

ments between two long-time major players. The formerly violent terrorist group that has brokered a deal with the antagonist—believing the peaceful way is the path to reaching objectives—often alienates a splinter group still committed to violence and guerrilla warfare to further the cause. Witness the activities of the military wing of Hamas, a Palestinian organization with followers both moderate and radical, in the months after the PLO and Israel signed a peace deal. Suicide bombing attacks were nothing if not increased: More than fifty have been killed and hundreds wounded on crowded commuter buses. The dissent is not relegated to one side; right-wing Jewish settlers have also vociferously—and violently—protested, the most deadly being the 1994 massacre of twenty-nine Muslims as they were praying at the Cave of Patriarchs in Hebron by settler Baruch Goldstein. The scenario engendered is that of former terrorist Yasser Arafat working in concert with Israeli leaders to try to rein in a group with whom he once was inextricably united with in the fight against Israel.

Suppression would seem to be the answer for a group newly partnered with the old enemy and handed a mandate to

clean house. The interest of the PLO—or the Moro National Liberation Front or the Irish Republican Army or Khun Sa—in remaining the top leader or at best advantage in the post-peace era is obvious. As such, cutting deals too with the third party may be the answer. Or else all parties risk cultivating the same separatist movement that will inevitably, someday, again cleave away at peace: The Al Faran is all but disavowed by the Kashmir Freedom Conference in Kashmir and the beheading of one of the five Western trekkers they kidnapped in the Himalayans is a drastic measure taken by an increasingly ignored group.

The only silver lining is that a consensus is emerging the world over that military options have to be somehow replaced by political solutions. But that is largely theoretical and it can apply, at best, to governments and political terrorists and not to those “pro-life” enthusiasts who spray bullets on doctors and patients at abortion clinics or to those self-appointed custodians of countless faiths who cannot secure their moral high ground without annihilating fellow humans. The world, perhaps, will have to learn to live with that kind of violence. ●

## SAFE HAVEN

*Thailand—knowingly or not—  
provided support of Ho Chi  
Minh's revolutionary activities  
against the French*

BY BERTIL LINTNER

A RUSTY SIGN in a glade in the forest north of Phichit in the heart of northern Thailand's central plains tells the visitor that he is entering public land. About seventy years ago, some homeless people wandered down from the North to settle here. Their descendants are still living in two small villages here, Ban Neun Samor and Ban Dong, and they are today Thai citizens. But this was not the case when they first arrived at Phichit: This is where Ho Chi Minh lived clandestinely for a few years in the late 1920s. Incongruous as it may seem, these tiny villages were once the secret headquarters of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement that struggled to drive the French out of Indochina.

Boakree Vilayphan is now eighty-seven, but recalls vividly the “tall and slim” gentleman who taught them that Vietnam should be independent from the French. Her husband Boontam Vilayphan, eighty-nine, still remembers some of the old slogans, which he writes down in Chinese characters on a piece of paper: “See, this is what Ho Chi Minh wrote on the blackboard in the school at the time. Freedom and patriotism.” Mr Boontam and Ms Boakree now have Thai names and are understandably shy to talk about the past. “We're good Thai citizens now,” they say.

They were in their late teens and early twenties when Ho arrived at Phichit in 1927. Ho had learned that some Vietnamese had moved to Phichit a few years before, and this seemed an ideal place for a revolutionary base. The Vietnamese communities in Udon Thani and other towns in Isaan, Thailand's Northeast, were heavily infiltrated by French agents, but no one would expect to find a nationalist stronghold near Phichit, then a sleepy market town on the banks of the Nan River. Udon Thani was a ten days' walk from Phichit through the forest and over the mountains north of Petchabun.

### THE TALKING CURE

KHUN SA'S apparent surrender at the beginning of this year makes him and his Mong Tai Army, which had been fighting for the independence of a Shan state, the latest high-profile insurgency group to have brokered a peace deal over the past few years. Other agreements, some still ongoing, include:

- The Moro National Liberation Front and the Philippine government. With a continuing dialogue beginning in 1975, what is still at issue is whether the government will allow the Muslim insurgent faction to set up an autonomous government in thirteen provinces and nine cities in the southern islands of Mindanao and Palawan. At the height of tensions in the 1970s, fifty thousand were killed.
- The PLO and Israel: The pact, signed in October 1993, aims to end generations of bloodshed by granting autonomy to Palestinians in the territories while affording Israel exacting security guarantees.
- The Irish Republican Army and Britain: Over the course of a twenty-four-year campaign to end British rule, seventeen hundred have been killed. With a ceasefire established in September 1994, and still holding, the sticking point now is getting the IRA and Sinn Fein to hand over hidden weapons. Sinn Fein has refused because to do so is seen as surrender on Britain's terms.
- Myanmar's State Law and Order Restoration Council and every ethnic group except the Karen: Khun Sa and his Mong Tai (Shan State) Army surrendered in January to SLORC with a guarantee that he and his troops would get amnesty. Other MTA top member have quit, however, after the deal. The Karen met with SLORC in late 1994 for a ceasefire, but are expecting increased military pressure from the government in the aftermath of Khun Sa's surrender. ●

The first Vietnamese settled at Ban Dong outside Phichit in the early 1920s as peasants and seasonal traders. Truong Van Trinh, now ninety-two, says that young revolutionary cadres traveled south from China and were joined by other Vietnamese who had trekked through Laos via Udon Thani to Phichit. They belonged to a group called Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi, or the Association of Young Revolutionary Comrades.

