

SHUT UP

OR

.....
 HOW A THAI MEDICAL AGENCY WAS CLOSED AFTER IT
 QUESTIONED WORKER SAFETY AT A FACTORY OWNED BY
 THAILAND'S LARGEST EMPLOYER **BY TIM FORSYTH**

SHUT DOWN

FOR WEEKS Dr. Orapun Methadilokkul had been investigating the deaths of several workers at a Seagate Technology (Thailand) Ltd. computer disk-drive assembly plant near Bangkok. The 36-year-old Thai doctor knew that her work was controversial. Her findings of higher than normal levels of lead in the blood of employees at the U.S.-based company already had contributed to workers' demonstrations for better safety conditions. Still, Orapun was surprised one day in August 1991 when, as she walked along the factory assembly line, she was summoned to the company's boardroom. There, surrounded by company officials, she was handed a telephone.

The caller was Staporn Kavitanon, secretary to then-Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and director general of the Thai Board of Investment. As Orapun recalls the conversation, Staporn got directly to the point: "What you are doing is hurting Thailand! How dare you investigate Seagate? I can have you fired!" Stunned, but unwilling to be intimidated, even by such a prominent bureaucrat, she replied,



STAPORN KAVITANON
 DIRECTOR OF THAILAND'S
 INVESTMENT BOARD,
 ALLEGEDLY THREATENED
 DR. ORAPUN IN 1991

"I don't care how big you are. I have my job to do. Why don't you do yours?" Staporn, when contacted by ASIA, INC., admitted making the call to Orapun, but he denied threatening the doctor in any way.

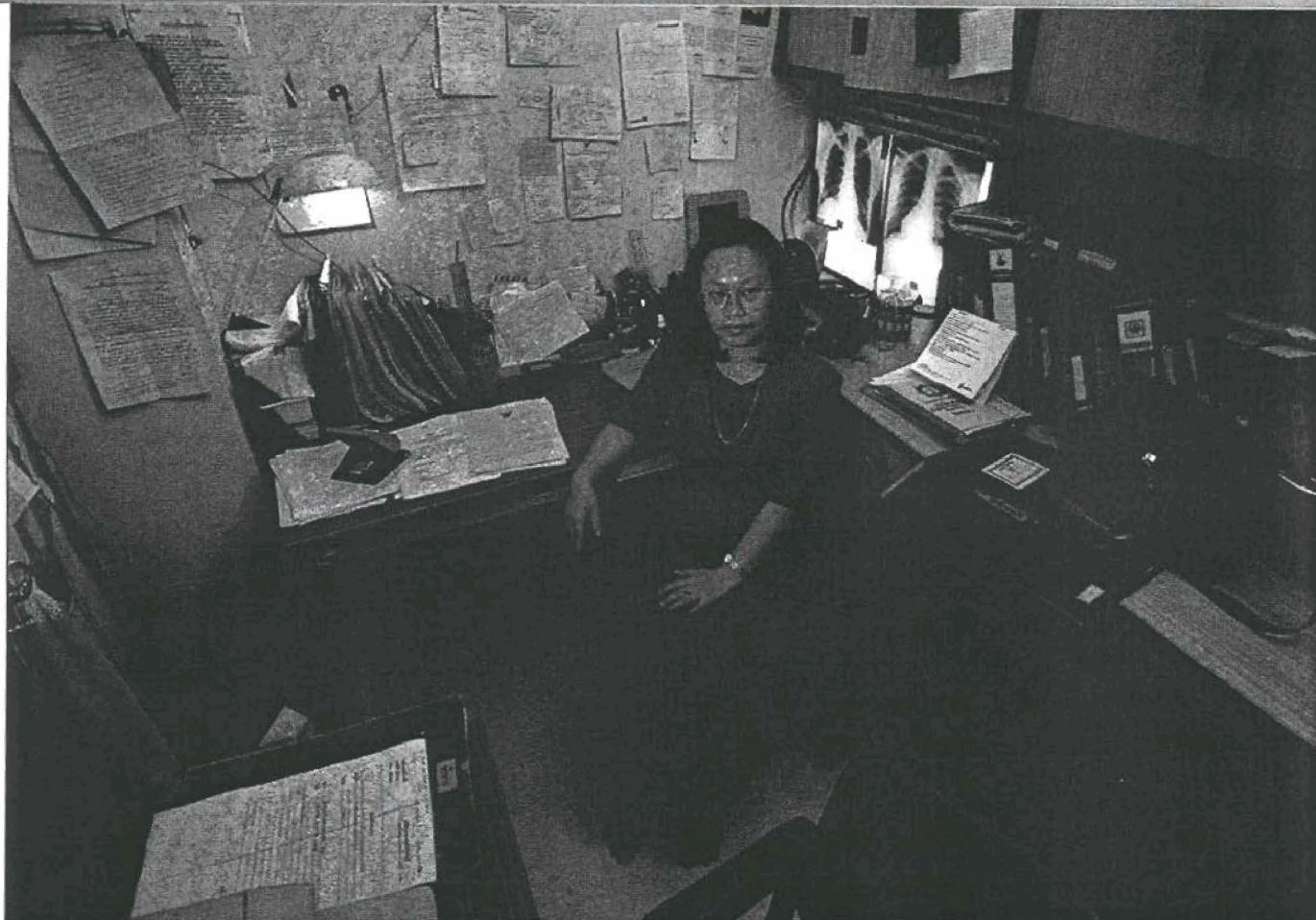
While the substance of the conversation is disputed, there is no doubt about what followed. In September 1991, a month after receiving Staporn's call, Orapun was removed from the Seagate case and the agency she headed, the National Institute of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (NIOEM), was closed. Along with it went Thailand's only program for treating and investigating workers suffering from industrial contamination.

