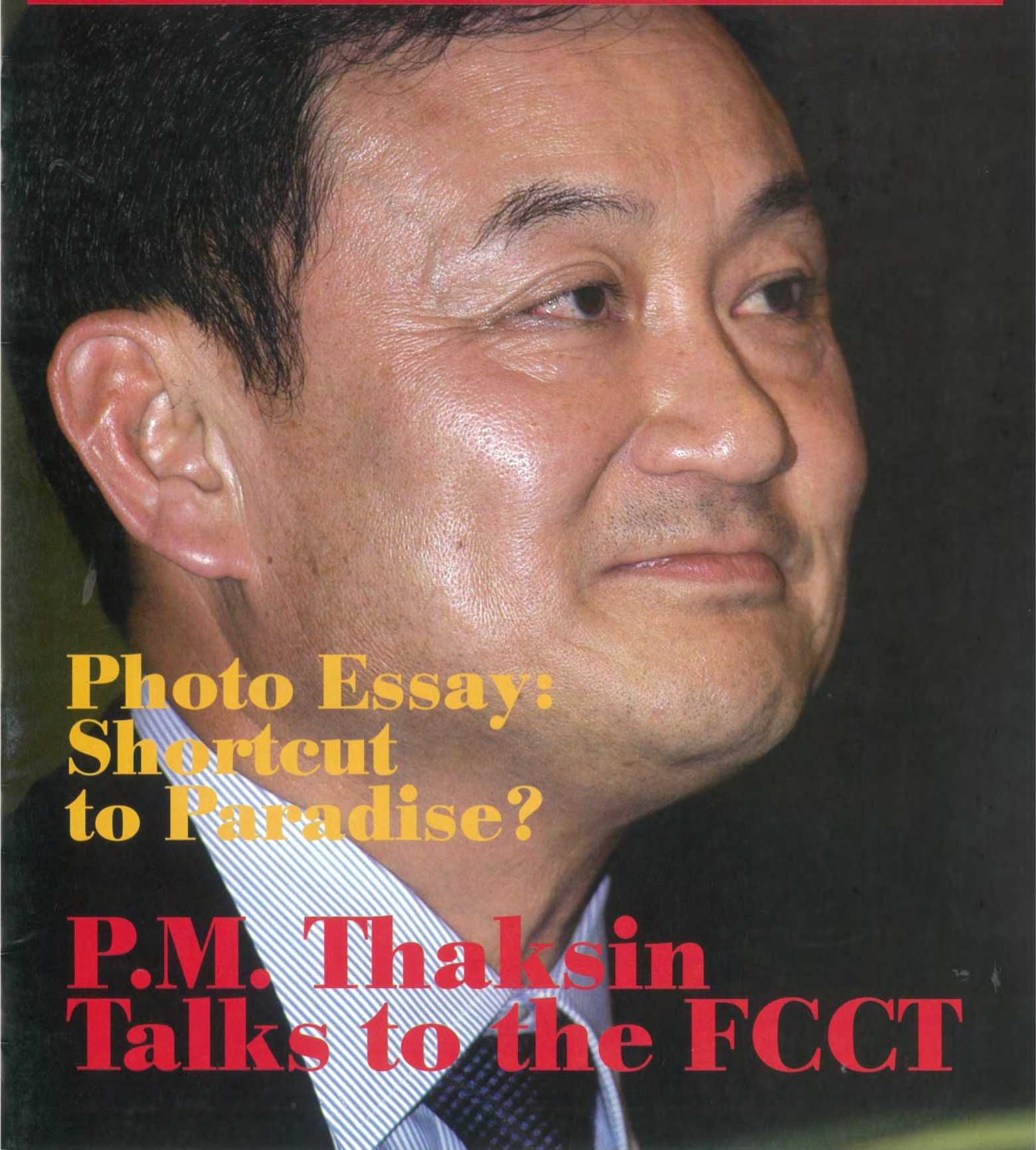


DATELINE

BANGKOK

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB OF THAILAND MAGAZINE

THIRD QUARTER 2003



**Photo Essay:
Shortcut
to Paradise?**

**P.M. Thaksin
Talks to the FCCT**

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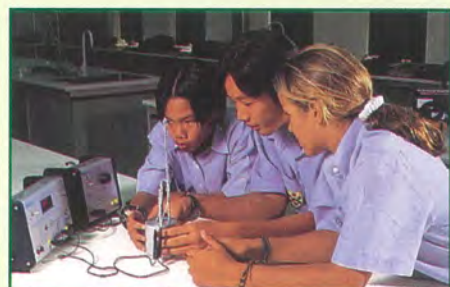


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FEEDING THE MACHINE

Dateline magazine looks at the stories behind the stories. All offerings will be considered, from articles and photo essays to letters, essays, haiku or sonnets. How you covered a story, what you think about how journalism works, or even some gossip for the Soi Whispers column — send it all in, to editor Craig Knowles (cknowles@yahoo.com.au) or deputy editor Vaudine England (vaudine@attglobal.net). Submissions are paid for with glory and bar coupons.

A Job Well Done

The evening with Prime Minister Thaksin was the Club's top event for the year and was highly successful. Some 600 members and non-members came to the Dusit Thani for the Prime Minister's speech which was followed by questions and answers. It was front page news in Thailand the next day and the Prime Minister said he would come back next year.

