

# CONFIDENTIAL

MBK-0011

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director, FBIS

7 April 1981

THROUGH : Chief, Operations Group

SUBJECT : Monthly Report - Bangkok Bureau - March 1981

## I. GENERAL

Although April Fool's Day overshadowed the developments of the month, March had sufficient excitement on its own. The "telex crisis" in late February carried with it not only confusion but the first real trouble for Gen Prem Tinsulanon's government. The controversy and squabbling within the government over who had the right to telex authority to Industry Minister Chatchai to sign an oil deal with Saudi Arabia brought charges and countercharges from and among government and party leaders. Amid numerous rumors of military unrest, coup planning and ministerial resignations, Prem announced on 2 March that a cabinet reshuffle was necessary. This prompted mass resignations of first the Democrat Party ministers and then Social Action Party ministers and officials. After what many people felt was too long a delay, Prem appointed a new cabinet on 11 March, but the inclusion of many "technocrats" and several controversial personages, particularly Maj Gen Sutsai Hatsadin, only served to cause additional discontent and disappointment among the military and politicians and to stir the emotions of the students.

Political problems and pressures were rudely pushed into the background on 28 March when a hijacked Indonesian plane landed in Bangkok. A dramatic end to three days of tension came early in the morning of the 31st with the successful storming of the plane and rescue mission.

Almost exactly 24 hours later--ironically, while Prem was receiving due credit from Thai and foreign leaders alike for his decisive and successful operation against the hijackers--his resignation as prime minister and commander in chief was announced by Gen San Chitpatima, the leader of the April Fool's Day coup.

The bureau was alerted to the "possible coup" via an early morning (0430) phone call to the bureau chief from [redacted] After making several phone calls to round up a skeleton crew and to activate Bang Ping, the bureau was opened at 0500 local. Thai monitor [redacted] [redacted] who had alertly started recording Thai radio after being

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# CONFIDENTIAL

**CONFIDENTIAL**

- 2 -

MBK-0011

awakened, arrived at the bureau within minutes after the bureau chief and quickly dispelled nagging fears on the chief's part that he had been the victim of a well executed April Fool's joke by announcing: "It is a coup; I've got it recorded." The initial flash fyi and several short announcements were translated and edited quickly but had to await the teletypist's arrival. Even though we didn't "catch it live," the bureau's initial fyi on the coup beat [redacted] by 29 minutes and was sent several minutes ahead of the sign-off time of the Wire editor's NIACT alert, which was received more than an hour after the bureau opened. Within an hour of opening, the bureau was fully manned and abreast of the rapidly developing situation. 25

Although there have been approximately six (depending on whose scorecard you read) coups or coupt attempts in Thailand within the past 10 years, this one surprised all the local experts. It also caught the Embassy and bureau at an awkward moment--during the school spring break when many Mission families were on holiday out of the city and during the summer school break for the Thai. Fortunately, the bureau had all its employees and families accounted for by noon the second day of the coup. Rumors and scares to the contrary, no bureau employees experienced any security or traffic problems.

The manpower drain on the staff was heavy owing to the 91 consecutive hours of operation, but it was especially heavy for the monitorial operation. Unlike previous coups, both military factions had separate radio networks, which were joined by a third (Free Radio Group) during the second day. This "open watch" duty on three separate radios forced the bureau to draft Thai-language monitors from the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese sections.

Not surprisingly, the bureau served also as an information desk to other concerned elements of the Mission. Requests for confirmation of reports or rumors heard by [redacted] Embassy personnel were combined with requests for visual observations of military activity from our choice "eagle's nest" location. Spotting armored vehicles in Lumpini Park adjacent to the bureau and watching military aircraft over the city added extra excitement to that generated from regular monitoring activities. 25

An anticipated curfew prompted panic buying by locals and "farangs" alike, with traffic-stopping queues observed at most gasoline stations and food stores. Contingency planning at the bureau included a collection of "temporary" beds for possible use during curfew hours. At the Ambassador's instructions, all "non-essential" employees were sent home around noon the first day of the coup and remained there for its duration. As part of the Embassy's emergency security preparations, hourly headcounts were taken on staffers on duty at the Mission. Most employees visibly enjoyed the hectic experience, but all also were relieved when the threat of civil war ceased and the "known quantity" regained power. With no curfew or other public restrictions declared, the city regained its normalcy almost immediately and within six hours after the coup had failed, it was next to impossible to observe any indication that the city had just changed from one military leadership to another and back again.

**CONFIDENTIAL**

**CONFIDENTIAL**

- 3 -

MBK-0011

**II. OPERATIONS****A. Editorial/Monitorial**

1. The "radio war," as the recent unsuccessful military coup in Thailand was most appropriately labelled by the local press, was tailor-made for FBIS in that the most accurate way one could determine which side was winning was by keeping a box score of who controlled which radios throughout the country. Many claims of support from various military groups and regions by the coup leaders were often rapidly disproved by determining whether the corresponding military radio stations were relaying Bangkok Domestic Service controlled by the coupists or the Prem-controlled military radio in Nakhon Ratchasima. Cruiser [redacted] and associate editor [redacted] along with the editors, wirefiled some 29 radio behavior reports over the 3-day period in order to supply consumers with a current tally.

