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DIRECTORATE OF
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Intelligence Report

Thailand's Khmer Minority

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CIA/BGI GR 71-2
September 1970

OCMH, S C No. 571

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
September 1970

INTELLIGENCE REPORT

Thailand's Khmer Minority

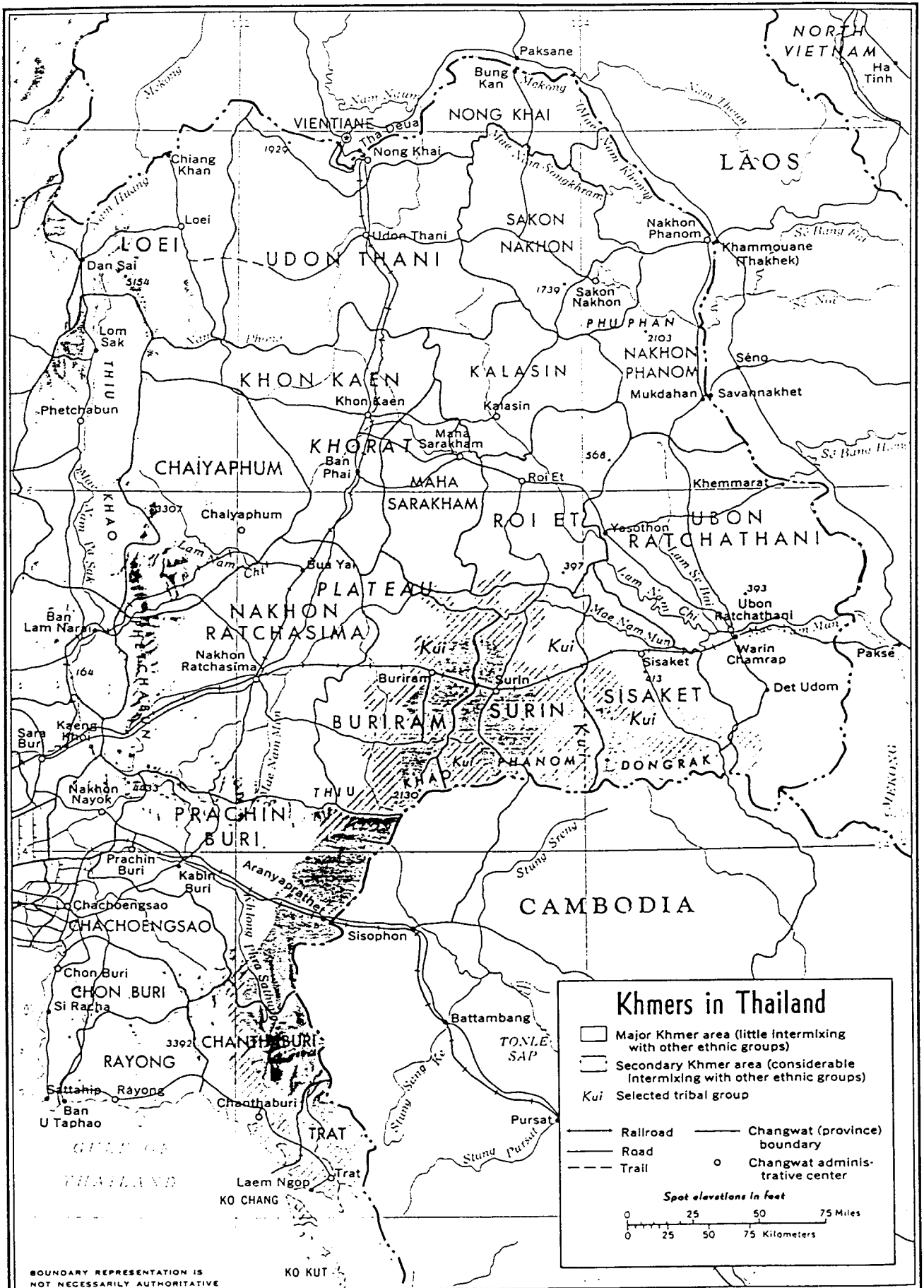
Introduction

Royal Thai Army training of Thai-Khmer recruits for possible service in support of the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia has focused attention on a relatively large but little known minority that occupies much of Thailand's frontier with Cambodia.* There are indications, moreover, that the Thai Government is growing increasingly concerned about the ability of this traditionally peaceful and apolitical minority to withstand propaganda emanating from Communist elements in Northeast Thailand or from across the border in Cambodia. This report presents a brief description of the Thai-Khmer community.