Unfortunately, due to time limitations a number of members didn't get to ask questions. The board regrets this and commits that next year they will get priority. The wires sat at the Prime Minister's table this year, but next year it will be different news organisations.

The programme was also a good cash injection for the Club. Our bank account looks better, but it is membership that will guarantee the Club's long-term future rather than annual events. This means we need another 200 mem-



bers and I invite you all to make the Club known and bring in new people.

I'd like to thank our manager Khun Leng and the Club's staff for putting the event together. As far as organisation it went flawlessly.

Starting next month we are kicking

off a series of programmes in association with the International Peace Foundation. The speakers will include Nobel Prize laureates and global peace activists. The first speaker is the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

The board is involved in assisting London Times correspondent Andrew Drummond. Andrew has been facing legal and security problems for articles he wrote about a British national in Pattaya and has been warned that he may be deported. We provided Andrew with legal advice and wrote a letter to the authorities expressing the Club's concern about his security and possible deportation after working for 15 years in Thailand.

Finally, Christmas is around the corner. We are courting hotels for the Club's party which promises to be the best ever.



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BRIDGES

DIALOGUES TOWARDS A CULTURE OF PEACE

Hosted through The International Peace Foundation

INTERNATIONAL PEACE FOUNDATION
NETWORK FOR THE PRO-MOTION OF PEACE

Stop Press—What is “Bridges?”

The FCCT is happy to be one of the hosts for the current spate of top-flight visitors to Thailand: Nobel prize winners, authors and artists, politicians and royalty. But how did we swing it?

A five-month series of “Bridges – Dialogues Towards a Culture of Peace” is the framework for the visits. And the FCCT's very own vice president, Daniel Lovering, is on the organising committee for the Dialogues. Thanks Dan!

In line with the cosmic themes

due for airing, these Dialogues are one of the activities of the International Peace Foundation. This Vienna-based organisation counts 21 Nobel Peace Prize laureates among its patrons, including the Dalai Lama, East Timor's Bishop Belo, South Korea's Kim Dae-jung, Michael Gorbachev and Nelson Mandela amongst others. Advisors include Prince Alfred of Liechtenstein, singer Joan Armatrading, Brazilian choreographer Professor Marcia Haydee, Indian political scientist Dr Karan Singh, a crowd of chemistry, physics

and medical professors, film-maker Wim Wenders and many more.

The foundation wants to stimulate new ways of thinking and acting to promote peace. That means supporting peace universities, sponsoring research into conflict prevention and solution, bringing about multi-disciplinary exchanges and cultural mixing. It's all part of a tradition of Peace Summits, held in Europe since 1993, which Thailand, and the FCCT, will now be part of.





The Bangkok Post's Alan Dawson and the Nation Group's Kavi Chongkittavorn listen to Senator Kraisaak Choonavan discuss the threat of terrorism and of the anti-terror decrees recently issued by the Thai government.

Terrorism Night

On August 27, crowds gathered at the FCCT to find out what the Thai government's two executive decrees really mean. The decrees amend the criminal code to facilitate prosecution of terrorism suspects and the anti-money laundering act to allow seizure of their assets. Soon after the decrees were announced, the so-called key Jemaah Islamiyah operative "Hambali" was arrested in Ayuthaya. But was a major attack really in the works, are other terrorists lurking in the Kingdom and will Hambali's capture precipitate terrorist acts on Thai soil in retaliation? No matter what the threat, though, or how real, are the decrees themselves constitutional? The Constitution Court has just agreed to take up the question. At the FCCT, the Chairman of the Thai Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee Senator Kraisaak Choonavan, was joined in a panel discussion by The Nation's assistant group editor Kavi Chongkittavorn, and long-time southeast Asia correspondent Alan Dawson, to explore the various facets of this important issue. — Pictures by Mick Elmore



Questions From the Floor



Two of the smartest news-women in town.



Decades of Experience, we won't say of what, clustered around Club founder Jorge Orgibet. He's the man of iron. The others, left to right, are John Hail, Richard Ehrlich, Costas Paris and Julian Spindler.



One of those Bar Moments

Meetings of Hearts and Minds...



The BBC's new correspondent here, Kylie Morris, managed to chat up the p.m. on her first night in town. Welcome to the Club!



Little Bangkok in Southern France

A healthy contingent of the Bangkok press corps made the journey to France in September for the wedding of photographers Agnes Dherbeys and Philip Blenkinsop. High - as in altitude - in the mountains near Romans, the wedding party included some old Bangkok hands as well, including Gary Knight, Alan Pearce, Patrick de Noirmont, Stuart Isett and Ben Bohane. Most were fresh (or not-so-fresh) from attending the photography festival at Perpignon where groom Blenkinsop had just picked up the coveted Visa D'or prize for his moving photos of Hmong rebels in Laos. The wedding itself went off without a hitch, and despite predictions, no blood was spilled. Bon chance.

