



Towards the 21st Century

by
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IN THIS WEEK'S HRI—POST CO—OPERATION COLUMN, Dr. Chira makes a plea for adopting long term vision as we enter another Thai New Year. He emphasises the importance of spreading development to the provinces and urges the government to take the lead.

Since the objective of this column is to develop human resources among the 60 million population of Thailand, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my warm wishes for happiness to all Thais as they celebrate the traditional New Year.

It turns out that the 'Songkran Festival' is increasingly more important than the 1st of January celebrations which mark the beginning of the regular New Year. And as we return today from the long holiday, we may reflect on how the Songkran festival provides a focus for reflection about our society as a whole.

Most obviously perhaps, despite some economic success, good growth and strong export performance in relation to other countries, the majority of Thai people remain very poor. The gap between urban and rural standards of living remains very wide, and opportunities for advancement still very much revolve around Bangkok. The mass return migration to up-country homes over Songkran clearly shows how many rural people have to come to Bangkok to earn a living.

Meanwhile, the availability of low-cost labour, particularly from Thailand's northeast (Isan), is still considered the engine of growth for our modern industrial sectors. While at the moment it is the influence of southerners and northerners which appear strongest in the business and political arenas, many of my friends have predicted that in the future Isan will play an increasingly significant role in Thai society. In fact, regionalism in general is becoming more evident, and it is fortunate that our differences in outlook actually serve to make Thailand a stronger country as a whole.

An important question to ask is whether cities other than Bangkok can emerge as strong economic centres. I personally am optimistic about this possibility. If you drive out to Don Muang domestic airport for instance, along the way you can see a lot of changes that have taken place, especially over the last 5 years. As in Chicago, Atlanta or Los Angeles there is now tremendous traffic flow.

But the real issue is whether we can speed up the development of other cities, and whether we can anticipate problems and plan ahead. If we do, then perhaps the goal of decentralisation can become a reality. To help us along the way, a political scientist friend of mine suggests deputy prime minister level appointments to look after each of the different regions.

As a final reflection on Songkran, I must admit that I am a bit worried that, despite some positive signs of regional growth, the development and distribution of low skill human resources has not kept pace with our stock of high level manpower, who are mainly congregated in Bangkok and its satellite provinces. The last time I checked, 70-80% of high skill people lived in Bangkok. The government should at least show signs of strong leadership by relocating some ministries away from Bangkok. And why not hold a cabinet meeting outside Bangkok once a month to get things going?

I hope all the readers of this column will reflect on these issues as you take your mid-morning coffee break or whatever. I also hope that this column will eventually influence senior managers and government leaders by encouraging them to focus on long term planning. In particular, I hope they will look at such vital new areas of interest as globalization and human resources development strategies.

I see it as being the role of both academics such as myself, and the media to keep working on these long term issues. At least I am encouraged by how top managers have told me that they have come to look forward to the HRI/POST Column on Mondays, because it provides them with some food for thought. Perhaps they are attracted by the fact that this column runs against general trends by addressing long term issues instead of sticking with short termism.

Anyway, our on-going organisation of what I call 'Visioning Conferences' is gathering further momentum. We have already organised two big seminars on this topic, and many more will follow. I have received so many requests from different government agencies and the private sector.

If Thai people focus more on significant long term issues, I am confident that our country will continue to survive and prosper. But I do not let our achievements so far lead me to be complacent about the future.

Perhaps it would be a good idea if we all spent a little time now that Songkran is over, to think about ourselves, our work and society in general in a long term context. Above all, we must be prepared for change.

Finally, a reminder to everyone about our television program tonight on Channel 11 at 8.30 p.m. The program will feature top high school students from Bangkok and other provinces discussing the topic of 'Youth and Vision for Thailand'. Perhaps we adults would do well to listen to them.

See you next week!

GOV.'S OFFICER ATTITUDE TO THAI BUREAUCRACY SYSTEM

