

Forests of Rubber?

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The government says it will stress reforestation by local residents as part of its new programme for the degraded forest areas. A fine idea: no self-serving companies need be involved, the farmers get to keep the land they have occupied, they plant trees to save the environment and don't have to bother with nasty eucalyptus if they don't want to. But a lot will have to change for this vision to materialise. As he looks over the draft of his Reforestation Bill the minister might reflect on the experiences of Mr Chaleum Khamthong and his neighbours in the hills of northern Chantaburi province, 200 kms east of Bangkok.

Mr Chaleum has a 40 rai farm in the Khun Song forest reserve. Thirty years ago his farm was primary forest. About 1960 loggers took out the best trees, and settlers from Rayong and Chonburi quickly moved in and cleared the rest. Chaleum's farm and most of the surrounding area became a huge cassava field, ploughed over and left open to the rain and wind once each year before being replanted. For kilometer after kilometer the landscape was dominated in the rainy season by swathes of dark green cassava stretching across rolling, almost-treeless hills to the horizon, and in the dry season by parched, exposed soil and pale green lalang grass.

To insist on calling this a forest reserve is a cruel joke. Not only are there few trees, there are roads, gas stations, cassava drying yards, villages, schools, post offices, police stations, reservoirs, anti-malaria spraying programmes, bridges built by the Accelerated Rural Development office, embryonic towns at road junctions, and the headquarters of the new Hang Maew sub-district.

So far this is a common story in Thailand, where the forest cover has declined from 53 percent of the area of the country in 1961 to 28 percent at present. An estimated one million farm families, around 5.5 million people or 20 percent of the total farming population, have their only homes in formerly forested areas which are still classified as "forest reserves". Like Chaleum, they are considered illegal squatters with at best tenuous rights to the land on which they depend for a living.

Chaleum though is different in one important respect. Soon his farm will again be a kind of



forest. In 1987 he planted rubber trees and the young saplings, five meters tall, about as thick as your arm and intercropped with pineapple in neat rows contrast starkly with the mix of bare soil and uncontrolled lalang on many of the nearby plots.

Chaleum planted his rubber within the framework of an EC-funded cassava-diversification project which is being implemented jointly through the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, coordinated by the Office of Agricultural Economics. The goal is to have about 4,800 local farmers plant 96,230 rai of rubber in formerly forested areas of Chantaburi and neighbouring Rayong provinces.

The project has had a noticeable effect on the local scene. Those sweeping vistas of cassava are gradually being broken up by stands of spindly rubber trees. Some are poorly done and will never give much production. Chaleum's plot stands out as an example to his neighbours. Visiting his farm suggests hope for a farmer-based approach to reforestation. But don't be fooled into thinking that getting this far has been easy, or that others will easily follow Chaleum's example.

The taming of Thailand's enormous forested frontier areas has been at best partially organised and often an extremely destructive process. From as early as the 1940s tracts of forest have been designated as *nikhoms* (settlements) in an attempt to contain the expansion of the farmed area, and put under the administration of one of several government



leaving large areas of soil exposed until a new crop can be established.

The EC project is based on a concept which is entirely consistent with the government's forestry policy and worked out in close coordination with the agencies concerned, but which is nevertheless quite distinct from what has been the main thrust of reforestation efforts to date. The idea is to stabilise the settlement pattern by encouraging not companies but local farmers to plant trees. There are two principal and related objectives in the forest reserve areas: to arrange for the RFD to issue documents to individual farmers,

thereby legitimizing them and qualifying them for the project; and to provide extension and financial support for those farmers to plant rubber trees in a technically and environmentally correct way.

Arranging for the land documents has been the main stumbling block. In recognition of the uncontrolled nature and vast scale of settlement in its forest reserve areas, the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) has since 1982 been empowered to issue cultivation-right certificates to squatters who met certain basic conditions. Certificates were issued initially for up to 15 rai per farmer, and procedures were agreed for extending this coverage to up to 50 rai.

Although in principle the steps involved in legitimizing squatters' claims are straightforward, in practice progress has been painfully slow. Part of the problem is that the regulations bear little relation to the present situation. Many farmers claim more than 50 rai of land. Documents already issued for many plots have been sold, and the RFD procedures do not allow for either recognizing the buyer or issuing new documents. Farmers must pay a fee for the process to be completed, and they resent having to pay for what they regard as their own land. Most important, the staff and funds of the RFD are spread thinly over the vast areas for which they are responsible, so it is difficult to muster the resources needed to deal comprehensively and finally with large areas of land.



agencies. The EC project includes three such *nikhoms*.