SOI WHISPERS

Because we're in the business of spreading sweetness and light we won't get into all the abuse and bleeding hearts hurled about in the wake of the prime minister's question time. We sympathise with the losers, even agree that major American networks must learn how to ask only one question at a time, and how pissing in a pot is perhaps an undesirable low note to end it all on. But hey, as one board member is prone to say, where is Australia anyway? (Joke, honest.) ● Far more cheering was the news of a double-whammy for Philip Blenkinsop. Not only did his powerful pictures of a group of distraught Hmong in a Lao special security zone win the Perpignan Photo Festival top prize this year. He also got married.... ● Back at the Thaksin night, some clues emerged into the private lives of our leaders, both of The Club and of The Country. When board member Amal Naj introduced himself to the prime minister as a top knob at Pfizer International, Mr Thaksin replied, "Ah, Viagra!" Excited discussion ensued about who uses the magic pill. Amal was told he needed it by Thaksin, who admitted to needing it himself, and generously roped in his offsider Pansak Vinyarat, claiming he was a man who needed it too. "But [Club president] Costas [Paris] doesn't need it because he's just had a baby," announced Thaksin. The baby's arrival is true, we know that much. But with a friend like Pansak who needs enemies? When Thaksin was asked what he thought there might be in this world which he could not do, he paused. And Pansak got in first: "One thing he can't do, he can't afford to fire me!" ● Perpignon also marked the much-anticipated launch of Asia-Works Photography and was the first time industry mucky mucks got to see the new agency's digital archive online. Reviews ranged from good to great, particularly for the search software, but it wasn't all smooth sailing. A bad case of bed bug bites had co-founders Peter Charlesworth and Yvan Cohen doing The Itchy and Scratchy Show for prospective clients. And we thought journos in Asia were immune to such things.



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Thaksin Night

Any doubts that Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is indeed the leading contender for Next Big Thing on the Asian political landscape were dispelled on October 1.

By Vaudine England Pictures by Kees Metselaar

On that night, the businessman-leader of a country long yearning for decisive action, offered himself up to the foreign correspondent community and emerged with his suavity unscathed.

He did this in that classic manoeuvre, which involves polite self-abnegation to begin with, paving the way for unchallengeable assertions later. In our typical journalistic way, we fell for it, alternately impressed and critical, and finally forced to laugh at ourselves.

This was The Club's first dinner with the prime minister in two years and we're thrilled with the honour and opportunity, and with the boost to Club Coffers.

The lines were already drawn in the private greeting room, where the hard-working mem-

bers of the FCCT board were allowed to greet the prime minister beforehand.

Mr Thaksin was defensive when it was suggested he might not welcome all the foreign press attention due with the Apec festivities. He insists he has no problems with us at all, and certainly no fear.

And he had no time for any bleeding heart laments we might voice about too much strength in governance.

"We are leaders! So we must lead!" he said succinctly.

His formal speech began with deceptive humility before becoming a spirited exposition of just how successful his new economic theories and political approaches have been for Thailand.

From left to right: PM Thaksin with board members Craig Knowles, Amal Naj, Julian Spindler, Karen Emmons and Marc Laban



Press Freedom at Home

The question which FCCT president Costas Paris was geared up to ask was the only one to garner spontaneous applause.

Our Costas recalled that two recent news events at The Club had been cancelled because prospective guests were not allowed into Thailand to attend. One event was that planned to hear testimony from two eye-witnesses of the attack on and imprisonment of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi on May 30. The other event was an evening with Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy.

Why did the government ban the arrival of Mr Rainsy seemingly to stop him speaking at The Club, and why were the Burmese eye-witnesses intimidated into fleeing?

Prime Minister Thaksin took the question on the chin and answered plainly.

"The Thais can speak every day, including to attack me. But politicians of other countries cannot use Thailand to attack others.

"This is our policy, that they cannot be allowed to use Thailand," he said.

This too garnered applause, perhaps from different members of the Dusit Thani ballroom audience.

Mr Thaksin explained the policy as being rooted in Asian politeness and in the way of things among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. And it seems he would expect neighbouring governments to extend the same courtesy to him.

In later questioning, from Alex Spillius of the Daily Telegraph, Mr Thaksin further made clear that such friendship between leaders across borders was less personal than political. If, for example, Aung San Suu Kyi became the leader of Burma, then she would be accorded the same official courtesy.

"For so long as we recognise a government, it's our friend. If the government changes, the new government is our friend. They don't have two governments," said Mr Thaksin.

"We don't ignore calls from the international community, but we have our own ways of handling it. We always give the message that we love democracy, but we cannot tell them what to do. They have their own dignity and sovereignty," he said.

It's an elegant variation on how to infringe press freedom but naturally the FCCT will continue to try to follow the news in the region by inviting speakers from all sides of the political spectrum. We believe that only through open and balanced discussion can complex situations be properly understood.

Meanwhile, as past president Dominic Faulder recalls, we've had a long bad run on trying to hear all sides of the Burmese issue. We would love to hear from any Myanmar officials explaining their policies, for example. As for Aung San Suu Kyi, she was invited along way back in 1990, but she's yet to have been allowed to leave the country safely.

"As I recall, when I last spoke to you... I could detect a slight sense of skepticism in the audience about our economic policies.

"This skepticism can perhaps be explained in a couple of ways. First it might have been because of my poor English and Texas Thai accent at the time, so you did not fully comprehend what I was trying to say.

"I believe that after two years of practice, my English has somewhat improved although my accent remains the same."

In a further sign of just how confident this leader is, he admitted that even his own staff had trouble getting the numbers right early on in his premiership.

"Even my own officials at the National Economic and Social Development Board were completely off the mark in their economic forecasts, not only once, but on more occasions than I care to remember! Anyway, most of them still have their jobs -- and so do you."