Note: This report was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Basic and Geographic Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence.

* Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman, in an interview with the Bangkok World on 9 September 1970, revealed that the Thai Government had, for the time being, decided against sending any Thai troops -- including Thai-Khmers -- into Cambodia.

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Numbers and Location

1. Although estimates of the Thai-Khmer population appearing in various US intelligence reports during the past 10 years range widely, from a low of 160,000 to a high of 600,000 persons, a realistic approximation would appear to lie between 600,000 and 800,000. According to an American missionary who surveyed the population in Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket in 1963-64, there were then more than 600,000 Khmers in these provinces alone. Most of the Khmers live in Ubon Ratchathani, Sisaket, Surin, Buriram, Prachinburi, Chanthaburi, and Trat Provinces, which collectively form a territorial arc along the full length of the Thailand-Cambodia border. Khmers reportedly comprise a majority of the population of Buriram and Surin Provinces,* and between one-fourth and one-third of the population of Sisaket. No information is available to indicate the percentage of Khmers in the other provinces involved, where their numbers are considerably fewer. Total provincial population, according to the 1960 Thailand census, is as follows (the census does not provide a breakdown by ethnic group):

Border Province Population

<u>Province</u>	<u>Population</u>
Ubon Ratchathani	1,130,712
Sisaket	601,356
Surin	581,732
Buriram	583,585
Prachinburi	334,895
Chanthaburi	157,803
Trat	66,328
Total	<u>3,456,411</u>

2. Most Khmer villages lie well away from the generally rugged terrain of the border and are concentrated along the railroad in Buriram, Surin, and

* The provincial capital of Surin is essentially a Khmer city.

Sisaket. The border belt of territory lying south of the railroad in these provinces and extending some 20 miles to the west of the border in Prachinburi, Chanthaburi, and Trat Provinces is more "purely" Khmer -- even though it is more sparsely populated and contains numerically fewer Khmers -- than the areas farther toward the interior (see Map 78820).

3. Small Khmer communities are also scattered outside the border provinces -- in Northeast Thailand as far north as Loei and in the central lowland within and around the cities of Bangkok, Rat Buri, Kanchanaburi, Chachoengsao, and Chon Buri. The lowland communities are reported to be comprised of the descendents of resettled Khmer prisoners-of-war. They were moved to specified settlements during World War II by the Royal Thai Government (RTG), which gave them land in return for their pledge to perform certain services, including military duty.

4. Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani Provinces are situated on the Khorat Plateau of Northeast Thailand, their southern boundaries alined along the Dangrek Ridge (Thiu Khao Phanom Dongrak). This ridge rises relatively gently from Thai territory on the north but drops precipitously some 600 to 1,800 feet to Cambodian territory on the south. It is a barrier to the development of surface transportation between the two countries; no all-weather road crosses it.* Prachinburi occupies a natural lowland corridor between Thailand and Cambodia. It is crossed by a railroad and an all-weather road, both of which link the two countries.** Chanthaburi and Trat occupy Thailand's isolated southeastern salient, which is cut off from Cambodia by the rugged, heavily forested, and lightly peopled Cardamomes Mountains.

* The Khmers of the Khorat Plateau call their ethnic cousins across the border "Khmer tam" (lower Cambodians) while the latter refer to the Thai-Khmers on the Khorat Plateau as either "Khmer dong" or "Khmer doi", meaning wild or mountain Cambodian.