Was the agency shut down, as some now say, to cover up a case of industrial poisoning, or to weaken an industrial dispute? It hardly matters, says Orapun. By closing the agency, Thailand's government gave every indication that it would rather protect foreign investors than Thai workers, and left a gaping hole in the government's ability to provide occupational health care. Thailand already is struggling to over-

cor
wo
fir
wo
the
em
nor
cy t

TC
Raj
ic v
of fi
tal's
eyes
H
rece
Pral
in ti
sym
Ora
istry
repo
the
"Un
tors,

.....
R IT
D BY
YTH
.....



come a reputation for inadequate enforcement of worker safety regulations after a tragic toy factory fire claimed the lives of at least 188 Bangkok workers last May. Now, three and a half years after the Seagate incident, more workers — this time employees of Japanese electronics factories in the north of Thailand — are dying, and there is no government agency to investigate the causes and treat the remaining workers.

ORAPUN AND THIS
SMALL OFFICE AT A
BANGKOK HOSPITAL ARE
NOW ALL THAT REMAIN
OF THE INSTITUTE

TODAY, ORAPUN is a doctor on the staff of Bangkok's Rajawithi Hospital, where NIOEM used to be based. An energetic woman, now 39, she is rated a level-eight physician on a scale of four to 11. Seated in her small, windowless office on the hospital's ninth floor, she removes her glasses and wipes tears from her eyes as she recounts the events of the past few years.

Her story begins during 1990 and 1991, when the government received news that four workers at Seagate's factory in Samut Prakan, 20 kilometers (km) south of Bangkok, had died. All were in their 20s and, according to co-workers, had experienced similar symptoms of headaches, fainting, muscular aches and fatigue. Orapun, then NIOEM's director, was asked by Thailand's Ministry of Public Health to investigate the deaths. Although her report suggested industrial poisoning might have contributed to the workers' deaths, those findings eventually were rejected. "Unfortunately," she says, "it seems that ministers, and not doctors, are who decide what causes deaths now."

Seagate is the world's largest independent producer of computer hard-disk drives. Based in Scotts Valley, California, it opened its first foreign assembly plant in Singapore in 1982 and then two more in 1988 and 1989 in Thailand, where it now employs 16,000 workers and claims to be Thailand's largest employer.