Having neatly put us in our place, Mr Thaksin read the rest of his speech from those clever tele-prompt machines which look like transparent bits of plastic on frames. This gave a rundown of many successes, according to the measurements of presumably different staff.

"I must admit that I took a risk in trying out these new policies, but it was calculated risk based on facts and analysis. So far, over two-and-a-half years later, the policies have worked out as evidenced by the macroeconomic picture," said Mr Thaksin.

He recapped on his "War" plans -- the War on Poverty which will be won in six years, he says, and the War on Narcotics and Corruption which is destroying the minds of youth. On the latter he said he was seeking active cooperation from Laos, China, India and Myanmar to formulate new programmes of drug control.

And he espoused his doctrine of dual-track policy, or the reconciliation of opposites.

"The government's dual-track development policy of coexistence between social objectives and capital management has gone through the test of time to the point that some have even termed it 'social capitalism'.

"I think the phrase might need some refine-

1. From left to right: Minister of Transport Suriya Jungthongreangkit, Minister of Commerce Adisai Bodharamak, Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak, PM Thaksin & Board Member Laurent Malespine.
2. PM Thaksin and Vice President Dan Lovering
3. Costas Paris and PM Thaksin
4. PM Thaksin Smells the Flowers
5. Vaudine England, John Hail and Karen Emmons
6. Joe Cochrane of Newsweek and Willi Germund of Berliner Zeitung
7. PM Thaksin unimpressed
- 8-9 Dinner guests at Dusit Thani Ballroom





Meeting Khun Leng

By Craig Knowles Portrait by Kees Metselaar

Our new club manager Suchawadee Khaosam-ank, known as Khun Leng, has been with us a few months now, replacing Noi, who left to take up a fellowship in Hawaii in July. In her varied career, Khun Leng has worked with Peace Corp. volunteers, taught English and – of all things – grown cucumbers in Finland.

A Nakhon Pathom native, Leng grew up on her family's fruit orchards and moved to Khon Kaen to study agriculture after completing high school.

"My family were farmers. It inspired me. I wanted to become a progressive farmer," she told Dateline.

After graduating, Leng was chosen as Thailand's first agricultural exchange student. But instead of the vast grain belts of Australia or the United States, she found herself heading to the chillier Scandinavian climes of Turku in Finland.

"It was my first time outside of Thailand and it was a great shock for me. I flew Aeroflot and remember being very scared, and crying, during transit in Moscow. There were no Thai people, and no one spoke English. My own English was very poor."

There she was assigned to take care of her host family's cucumber farm.

"It was very different. I was there during summer but for me it was still cold. I stood out because I was the one wearing a sweater and blue-jeans while everyone else was walking around in bikinis."

Not surprisingly, Khun Leng was the only Thai in Turku and proved somewhat of a novelty among the local community.

"At first, people thought I was a refugee from Vietnam, then when I explained they kept thinking I was from Taiwan. I don't think many people had heard of Thailand in those days."

Upon her return to Thailand, Leng decided to forego a career in farming, opting instead for a job in the United States Peace Corp.

She began teaching Thai to volunteers, a period in her life she describes as rich and rewarding.

"I think I gained a lot of things from the Peace Corp.," she says.



"Basic communication skills, organisational skills, problem solving skills."

All this stands her in good stead at the often organisationally challenged FCCT.

In her first three months on board, Khun Leng has already become that cool, calm and coherent force we need and love.

She has organised opening nights, handed out brochures at the Bumrungrad Hospital expats' fair, and coped admirably with the list of requests and demands arising from Executive Committee meetings.

And after just a few months in the job, she already has a hugely successful Prime Minister's night behind her, an evening which was widely praised for running so smoothly.

Her impressions so far?

"It's different than anything I've done. I think you need compassion and understanding to handle this job. I like the club's cozy, comfortable feel and hope I can work to make it more welcoming for newcomers."

We warmly welcome Khun Leng on board and wish her continued success in her new role.



Ed McBride of
The Economist asks
a question

ment. In any case, the principle of social capitalism in itself is not a contradiction as some may think, but in fact it is a dual-track approach to enhancing Thailand's comparative advantages."

In a haunting reminder of undergraduate talk of Marxist dialectics, Mr Thaksin went on to describe the duality of many things, in Thailand and in the world of ideas. The Apec conference, probably safely over by the time you read this, was another example of the philosophy, he said, as summed up by the official theme: A World of Differences, Partnership for the Future.

In Thailand, he noted, there exists great diversity, between rural and urban lives, between rich and poor, between those with access to opportunities and those without. Mr Thaksin wants to bridge these gaps, he believes, in the same way he hopes to bridge ideological chasms, injecting some social awareness into his capitalism, and some capital consciousness into his welfare models.

Questioning was intense thereafter and was cut short by the premier's officials to the chagrin of many journalists hoping for a word.

There has yet to evolve the perfect system for organising questioning from the floor at such an important occasion and the Board will be discussing this further. One reporter was "shaking" and "stunned" when accused of hogging the limelight, but liquid refreshments helped this and another "outraged" hackette recover.

Perhaps we journalists should learn to ask tighter questions – the one from ITN's Ian Williams, asking Mr Thaksin why he changed his mind on the existence of a terror threat in Thailand was undoubtedly the best. It made the prime minister pause, noticeably, before replying, "Well things change every day."

But again Mr Thaksin got the last laugh, by refusing to answer a follow-up by saying with a smile, "I cannot tell you, it's a security matter!"

