

Under Siege

Negative side of industrial growth

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MORE than half a million people braved the sun last Sunday to view the latest technology on show at the BOI Fair at Laem Chabang deepsea port.

But Laem Chabang villagers seemed largely unimpressed; even those who lived closest to the huge fair site were not among the jostling crowd.

This attitude reflects a desire for self-preservation rather than indifference. While the technology on display may have been impressive, the villagers were grappling with far more pressing concerns.

Their small village is slowly being encircled by high-technology factories mushrooming as part of the eastern seaboard development. The area is Thailand's biggest industrial area, taking in 13,215 square kilometres throughout the provinces of Chachoengsao, Chon Buri and Rayong. This project stems from the sixth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1987-91) with the official objective of accelerating the country's already-robust industrial growth.

In the past 10 years, heavy government promotion has succeeded in attracting both Thai and foreign investors to the eastern seaboard. The once-commercially negligible eastern long beach and rice fields are now prime commercial real estate.

In 1969, the government promulgated the Land Reclamation Act in Tambon Tungsukla in Chon Buri Province, causing village land to be surrendered to the government. The Port Authority of Thailand has the authority to expropriate land, as well as to relocate people. The much-touted slogan 'sacrifice for development' means simple villagers have no choice but to go when the government says so.

Locals whose families have been living in the area for more than 100 years are threatened with removal. State planners pinpointed Laem Chabang village as the centre of industrial expansion.

They will meet resistance.

'We won't move,' says Manote Kaosak, who depends on fishing for her living.

* *Bangkok Post, The Sunday Post March 5, 1995.*

"Our neighbours have been farming this lands for decades, but they had to move. All the farmers in our village had to move too so the estate could be built on the rice fields," she says.

"I hear they are financially hard up. In the first place, they did not receive much money for their land. To make it worse, the new place to which they were relocated is not good for growing rice.

"I don't want to face the same fate," says Manote, a mother of three.

"We fishermen were told that we must go too, but we have stood against the state order. As simple people, the place where we choose to live means our survival. This is a very good place for fishermen. We have fish aplenty, we can keep our boats safe from storms and the sea is deep enough to drop anchor. We don't want to leave," she says.



Laem Chabang village is one of the oldest Thai communities in the area, having been populated for more than a century, attested to by the old ordination hall built in the reign of King Rama V.

The Fine Arts Department plans to declare the hall an archaeological site.

Apart from being the main source of fishery products in Chon Buri province, Laem Chabang has fertile soil and is a major rice-producing area.

Although eviction is the biggest problem the villagers have faced so far, the invasion by modern technology has given fishermen other problems.

The proliferation of factories may sound like a paradise for workers but very few villagers work in them.

The villagers note marine life has decreased since the area became industrialised, although they have not directly blamed the factories around them.

They have to go further afield to fish and it takes longer to make a good catch.

"Sometimes, we see waste water from the factories going into the sea," Manote says, "Many creatures seem to have disappeared."

Kuey, a type of sea plankton used to make shrimp paste, has disappeared. Shrimp paste was once a big income-earner for the villagers but, with the disappearance of *kuey*, they have to turn to other products.

An environment management plan exists to cope with impact of massive industrialisation on the area's ecosystem but it seems that, like many other environmental projects, it will never see the light of day.

As a result of the environmental imbalance, Laem Chabang villagers and those in other villages have quit fishing and turned instead to squid and

crab. Others have gone into restaurant or dried seafood businesses.

"We face problems that come with changes. As in any beginning, it is hard, but we have to survive. We have to learn to accommodate these changes. We have to learn to be satisfied with this kind of life," a restaurant says.

After the rice farmers were moved out 10 years ago, the remaining 400 rai of land in the village was tentatively identified as the best location for a fishery settlement. After the transformation of the local scene into a cash economy, the beautiful cape drew city people in search of pristine holiday retreats.

But the villagers, are suspicious because the Port Authority has not said clearly what it wants to do with the land if it succeeds in relocating the villagers.

"We believe the Port Authority bought the land very cheaply and sold it to industrialists for a very high profit," Manote says. "We feel everybody gained money except us."

"I doubt the port officials will turn this into a factory as claimed. It will probably become a resort."

"We have sacrificed our land in the name of industrial development. Now, we barely have enough to build our homes on. We don't want to lose what little we have, whatever the reason they may give us."

"Despite all these problems we have to face, we are still proud that, in some little way, we have helped the Government in its efforts to improve our country's industry," Manote says.

As one mother says: "We were born here and have lived here all our life. We would rather die here than move out."