"Seagate is a world-class producer of hard drives," says Robert Katzive, vice president of Disk Trend Inc., a California-based industry research firm. The company has stayed consistently profitable, he says, by maintaining an up-to-date range of products and locating its factories where labor is cheap. At the same time, Seagate has drawn criticism for being a hard-driving company focused more on profits than on its workers. Even Chief Executive Alan Shugart admitted in a 1991 *Electronic Business* magazine interview that "Seagate [has] had a rap for not being very employee-oriented."

In the early 1990s Seagate faced a crisis of strategy. After years of following its competitors' technological innovations and then producing them in bulk, upstart competitors like Conner Peripherals Inc. forced Seagate to become a technological leader again to maintain market share and avoid being squeezed out of new markets. The company's most competitive market sector was for low-margin, 3.5-inch disk drives, about 40 percent of which it makes in Thailand. Simultaneously, Seagate's profits were suffering, dropping nearly 40 percent from \$117.2 million in 1990 to \$72 million in 1991. The last thing the company wanted was a union

ny job to
rn, when
king the
ning the

sation is
hat fol-
th after
removed
he head-
onal and
d), was
nly pro-
workers

ow say,
ig, or to
pun. By
lication
workers,
provide
to over-

demanding higher wages and better conditions for its 16,000 workers in Thailand.

It was in this atmosphere of cost cutting and strategic reversal that Orapun launched her investigation into work conditions at Seagate and the possible reasons for its workers' deaths. She analyzed blood samples from 1,175 Seagate workers at the Samut Prakan plant and found that 36 percent of those sampled had levels greater than 20 micrograms (μg) of lead per 100 milliliters (ml) of blood. In her report, completed in early August 1991,

far below the 80 to 120 μg per 100 ml level considered dangerous to life, usually indicate that workers should be transferred to different work environments. Seagate also claimed that its employees' high lead levels were more likely the result of living amidst Bangkok's notorious automobile pollution.

Orapun, however, noted that similar studies conducted at the same time indicated that only 8 percent of Bangkok traffic police (many of whom are constantly exposed to traffic fumes) had more than 20 μg of lead per 100 ml of blood, compared with only 2 percent of the average Bangkok population.

Many independent medical experts say that chronic low levels of lead poisoning are unlikely to cause death. Orapun herself now

at
Se
ny
we
er
un
62
ne
Th
cer
wa
I
ver
dis
abi
tio
loc
lan
the
mi
nev
pay
fun
opr.
Th:
Inv
bee
attr
tior
the
inve
Si
Ora
insti
its fi
dow.
hosp
told
unde
carri
cies l
the i



Orapun claimed this indicated widespread levels of chronic (long-term) lead poisoning at the plant. She figured the fatalities might have occurred either because of chronic poisoning, or because much higher acute levels of lead poisoning accumulated in some workers. The main source of lead in electronics factories is solder, a metal compound that is melted and used to attach components to circuit boards.

Seagate, in a letter to the Ministry of Public Health, responded that most of its workers' blood-lead levels were much lower than the 40- μg threshold allowable under Thai law or the internationally recognized limit of 50 μg per 100 ml. Those limits, though

SOLDERING, COMMON IN ELECTRONICS FACTORIES, PRODUCES LEAD FUMES THAT ARE DANGEROUS WITHOUT PROPER PRECAUTIONS

suspects that the company's workers may have been exposed to other toxic substances in the workplace. She says that more than 200 Seagate workers have complained of headaches, insomnia, aching bodies and fatigue. Although these symptoms appeared to have been caused by chronic lead poisoning, she says, they could have been aggravated by the inhalation of solvents. Solvents are commonly used to clean circuit boards before components are attached to them.