Topics covered security preparations ahead of the Apec summit in Bangkok (October 20-21), how Thaksin would like to be remembered (he said he doesn't care), definitions of democracy, denying the presence of any threatening missiles, stressing the longstanding close ties between Thailand and the United States ("We were the first Treaty ally of the US in Asia"), and how the government should try to only facilitate the economy's workings but might need to be the spark to recharge it when it fails.

"I always said democracy is not an end by itself but a means to an end," said Mr Thaksin.

"You have to get into office through the democratic way, but after that you have to manage, not to decorate democracy beautifully."

"This does not mean that I am against democracy. You know if you're trying to work on democracy all the time, you leave no time for improving the livelihoods of the people."



Thank You Khun Roong

Khun Roong Pukrabet, Bar Supervisor, is the longest serving staff-member at the Foreign Correspondents' Club. In recognition of his 25 years' service, an FCCT plaque was presented to him by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on October 1st 2003.

By Saprang Palasthira

Khun Roong, a seasoned bartender with nearly 30 years of experience, worked for the Food and Beverage department of a top Bangkok hotel before joining the FCCT in 1977. His then salary was just 380 baht a month, as he recalls with a chuckle. Today, as Bar Supervisor with a number of staff working under him, Khun Roong is entrusted

with the FCCT is indeed a remarkable employment record!

Is he crazy, over-committed or just down-right loyal? While Khun Roong was brilliant at telling some of the stories of people and events related to the Club, he couldn't quite explain the personal decisions he must have made that kept him so long in one place.

Whatever his reasons – the FCCT is extremely lucky.

Like every organisation, the FCCT has had its fair share of ups and downs throughout its nearly fifty-year history. That's a big enough chunk of time to subdivide into eras or ages. Let's call anything before Khun Roong's time pre-history (with due respect to the senior members of the community!) Khun Roong calls the period 1985-1993 the Golden Age of the FCCT. From 1994 onwards, it's the "Iron Age", he says, a dark time when life is tough.

Khun Roong felt all the highs and the lows, how well the Club is being run, the personalities involved. He remembers well that during the Golden Age he was given a 2-month bonus. There have been times when the Club lacked good facilities, was poorly located or not as well managed as it could have been. There have been strong boards, management and staff teams as well as weak ones that contributed to the mixed fortunes of this fine Club of ours over the years.

Who was the person he remembers best? "Eric Brighton," replies Khun Roong without having to think. Brighton was a retired British Navy Officer, who ran the Royal Bangkok Sports Club for over 30 years before becoming manager of the FCCT in 1985. According to Khun Roong, he was a strong manager who led the Club into its Golden Age.

He mentions many more names of foreign and local journalists and other personalities involved with the FCCT than can possibly be included here. And he likes to include their news agency and position, like Denis Gray, The Associated Press, bureau chief, president of the FCCT in 1976, 1977 and 1980; Rodney



Khun Roong and Khun Naovarat

and headed for the then-much-dreaded Supreme Command HQ at Sanam Sueapa Road. Caught up in the emotions of the Club as the rallying point for the journalist about to be expelled, he thought for a moment that the limo might be able to enter the barracks, letting him march right into the coup leaders' office to hand them the FCCT letter. In reality, he only got as far as the first check point!

Over the many long years working at the Club, there had been opportunities for him to move on to better pastures working with big hotels in Bangkok. Raising a family with several mouths to feed and children to put through school, Khun Roong, the family's principal breadwinner, had to think more than twice about exposing his family's welfare to the risks and unknowns of a new job and the possibility of unemployment.

Tasker, Far Eastern Economic Review, president in 2002; John Everingham, Australian news and photography, and so on – just as journalists refer to their peers. That shows how much FCCT culture Khun Roong has embraced in the quarter of a century he's been working here.

He thinks the foreign journalists he meets are a great bunch of people. He laments the missed opportunity for better education when he was young. Perhaps he could have become a reporter, says the Walter Mitty spirit in Khun Roong. He's proud to be associated with journalists and the Club. His elder daughter's wedding was held at the Club.

When asked to remember the worst event in his life at work, again without a blink, he says: Neil Davis, NBC bureau chief, killed in crossfire between troops during a coup d'etat.

Neil Davis, a veteran Australian cameraman well-known for his coverage of the Indo-China War, was a personality who had made an immense impact on the Club.

On that fateful day, September 4th, 1985, Khun Roong was working behind the bar when he suddenly heard someone shouting above the noisy level of conversation: "Neil Davis is dead!" The Clubhouse went into stony silence. It was a moment of shock. Neil Davis had a Buddhist funeral and Khun Roong remembers being quite shaken by the demise of Neil Davis and the mourning that went on within him.

Another incident that also involved a member of the FCCT was when Barry Wain, Asian Wall Street Journal, was expelled from this country under martial law. Khun Roong volunteered to deliver the Club's protest letter – because he was a friend of this foreign journalist in trouble and he simply wanted to help.

That's why he put on his Sunday best and a brave face, and got into a chauffeur-driven long, black limousine provided by the Oriental Hotel



Good Old Days – with Reuters' Michael Battye, poolside, 1977

Khun Roong is too big of a fan of the foreign journalists and probably too proud of the FCCT to even consider that by hanging on his job with the Club his financial dependents were equally exposed to the uncertainty of this employer's future.