It was obvious from the beginning that the Revolutionary Party's so-called "control" of Bangkok was not complete as it had continuing problems controlling local radio stations and the press. As the Prem forces organized and it became known he had not resigned but enjoyed the support of the royal family, more and more radios began relaying the Nakhon Ratchasima broadcasts. On the third day, the end of the coup became obvious as soon as cruising verified that all Bangkok stations were in parallel with Prem's station.

2. As dress rehearsals in handling the 1 April crisis, two hijackings occurred in the bureau's coverage area: the 3 March hijacking of the Pakistani airliner to Kabul and then Damascus; and the 28 March hijacking of the Indonesian airliner to Bangkok which immediately preceded the coup. Between these two events, the Cambodian monitors stretched their production capabilities to the maximum in processing the 8,000-word draft PRK Constitution and the 4,000-word KPRC decree on elections to the PRK National Assembly. These events made for a very hectic month for bureau personnel, whose combined hours of overtime is expected to approach the 200-hour mark. Excluding production prompted by the coup, which will be reported in the April monthly report, production figures jumped from a total of 670,960 in February to 814,910 in March.

3. Split coverage with Gulf Bureau of late night Karachi radio broadcasts to assist our undermanned South Asian Unit worked well during the 1-4 April period when one of our monitors was on EOT leave. Earlier, on 25 March, Gulf was called upon to process a lengthy priority item from its backstop recording of Karachi English due to deteriorating reception at Bangkok.

**B. Cruising**

Associate editor [redacted] and cruiser [redacted] conducted a cruising survey in Songkhla, southern Thailand, 2-6 March of Indonesian regional and other area stations to compare reception with that at Bang Ping.

**CONFIDENTIAL**

**CONFIDENTIAL**

- 4 -

MBK-0011

Although disappointing, the reception ratings did prove that Songkhla was not a viable alternative to Bang Ping for coverage of Indonesian or other area stations. In many cases, particularly with the Indonesian stations, reception was worse than at Bang Ping. Survey results will be pouched to FCS in the near future.

### C. Lateral Services

1. The bureau received a much appreciated kudo from Amemb Vientiane on 11 March contained in Airgram A-009 addressed to the Department of State and info'ed to a number of major U.S. missions abroad. Subject of the Airgram was the "8th Resolution" of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) embodied in the lengthy speech delivered to the Supreme People's Council by LPRP General Secretary Kaysone Phomvihon on 6 January. To quote from the Airgram: "...the English text done by FBIS Bangkok is the first non-Lao version to emerge, and so far the only one. This year it ran to about 30,000 words and became available in completed form in mid-February. We would like to observe, with a deep bow of appreciation to the FBIS staff in Bangkok, that their very polished translation is of great usefulness, not only to this Embassy, but to many of the other foreign mission staffs here...."

2. Early in the month, the bureau completed a second Thai language-taping project on behalf of DDO/NEA/Language School (first project was done last November). A total of 20 video tapes--comprising news programs, documentaries, Thai dramas, sports events, movies, and interviews with Thai officials--and another 20 audio tapes were turned over to the Station for pouching back to Headquarters. The tapes were supplied by the requester.

3. Kudos in several forms were received from the Embassy Political Section and the Station during and after the April Fool's Day coup. A message of appreciation from Director, FBIS received during the coup served to buoy spirits at a very critical time.

## III. ADMINISTRATION

### A. Personnel

1. A suitable candidate to fill the vacancy in the South Asian Unit was identified early in the month and accepted a job offer with a starting salary of FSN 7/10. A background investigation has been requested from the Regional Security Office which, hopefully, will be completed within a couple of months.

2. Following an impressive and exhausting series of farewell dinners and parties, editor [redacted] departed Bangkok PCS on 6 March for an assignment in Headquarters.

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**CONFIDENTIAL**

**CONFIDENTIAL**

- 5 -

MBK-0011

**B. Other**

1. Upon receipt of State Department authorization to include the bureau's TCN's in the Embassy housing program, the bureau officially joined the newly formed housing pool on 24 March. Under its general policy, arriving Mission employees are assigned housing based primarily on family size and availability of housing. It is a phased program, the goal of which is to have all Mission staff and TCN employees in Government-leased housing by 1984. The two next arriving bureau staffers (both August) have already been assigned housing.

2. Bureau management and PRA employees were pleased to learn of the recent revision of documentary requirements for returning PRA's that eliminates the need of most PRA's to travel to the States every two years for visa redocumentation. Five bureau PRA's will benefit from the revision, while the other five, all of whom are "stateless," must continue redocumentation travel in order to retain Thai residency authorization.

While the above was evolving, the bureau received surprising news on 4 March that the Thai Foreign Ministry had routinely approved the issuance of non-immigrant visas to three of our "stateless" Vietnamese PRA's and their families and promptly had so notified the Thai Embassy in Washington. This will allow [redacted] to complete their redocumentation travel at the most opportune time--during school vacation and at the very end of their current visa extension periods. The bureau deliberately had forwarded the visa issuance requests well in advance to counter anticipated bureaucratic stalling on the part of Thai officialdom, which is not noted for its pro-Vietnamese attitude.

**IV. VISITS**

On 4 March, visiting NFAC Indochinese analyst [redacted] visited the bureau in the company of Station NFAC representative [redacted]. Both visitors had an extensive exchange with the chief and deputy chief, the editorial staff and with several monitors.

[redacted]  
Chief, Bangkok Bureau, FBIS

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**Attachments:**

Engineering  
Production Report  
Production Report by Language, Country & Source  
Embassy Circuit Outage Report

**Distribution:**

C/Okinawa Bureau

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