

# Burma Threatens Thailand's stability: Bangkok Governor

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BANGKOK — Speaking at a dinner talk on Tuesday night, Bangkok Gov. M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra said that Thailand's already precarious stability faces additional pressure from its neighbor Burma.

Addressing a forum at the Bangkok Sheraton Grande Hotel, the Democrat Party deputy secretary-general and former deputy foreign minister said, "A major source of regional instability is the large standing army maintained by the Myanmar [Burmese] government."  
Bangkok governor M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra. (Source: Facebook)

He compared Thailand's 430,000-strong military with Burma's, which has been estimated at more than 500,000 and is thought to be the largest standing army in Southeast Asia.

Commenting on the Burmese junta's attempts to upgrade and expand its military, Paribatra said, "Myanmar [Burma] has been modernizing [its military] for a long time, and this could fuel a regional arms race."

Thailand spends less than 5 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, he said, while the military dictatorship in Naypyidaw is thought to allocate around one-third of the country's GDP to military spending.

Accurate figures for Burma's military spending are not available, but several organizations including the Soros Foundation believe that around 40 percent of Burma's GDP is spent on the military.

Thailand is about to start a military modernization program based on two five-year procurement and upgrade phases, according to Paribatra. Thailand's defense spending as a proportion of GDP has declined relative to the rest of southeast Asia in recent years.

The increasingly close relationship between the Burmese junta and the Communist regime in North Korea is also causing concern in Thailand. Both sides are collaborating on conventional military means and rumors circulate that Naypyidaw is seeking Pyongyang's assistance in developing some form of nuclear capability. North Korea itself tested nuclear weapons in early 2009.

Focusing on domestic Burmese politics, Paribatra said that the lack of national reconciliation in Burma would mean continued violence and instability, especially in the borderlands where ethnic minorities live. This would lead to more displacement, and, inevitably, Thailand would receive additional refugees coming in to the north. More than 130,000 Burmese refugees already live in camps along northern Thailand's border with Burma.

The Burmese junta's armed forces attacked the ethnic Kokang militia in northern Shan State close to the Chinese border in late August, causing 37,000 refugees to flee to China. It was suggested that this was a prelude to a wider assault on ethnic minority groups.

Militias representing the 17 "cease-fire groups" have been ordered to become border guard forces

that would be part of the junta state security apparatus. However, most have either refused or ignored the request, prompting speculation that the junta's growing and well-equipped forces will attack the recalcitrant ethnic militias before and possibly after the planned 2010 national elections.

Paribatra likened the internal displacement situation in Burma to that of Sudan's western Darfur region, where government forces and allied militias have carried out what the US believes to be genocide since early 2003.

Another source of concern for Thailand is the Burmese drug trade, he said. UN figures show Burma produced an estimated 410 tons of opium in 2008 (enough to make 40 tons of heroin), making the country the world's second-largest producer after Afghanistan, which accounts for 90 percent of world output. Burma is also a major source for methamphetamine, much of which is trafficked to Thailand from northern Shan State.

Despite the concerns, Thailand has an ambivalent relationship with Burma. Economists believe the Thai economy depends on cheap Burmese labor provided by an estimated 3 million Burmese migrants.

He said gas piped from the Shwe Field helps meet Thailand's electricity needs even though Burmese citizens frequently go without power, and this despite long-standing allegations that junta forces have perpetrated atrocities and human rights violations in the vicinity of the Yadana Pipeline, which carries the gas south to Thailand.

Thailand is also involved in a highly controversial project to build dams on the Salween River, less than 50 km from the Thai-Burma border-though this has been hit by recent fall-off in Thailand electricity needs. The drop in demand of 2,000 megawatts over the past year is more than the entire generating capacity in Burma.

He said Thailand's Burma policy appears contradictory and lacks a coherent overall strategy, according to observers, who suggest Burma's ruling military are siphoning off the revenues from Burma's natural resource exports for both personal use and to finance the same massive military budget that is now causing concern in Bangkok.

Similarly, many of the Burmese refugees and migrants in Thailand have been displaced by forced clearances and rights abuses carried out by junta forces.

On Nov. 23, a petition signed by 189 organizations was presented to Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva which outlined the potential impacts of the Salween project. It warned that while Thailand may benefit from greater electricity, it is also likely to face another influx of Burmese refugees escaping human rights abuses at the site of the Hatgyi dam in Karen State.

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