But so far so good for Khun Roong's gamble to stick with the FCCT. He has a healthy and happy family. And he deserves every bit of recognition he got that evening with the Prime Minister at the Club function. It made him a happy man who can be proud of what he's done.



Khun Roong receives FCCT plaque from PM Thaksin

with operating the Clubhouse Bar and function room facilities at our Club.

Khun Roong was born in a small rural community in Kalasin province in 1953. His father died when he was quite young. His family moved him to Bangkok where he finished high school, got married to Khun Naovarat, got a job and settled down. His eldest daughter, a graduate from St. John's College, is married and has a 3 year old daughter. The youngest daughter has just finished high school and is applying for a place at Thammasat University.

Twenty five years is a long time. Given that Thailand does not have a life-long-employment culture like Japan, Khun Roong's long associ-

Shortcut to Paradise?

Words and pictures by Dan White

One morning 21 years ago Thapan Puri arose from his bed in Bihar, India. He raised one foot in the air and from that day to this that foot has never touched the ground again.

Thapan Puri is not a masochist nor is he insane. His decision to spend his whole life as a silent, hungry, one legged man was one born of deep conviction that these acts would aid him in his meditations on the human condition. He is a Sadhu.

These naked, ash smeared, warrior priests have been wandering India for at least five thousand years. Alexander the Great called them "naked philosophers". Empires have come and gone. India has evolved into a place where TV satellite dishes and mobile phones dominate the cityscape.

But Thapan Puri is part of the unchanged world. The only progress he values is in the journey towards 'moksha' – a state of absolute bliss free from the fetters of bodily desire or earthly gain. He abstains from sex. He has cut all ties with his family and his former life.

He is looking for a shortcut to paradise. As is the sadhu with the knife through his arm.

And Amar Bharti, a senior shipping clerk in New Delhi with all the comfortable trappings of the Indian middle class who one day made a decision. He handed in his notice at the office, paid off the furniture, gave his car to his eldest son, and left his house, his wife and his grown children for ever. He had decided to devote the rest of his life to Shiva.

Three years on, feeling his spiritual quest was still weighed down

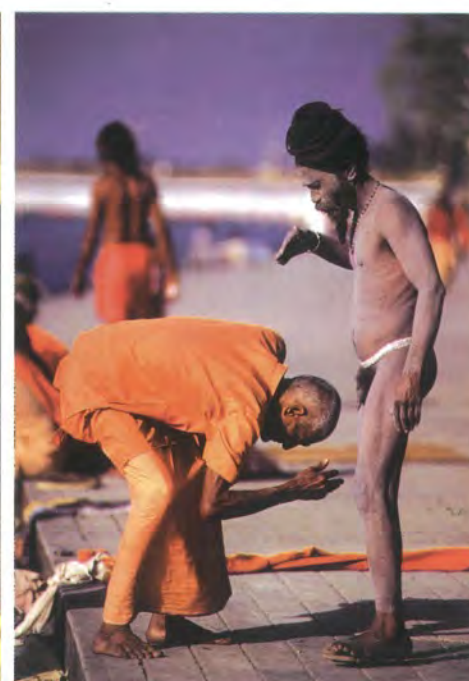
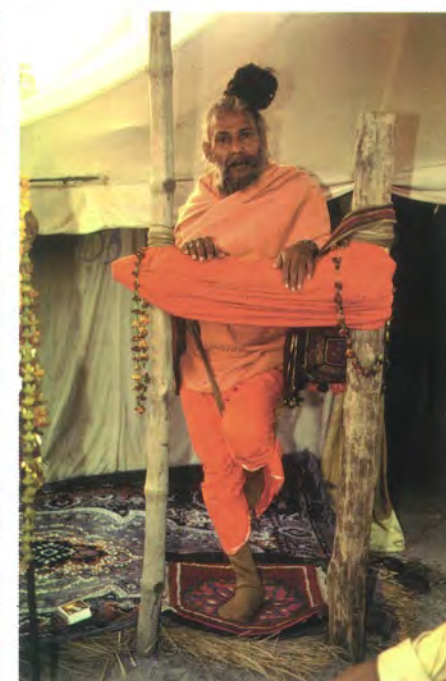


by earthly comforts, he decided to raise his arm vertically in the air. That was in 1973. His arm is still raised. It is now atrophied and the joints are locked. The translator says: "Baba ji says he felt like it".

Ram Krishna Das is a follower of Vishnu. A gentle man dressed all in white he has neither eaten nor drunk anything but milk for 28 years. He is known as the Milk Baba. Tracked down to his spartan cell in the hills of Nepal, he tells us simply "milk is all I need".

Sadhus, like India itself, present a contradictory face to the world. Some are pure in their quest for an eternal truth. Others are little more than beggars, con men or thugs. But whether saints or charlatans they represent an ancient and parallel reality.

When we look at them we see naked, filthy, long haired men perversely spurning five centuries of human progress. When they look back at us all he sees are hordes of inquisitive, pointless children.



School of Journalism

By James Eckardt, Cartoon by Koen Ollie

I have dragged some appalling human flotsam into the FCCT, including myself, but a great crest came during the boom years when an unruly horde of reformed Khao San roaders, suddenly bona fide journalists, descended upon the club.

Like me, they were in search of cheap beer and their crummy friends. Like me, they lived in the Peachy Flophouse.