Ho—or Tin Thau or Thau Chin as he called himself at that time—brought new ideas to the Vietnamese community in Phichit. A communist cell of eight members was formed at Ban Dong to guide a broader front called the Thai An (Friendship) Association. There was also a Youth



THE VILAYPHANS: FORMER HO CHI MINH STUDENTS

Party for younger cadre such as Ms Boakree and Mr Boontam. A Vietnamese school was established at Ban Neun Samor and a printing press was installed.

“Ho Chi Minh wanted to organize the Vietnamese in Thailand against the French,” Mr Truong recalls. “He lectured us about Marxism-Leninism at the local school, but he stayed as a farmer in a house which belonged to one of the cell members called Ong Sau.”

Thailand had sizable Vietnamese communities already at this time, and it was among these exiles that Ho hoped to establish support for his struggle against the French. The first Vietnamese in Thailand had come in the early nineteenth century during fighting between Emperor Gia-Long, the founder of the Nguyen Dynasty, Vietnam’s last imperial family, and rival clans and families. More Vietnamese, mainly Roman Catholics, followed in the mid-nineteenth century when further unrest engulfed their homeland.

Most of them settled in Isaan in Chanthaburi on the eastern seaboard and in Samsen, then a village north of Bangkok and now a part of the sprawling city. A

Roman Catholic cathedral and several Catholic schools institutions in both areas are reminders of these days when Thailand received its first influx of Indochinese refugees.

According to Mr Truong, Ho succeeded in contacting several of the Vietnamese communities in Thailand and gaining support for his cause. The official biography *Our President Ho Chi Minh*, published in Hanoi in 1970, states that he “read newspapers and books to them and went away with a small bag on his shoulder like a traveling trader. He went to those places where Vietnamese nationals lived, to diffuse propaganda and to organize them.” Ms Boakree remembers him as “bright and quite handsome.”

To what extent the Thai authorities were aware of Ho’s activities remains, however, a matter of conjecture. Some Thai scholars have suggested that the Thais lent some clandestine support to Ho’s movement, in accordance with the Bangkok’s old foreign policy maxim of supporting the enemy’s enemy regardless of ideology. This has been the case in regard to Thailand’s relations until recently with several anti-Yangon minority groups along the Myanmar border and with the Communist Party of Malaya in the South—which proved useful in tracking down anti-Thai Muslim guerrillas in the same area—and also with the Khmer Rouge, which fought the Vietnamese in Cambodia in a way that suited Thailand’s security interests.

While conceding that Thailand was wary of the aggressive French colonial power in Indochina, Mr Truong disputes the suggestion that Ho received Thai support at this time. “The Thais were unaware of Ho’s presence in Thailand until he decided to send two of his men, Ong Sau and Ong Canh Tan, to China to bring back Marxist-Leninist literature to the communist cell in Ban Dong.”

Sau and Canh Tan were arrested in Bangkok, which was how the government learned about a secret Vietnamese communist group in Phichit. “This was during the days of the absolute monarchy, and the Thais were very afraid of any communist movement, even if it was fighting the French in Indochina,” Mr Truong says.

Sau and Canh Tan were expelled to France, and the Vietnamese at Phichit be-

lieved they had been betrayed by an infiltrator in their own group. He was identified as Cuong, the owner of the house where Ho Chi Minh had actually spent his first night at Ban Dong when he arrived there in 1927. Cuong was executed by the other Vietnamese at Phichit—and at this stage more news about Ho’s activities had reached the Thai authorities.

Ho slipped out of the country in late 1929 and made it to Hong Kong, where he formed the Indochinese Communist Party the following year. At Phichit, more than one hundred Vietnamese were arrested by the Thai police while others moved to Udon Thani, along with their files and printing press. Phichit never became the headquarters of the Vietnamese revolution. The school was handed over to the Thai authorities and on its site now stands a Buddhist temple.

The official Ho biography states that “the Siamese were good to the Vietnamese, but to avoid diplomatic difficulties they were forced to act.” In fact, most Vietnamese were allowed to remain in Thailand despite the crackdown in Phichit. But the Thais preferred to have them concentrated along the Lao border in Isaan rather than in the Thai heartland. Direct Thai support, including weapons, for the Vietnamese resistance did not materialize until 1946 and 1947, when the absolute monarchy had been abolished and Thailand was led by a liberal, left-leaning prime minister, Pridi Banomyong.

Pridi’s sympathy for the Vietnamese movement was no doubt politically motivated and may not represent a general Thai attitude towards Ho. But the fact that Ho was able to stay in Thailand, along with his followers, for several years reflects the general openness of Thai society, which has continued to attract political and religious émigrés from neighbouring countries, ranging from Lao and Myanmar rebels to leaders of Malaysian religious sects. This has often been misinterpreted as support for these groups, which has not always been the case.

The few hundred Vietnamese descendants who now live in Phichit are living proof of this flexibility and the ability of Thai society to absorb even very controversial outsiders. All of them are now Thai citizens, have Thai names, and apart from the stories told by the older generation there is nothing to indicate that this once was the secret hideout of one of Asia’s most famous revolutionaries. ●