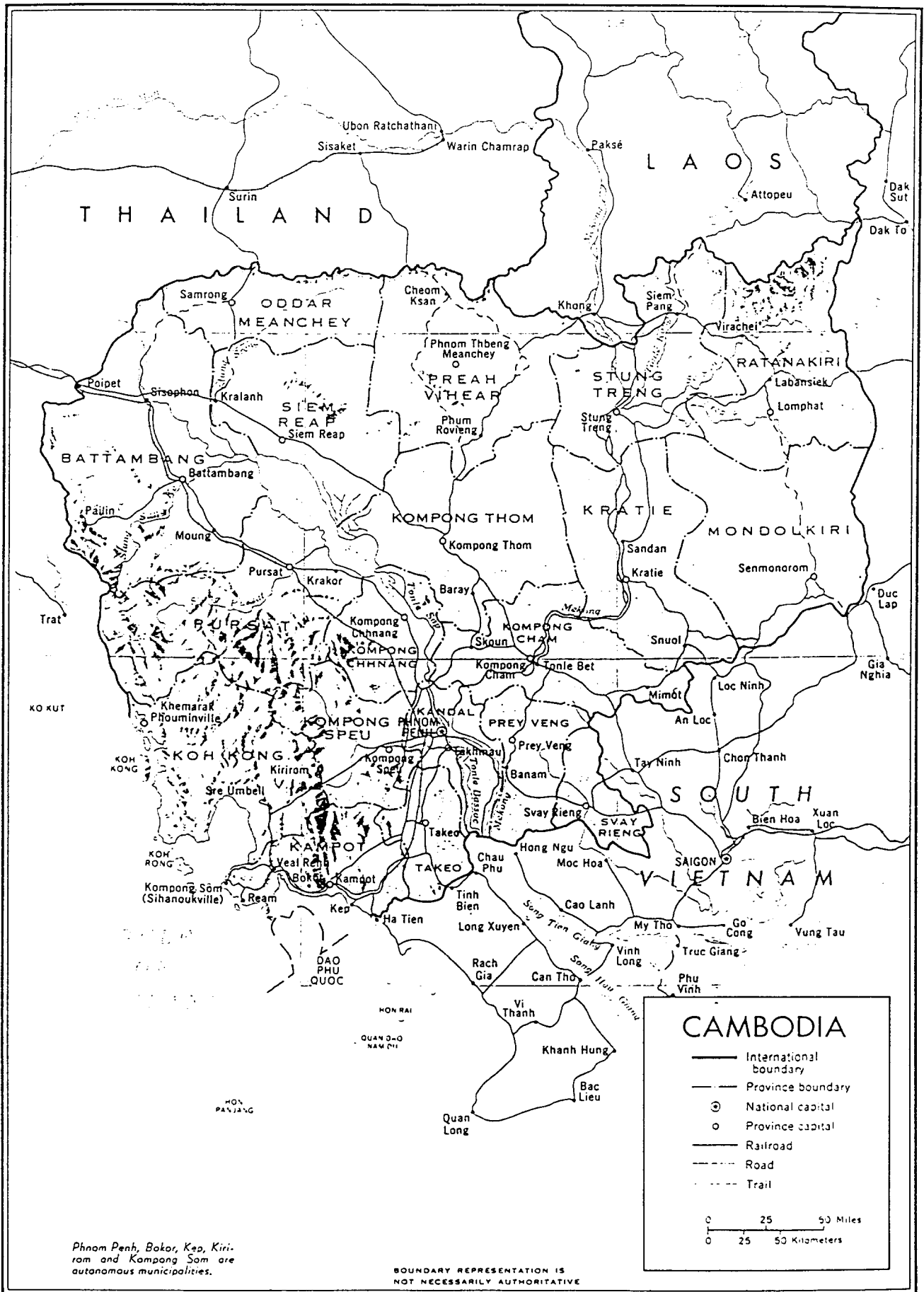
** The rail link has been restored in 1970, after having been closed during the 9 years that Thailand-Cambodian diplomatic relations were severed.

5. The Thai-Khmers occupy territory that was controlled centuries ago by their Khmer ancestors, whose empire was for several hundred years the dominant power in much of Southeast Asia. The Khmer Empire, which flourished from the ninth until the 13th centuries A.D., encompassed territory in much of present-day Thailand and as far westward as Burma's Tenasserim Coast. From the 13th century onward, however, Khmer power waned, and the borders of the Khmer lands succumbed to the onslaught of the increasingly powerful Siamese. By the early 19th century, Siam (now Thailand) had pushed the Khmers southward beyond the edge of the Dangrek Ridge and well to the east of the present boundary. Siam retained much of present-day Battambang and Siem Reap Provinces in western Cambodia (see Map 77970) until the early 20th century when they became a part of French Indo China. (She regained them temporarily, with Japanese assistance, during World War II.) Although their Thai territory has been lost for some time, the Khmers have remained in Thailand where they have been for many generations an impoverished but peaceful minority.