In early May 1992, the horrible Hurley Scroggins introduced me to the Peachy Flophouse. It was love at first sight. This raffish, rambling, decrepit 80-year-old wooden manse was built around a beer garden on Banglampoo's Pra Arthit Road, now a famous strip of yuppie bars, then just mom-and-pop noodle shops.

After I'd passed my audition – I'd just become associate editor of Manager Magazine – my new mentor Hurley Scroggins led me down the street to the Peachy Flophouse.

Hurley came from a proud California hippie heritage – Ramblin' Jack Eliot was a family friend – and had made a living for years in freewheeling Amsterdam by selling, among other things, super-thin Swedish condoms to Dutch hookers. A refugee from nearby Khao San Road, he'd been a reporter at Manager for a year. He relished the perks of journalism.

At the Peachy Flophouse, Harley shared a room with an English girl named Sandra Gregory. Of Hurley, she wrote: "His Jack Nicholson looks took

my fancy." She wrote this ten years later in her book "Forget You Had a Daughter" which details her adventures in prison after she was popped at Don Muang Airport for having 89 grams of heroin secreted in a body cavity.

The three-storey Peachy dated back to the 1920s, erected by a palace clas-

For the next five years, the Peachy Flophouse was home. Every morning I reported for work down the street. At noon, our editorial crew would head to Khao San Road for lunch, breasting through the mad swirl of batik-clad freaks, incongruous in our short hair, white shirts and ties – the Mild Bunch!

After work, I'd stroll down the river for dinner and at night repair to the Peachy Flophouse beer garden.

Here my friends would be gathered, we band of brothers, we happy few. Thammasat teacher, Collin Piprell, had turned successful freelance writer and still lived around the corner. Evil David, an old friend from Songkhla, had recently left teaching for an advertising career. Also resident were five Thai-speaking Australian guys doing post-graduate studies at Thammasat, and four Canadian women doing the same at Chulalongkorn.

From 1992 to 1997, the beer garden became our Mermaid Tavern, the centre for an ever-shifting group of drifters, scholars, teachers and writers. There was a classical progression: a young backpacker decided to stay in Bangkok and

teach English and then observed the older journalists at our table – Piprell, Tsow, Scroggins, me – and thinks: "Those guys are a hell of a lot dumber than I am. Why can't I be a journalist too?"

So Aussie John MacDonald got work at *The Nation*, Helen and Paul

at the *Bangkok Post*, Canadian Dennis at *Phuket Magazine*, Catherine Gosse, Simon Hand and Marcus Brogden at *Siam Trade*, Sarah Kibble and half a dozen others at *Thailand Times*.

There was definitely a social chasm at the Peachy: residents occupied the second floor, transient freaks the third. The breach could be bridged, though. Picture a besotted Evil David gazing rapturously into the vapid blue orbs of a world-travelling bimbo in batik and saying, "Oh, you're a vegetarian! How interesting! And a Buddhist! Wow!"

On Friday nights, we'd slam a half dozen tables together and feast and swill beer and bring out the guitars and sing all night. The resident boys and girls of the Peachy were like a vastly enlarged cast of "Friends", in much shabbier surroundings.

The regulars also included the flophouse managers Nai and Chun; the Norfolk Broads, Sara and Sara, and their Thai husbands Pete and Chattri; the Witch's Coven led by Helen the Barmaid from Sheffield who was study-

ing Thai massage at Wat Po. At the climax of our Friday night revels, Evil David and Aussie Paul would improvise comic duets: one moment they were Dr Frankenstein and Igor, the next Brother David and Brother Paul of the Peachy Sacred Heart Love Chapel Redemption Mission just a-preaching and a-teaching and a-saving all them fallen women.

We laughed, we howled, we wept, we gagged, we fell off chairs and pounded tables and knocked over beer bottles.

At 11, the maids would pull down the portcullis by the bar and turn in for the night. This blocked our entrance to the ground floor bathroom whose whitewashed cement walls above the two urinals were marked by twin black Xs from years of criss-crossed sweaty forearms. In lieu of the urinals, we each adopted a particular potted sapling, whose comparative growth was much argued about. ("My tree's growing taller than yours." "But mine's fatter. It's prospering!")

In its heyday, the Peachy housed nearly a score of journalists, their work appearing in the English-language newspapers, airline magazines, *Thailand Traveller*, *Siam Trade*, *Living in Thailand*, *Metro*, *Manager*.

And suddenly it was over. The Great Crash of 1997 threw nearly everyone out of work. The tribe disappeared back to Britain, Australia, Canada, the US.

People still come back to the Peachy for sentimental journeys but, though you can always go back to the place, the time is gone, the old mad crowd long scattered.

The Peachy too has moved on. There's an Internet room and a big cable TV. The beer garden is gone. In its place is a thatched-roof restaurant that actually serves good food.

But I found, to my horror, that the bathroom has been repainted an effete beige, obliterating forever the black Xs planted by a generation of hard-working journalistic elbows.



Suharto's Feet

By Richard S. Ehrlich

Former President Suharto, safe from prosecution for allegedly embezzling millions of dollars during his 32-year, U.S.-backed rule, has decided to give something away for free.

Shrouded in secrecy and officially suffering "dementia", the ex-dictator agreed to provide a sample of his footprints, to be enshrined alongside the undersole impressions of other Indonesian presidents and officials in a downtown Jakarta display.