But invariably the migrants have been far ahead of the bureaucrats, resulting in large numbers of people being classed as illegal squatters with land tenure determined all too often by the threat of violence and at risk of summary eviction. As illegal squatters these people will not invest in their land because of their uncertain tenure and because they do not usually have access to legitimate, cheap credit like the loans offered by the BAAC. So they plant cassava, or let the land go wild.

The project area in Rayong and Chantaburi is a microcosm of the national problem. Large areas of the Tung Kwai Kin, Khun Song and Jantapae forest reserves are outside of the *nikhoms* but have been settled and almost treeless for 20 or 30 years.

The government has promoted reforestation by leasing areas of forest reserves to private companies for development as commercial plantations. The policy has had mixed results, and stories of abuses abound. Concessions have been extended into areas where the original forest still stood, with primary forest being cut to make way for commercial, fast-growing trees. And local people farming as illegal squatters in the concession areas have been bought out for paltry sums or summarily removed.

Critics also question the environmental impact of the commercial plantations. The plantations have in most cases been of eucalyptus which is fast-growing but has two principal disadvantages. Eucalyptus is highly efficient at drawing water from the soil, and can reduce the water available for neighbouring farmers' plots. And it is normally cut after five or six years, usually for chipboard manufacture, again

Chaleum's present situation illustrates some aspects of the problem. He bought his plot in 1974 and was covered by the RFD's 1982 survey, so he received a land certificate for 15 rai. He therefore qualified for the project, and planted 15 rai of rubber in 1987. This is the good rubber which visitors can see when they visit. He wanted to extend his rubber plantation to his remaining 25 rai which was not yet certified by the RFD. Eventually in 1989 the RFD surveyed about 200 plots in the area, including Chaleum's, with a view to issuing certificates and clearing the way into the EC project. Almost two years after the survey Chaleum and his neighbours are still waiting for their certificates.

In some ways, though, they are lucky. In the Khun Song and neighbouring Jantapae forests a total of 2,000 farmers with over 40,000 rai of land applied to join the project in 1989 but as yet have not even had their plots surveyed.

The project presents substantial technical challenges, aside from the question of issuing land documents. Cassava growers are not used to the idea of investing in their land or giving their crops the kinds of care and attention demanded by rubber. Marketing too will eventually impose its own demands and open new possibilities for income improvement. Cassava can be left in the ground till the price is right, with little loss of quality. In contrast the perishability of latex makes strict marketing regimes necessary if the farmers are to derive full benefits from their rubber investments. Farmers will be encouraged to form semi-formal or formal groups to cooperate in raising quality standards and negotiating collectively with reliable purchasing companies.

But the technical problems were anticipated and are being tackled successfully by the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (ORRAF). Evidence from regular field inspections shows that the project farmers are, in general, doing well. The over-riding problem remains the cumbersome procedures for issuing land documents in the degraded forest reserve areas. Even with so many points in its favour, including generous financial support from the EC, the project is after four years barely one third of the way to reaching its relatively modest planting area target. A further three years will be needed if the eventual target of 96,230 rai is to be reached.

Will Mr Chaleum get the documents he has waited for since 1989? Will his 2,000 neighbours have a

chance to entertain the RFD field inspection team any time soon? The RFD restarted its field survey in the area in February so these farmers' chances now look better, though few are likely to be covered in time for the 1991 planting season. Perhaps they will wait to plant in 1992. Or perhaps like many others they will lose patience with the RFD and continue planting their cassava, or try to plant rubber or fruit trees without the cheap BAAC loans and ORRAF training and technical support that the project offers. We can already see the results of unsupervised tree planting: skinny, stunted trees infested by lalang, already fire hazards and facing a prospect of low yields and poor quality production.

The EC-funded project will probably succeed, and in some respects may serve as a model for other forest areas. It is based on a concept which fits exactly with the present government's idea of involving local farmers in the national reforestation effort. Making the concept work has been slow and difficult, not necessarily because of the inadequacies of the law but more importantly because all too often inadequate resources have been available to implement what should be routine procedures. And this has been in spite of the fact that the project is supported by generous foreign funding, and it has the support of at least a few dedicated individuals in each of the agencies involved, including the RFD.

It is all too clear that significant institutional adjustments are necessary for this concept to work, and if they cannot be made efficiently within the framework of this kind of special project, they are far less likely to be made within the routine administration system. Thailand badly needs a forest renewal programme which is sensitive both to the environment and to the communities which have settled in the forest reserve areas. Although the project described here may be a model and offers a glimmer of hope, the problems encountered in trying to implement it raise sobering questions about the prospects for a large-scale forest renewal programme in Thailand. More than a new law will be needed if these problems are to be solved.