6. Few Thai-Khmers were born in Cambodia; according to the 1960 Thailand census, they totaled 4,494 persons, many of whom may have emigrated from Cambodia to escape the unsettled conditions after World War II. Others have fled recently to escape the current imbroglio in Cambodia. According to RTG border officials, more than 1,200 persons (excluding Government officials and troops, tourists, and villagers living in the border area) moved from Cambodia into the Thai border provinces -- principally Surin, Sisaket, and Trat -- during the first 6 months of 1970; about two-thirds of them were Cambodian citizens and one-third Thai citizens, the latter apparently returning to Thailand after unsuccessful attempts to resettle in Cambodia prior to the Sihanouk coup. The RTG reportedly expects to quickly repatriate the Cambodian refugees.

Cultural Factors

7. There is little to distinguish the Khmers physically from their Thai neighbors. They are



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about the same height and have generally similar facial traits; only the slightly darker complexion of the Khmers is distinctive. Nor is there much to set them apart culturally. Both espouse Theravada Buddhism and their passive life styles reflect that faith.*

8. The extent of assimilation into Thai culture varies geographically; it is least in the relatively "pure" Khmer areas near the border, where the Khmer cling to close-knit communities, and is greatest in the enclaves of the Northeast and the central lowland, well away from the Khmer strongholds. Many of the Khmers living in such small, scattered enclave communities surrounded by Thais probably retain only a trace of their Khmer identity.

9. Language is the major distinguishing cultural feature. The Khmer language is spoken almost exclusively within the family and in the local community, although most Thai-Khmers -- particularly the men and residents of the provincial capitals -- have learned Thai and use it as a second language. Young Thai-Khmers, who are generally getting a better education than did their elders, are likely to be more fluent in the Thai tongue.

10. The RTG has used education as a vehicle to enhance the assimilation of the country's minorities, including the Khmer, and literacy in the Thai language has been emphasized. Educational facilities in the Khmer strongholds are still not good, however, and few Thai-Khmers receive more than a 4-year education. A recent literacy study

* An estimated 100,000 to 150,000 Kui people (called Soai by the Thai) are scattered among the Khmers and Thais in Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket Provinces (see Map 78820) as well as across the borders in northern Cambodia and southwestern Laos. Additional numbers retain only a trace of their Kui identity, having been assimilated into either Khmer or Thai society (one or the other, depending on proximity). Although the Kui language remains distinct, the people are otherwise closely related to the Khmers and, like them, inhabited this territory long before the arrival of the Siamese.

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in rural areas of the Northeast revealed that in those villages where Khmer was the spoken language, 78 percent of the people were either totally illiterate or could not comprehend the lowest-level Thai language materials.

11. The Thai-Khmers remain largely isolated and ignored by both the Thai and the Cambodian Governments. Like their Thai neighbors, the Thai-Khmer peasants are engrossed in eking out a living from farming the generally infertile soils of their homesteads. They have little interest in politics outside the village, and there are no well-developed political ties with either country. Terrain barriers, such as the Dangrek Ridge and the Cardamomes Mountains, and the cross-border language differences discourage the development of political attachments with Phnom Penh.* After World War II, some Thai-Khmers sought the re-creation of a natural Khmer state through the annexation of the Thai border provinces to Cambodia. Otherwise, there has been little manifestation of Thai-Khmer desire to belong to a greater Khmer community.

12. An ambivalent attitude toward the RTG prevails among the Thai-Khmers. Most avow at least a nominal loyalty to the King and Queen, whose pictures may be found on the walls of many homes; nevertheless, the Thai-Khmers may talk about Bangkok as if it were in a foreign country. The communications gap between Bangkok and the Thai-Khmer country has been widened by a paucity of newspapers and radios. Broadcasts from Bangkok, moreover, are in a Thai dialect alien to Khmer ears.