Local media compared the political walkway to the showcasing of famous actors' handprints set in cement on Hollywood Boulevard in California. Above the ankles, Mr. Suharto has remained mostly unseen by the outside world.

Below his ankles, however, Mr.

Suharto possessed something the Indonesian government craved so much that several officials pilgrimaged to his Jakarta house on a recent hot, smoggy morning, hoping the disgraced leader would comply.

Mr. Suharto, 82, is widely hated for allowing his adult children and other relatives and friends to grow spectacularly wealthy while he manipulated U.S. aid, the domestic economy, a Byzantine system of "contributions" and other lucrative income.

Unwilling to put him on trial after he was diagnosed as mentally unstable, the government is now happy to play footsie with Mr. Suharto instead.

"He is old, but he looks very fresh," Jakarta Governor Sutiyoso told reporters upon emerging from Mr. Suharto's home on leafy Cendana Street, accompanied by two workers who took an

imprint of Mr. Suharto's feet.

Governor Sutiyoso was reluctant to discuss Mr. Suharto's mental condition and said his visit was simply to get the former president's footprints.

The prints will soon be permanently installed in pavement at the edge of Jakarta's revered Freedom Square – which is also adorned by founding president Sukarno's "Last Erection", the gold-flamed National Monument.

But while Suharto may still have his feet on the ground, this Southeast Asian nation "seems to be adrift with uncertainty, and the national leadership is beset by internal squabbling among a political elite that blatantly displays its greed," notes the Jakarta Post.

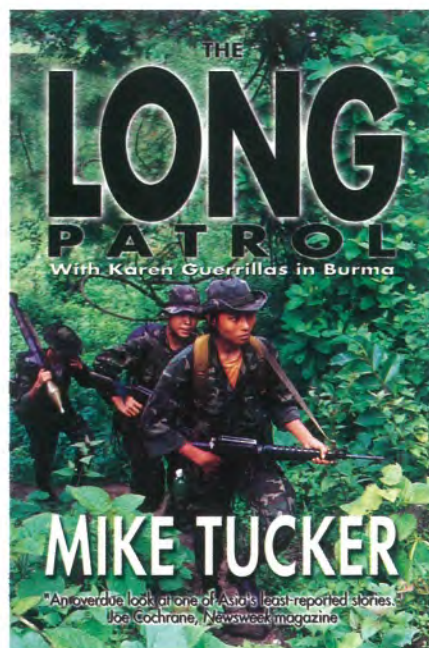
Behind Burmese Lines

Asia Books editor for New Arrivals, Greg Lowe, talks to author Mike Tucker about his clandestine manoeuvres across the border.

In *The Long Patrol* the ex-US Marine-cum-writer goes behind enemy lines through the jungles of east Burma with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Throughout these two weeks he documents aspects of the KNLA's continued struggle against Burma's Orwellian-named junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Tucker's writing and photography provide a snapshot of the reality of everyday life for the Karen as they endure a low-intensity war waged against them for the best part of five decades. The fact that they continue to fight for autonomy and self-determination only serves to bolster Tucker's admiration for them.

"The Karen are a bold and defiant people who refuse to submit to the jackboot of the Burmese dictatorship; people who stand up to tyrants always inspire me. Their culture stresses respect for freedom, dignity and courage, if



they didn't believe so strongly in courage, all the other virtues would be meaningless," Tucker said from a remote location in northern Iraq where he is reporting on the Kurdish Peshmurga guerrillas.

He recounts his nerve-wracking experience on patrol with the Karen: "We were on the mountain for three days, waiting, not knowing if the Burmese Army was going to lay siege to us with two battalions. But our scouts were better than the Burmese Army's, and at the end of the patrol, we realised that the Burmese Army had no idea where we'd escaped to.

"But on the mountain, when we had no idea where they were, it was maddeningly frustrating. We prayed a lot, listened to Lance Corporal Jaisureyea sing the blues in Karen and play a mean acoustic guitar, and when we finally got the order to move out, my God we were merry.

"What really sticks in my gut is that the Karen guerrilla fighters did just about everything dead-solid right, tactically and strategically, and of course,

saved my life. I wake up every day now realising that the Burmese Army could very well have closed on us and massacred us. They didn't and that is due to the professionalism of the KNLA."

When Tucker was a marine serving in Okinawa, two of his comrades were Laotian. Fascinated by their families' exodus from Laos to America, he swore to write their story. But when the Laotian relatives withdrew their support through fears of government reprisals, Tucker headed to northern Thailand where, in 1992, he first made contact with the Karen.

The end result is *The Long Patrol*, a compelling read, and useful for anyone interested in crossing the border clandestinely to take a closer look.

The book maintains a good pace, although Tucker's efforts falter at some points. His book is a little too short, and could do with more background on the Karen struggle.

Tucker should also have more actively reassured the reader he is not simply reporting Karen propaganda. While there is no reason to doubt the testimonies, at times he should have done something to make this more clear.

He does at least highlight the fact that both the SPDC and the KNLA use landmines, and that the KNLA and the KNU consistently avoid addressing the issue.

Finally, Tucker's years as a Marine come through in the text. He was and still is a military man. *The Long Patrol* demonstrates his knowledge of munitions, tactics and strategy, which gives the book an extra edge.

The Long Patrol: With Karen Guerrillas in Burma by Mike Tucker (Asia Books), price 385 baht.



Mike Tucker, the author



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