13. RTG policy toward the Khmer minority may best be described as indifferent, particularly when compared to its efforts to accommodate the hill tribe minorities of northern Thailand. But, unlike the northern uplanders -- or the Vietnamese of the Northeast -- the Khmers are an unusually stable

* Phnom Penh radio broadcasts reach into Thai territory. The Khmer dialect spoken in Thailand, however, is distinct from that of Phnom Penh, and Thai-Khmers reportedly have difficulty comprehending Cambodian-Khmer broadcasters.

minority. Although some Communist propaganda has been disseminated among them and there are a few Communist-activated students, little else indicates that the Thai-Khmers are a disruptive element. An undercurrent of antipathy is directed toward most Thais, however, and RTG officials, in rare visits to Khmer villages, are likely to be coolly received. Few such officials speak Khmer, a disability that causes confidence in the RTG to be weakened. Even Thai schoolteachers serving the Khmers are reported to suffer from a language handicap. Much of the RTG presence in the Khmer-settled lands, moreover, is related to military operations of the Royal Thai Army or the Border Patrol Police, and the Khmers undoubtedly are doubly suspicious of uniformed personnel. Educated Khmers must surely relate the poverty of their people to discriminatory policies of the RTG.

14. Although most Thai-Khmers are sedentary and content to remain in their villages year round, many of the men seek employment outside the village during the dry season. Most of them join their Thai neighbors from the Northeast in mass migrations to provincial capitals, to Bangkok, or to other large cities, where they seek employment as day laborers or pedicab drivers.* The communities of Khmer itinerants in these cities tend to be close-knit. Some Thai-Khmers living close to the border reportedly migrate to Cambodia, returning to their families with the onset of the monsoon rains in late May or early June to work in the ricefields. There is, moreover, a "floating" Khmer element in the border area, comprised of oxcart drivers who transport dried fish from the Tonle Sap into Thailand in exchange for such commodities as home-woven textiles and salt. Villagers in the border area apparently cross the border freely.

Military Experience

15. The Thai-Khmers, as a group, have no strong military proclivities. Their history is

* An increasing number of better educated Thai-Khmer youths have been leaving their impoverished villages to establish permanent residence in the Thai cities.

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noteworthy for its peaceful -- although not necessarily friendly -- relations with their neighbors. Some, however, have served in the Royal Thai Army and others with the Khmer Serei (Free Cambodia) movement -- a Thai- and South Vietnam-based insurgent force whose objective was the overthrow of the Sihanouk Government.*

16. Thailand assisted the Khmer Serei during the late 1950's and throughout the 1960's by recruiting, training, and offering sanctuary to personnel. During the peak of its insurgent activities in the mid-1960's, the Khmer Serei maintained several bases in Prachinburi, Buriram, and Surin Provinces in Thailand, from which it conducted hit-and-run raids against Cambodian Army outposts in northwestern Cambodia. Although comprised mostly of Cambodian Khmers and Khmer Kroms (ethnic Khmers living in South Vietnam), the Khmer Serei reportedly recruited as many as several hundred Thai-Khmers. RTG military representatives, recruiting for the Khmer Serei in 1969, reportedly sought out Thai-Khmers who had lived in Cambodia. Recruiters often capitalized on grievances that were directed against officials in the Sihanouk Government. Perhaps a greater incentive to recruitment, however, was the fact that the Khmer Serei movement offered the Thai-Khmers cover for such illicit activities as cattle rustling or timber smuggling. This attraction may still motivate Thai-Khmer personnel to volunteer to fight against Communist forces in Cambodia.

17. Reports in late 1969 and early 1970 (before the Sihanouk coup) indicated that a number of Thai-Khmers, dissatisfied with conditions in Thailand (and often enticed by Cambodian Government recruiters), were fleeing to Cambodia to be resettled in Government-run camps in the provinces of

* Khmer Serei units in Thailand apparently have been disbanded; the founder and leader, Son Ngoc Thanh, a prominent figure in the struggle for Cambodian independence, has accepted a position as Counselor in the Lon Nol Government.

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Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vihear (see Map 77970). Reportedly, many refugees were recruited for Cambodian paramilitary training, apparently to form a counterforce to the Thailand-based Khmer Serei insurgents. Allegedly, trainees were told that the southern parts of the Thai provinces of Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani rightfully belonged to Cambodia; they were further informed that they would become part of a force fighting for the return of these lands. Many, however, disillusioned with conditions in the camps and the prospects of military life, returned to Thailand.

18. Cross-border ethnic ties would motivate few Thai-Khmers to fight in Cambodia. Recent immigrants into Thai territory, however, especially those with relatives still in Cambodia, would certainly be more inclined to aid fellow Khmers than would Thai-Khmers who are long established and without such ties. Fewer still would be motivated by political ideology. The promise of improved economic status would seem to be the inducement most likely to motivate impoverished Thai-Khmer peasants to volunteer for military service.

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