Although Orapun's study did not prove that workplace poisoning caused the deaths, it did raise the possibility. Her findings were reported in the local press and by mid-August 1991, fears

OR.
work
ing.
NIO.
depu
claim
the S
press
to sh
that c

about lead contamination were a factor in prompting hundreds of Seagate workers to stage protests in Bangkok outside the company's headquarters and the U.S. Embassy. When Seagate fired 87 workers in connection with the protests, employees staged another demonstration to get the workers reinstated and establish a union. Seagate refused to budge, and eventually sacked another 621 workers. On one sweltering September day as the dispute neared its peak, Seagate employees filled the streets in front of Thailand's Government House in Bangkok to publicize their concerns. They even appealed to U.S. President George Bush, who was on a state visit to Thailand at the time.

But neither Bush nor Thai officials appeared interested in intervening on behalf of the workers. Although Seagate is reluctant to disclose financial details about its Thai operations, its decision to locate factories in Thailand clearly has brought the country hundreds of millions of dollars in new investment and payroll and promoted further industrial development. It also pleased Thailand's Board of Investment, which has been especially eager to attract major international companies since the influx of Japanese investment began to slow in the late 1980s.

Six weeks after finishing her report into Seagate, Orapun was removed from the case and the medical institute (NIOEM) was closed, just 16 months after its formation. "People arrived to take the name board down from outside my office, and the director of the hospital told me my office was closed. My staff were told to find work elsewhere," she recalls. "I don't understand. I was only doing my job." New studies carried out by industrial hygienists from other government agencies later cleared the Seagate factory of legal liability. Eventually, the industrial dispute died away and no union was formed.

ORAPUN STILL TREATS some of the 200 Seagate workers initially diagnosed as suffering from chronic lead poisoning. Because of this, there is some debate about whether the NIOEM was actually closed. Dr. Narongsakdi Aungkasuyapala, deputy-director general of Thailand's Department of Health, that the institute was simply made less important. "After the Seagate affair, the [Ministry of Public Health] did not suppress the NIOEM but reconsidered its role," he says. "We wanted to share its duties between more offices." But the fact remains that of the institute's six permanent staff at the time of the Sea-

gate investigation, only Orapun remains. Moreover, there is no sign that the government plans to proceed with the \$17.2 million budget, or the staff of 200, including 70 doctors, originally allocated to the institute under Thailand's Seventh Five-Year Plan, which runs from 1992 to 1996.

The institute's closing has effectively crippled Thailand's program for treating workers suspected of industrial poisoning. The government still has two other offices for occupational and environmental health care under the Department of Health and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, but their primary aim is to prevent industrial poisoning by enforcing workplace safety regulations. While it is possible that these agencies can also treat patients, they lack the specialized medical staff once earmarked for the NIOEM.

Although they cannot prove the institute was closed for political reasons, Orapun and many of her colleagues believe that to be the case. "It is sad that Seagate was never really investigated," laments Surichai Wungaco, a sociology lecturer at Thailand's Chulalongkorn University and editor of a book on the impact of industrial poisoning in Thailand.



SEAGATE FIRED MORE THAN 750 WORKERS IN 1991 FOLLOWING DEMONSTRATIONS CALLING FOR A UNION AND SAFER CONDITIONS

"A fraction of people care more about Seagate than the need to investigate future situations."

Dr. Sidney Shindell, professor emeritus of the Medical College of Wisconsin and co-organizer of an occupational health education degree program in Thailand, suggests that Orapun's assertive personality and her status as a woman also may have played a role in the institute's demise. Shindell describes Orapun as "a very competent and honest individual,"

but adds that "she has a problem of gaining respect, not just for the new science of occupational medicine but for herself as a woman in a traditionally male-dominated area." The comments of the health department's Narongsakdi lend some credence to that theory. "We wanted to find someone who could take care of the office more concretely," he says. "Orapun was too young."

Whatever the reasons for the institute's closure, Orapun maintains that industrial poisoning remains a serious problem, one far more prevalent than government and industry officials would like to admit. Consider, for instance, the case of Pratumrat Kangsiti (not her real name), who left her home near northern Thailand's main city of Chiang Mai when she was 20 and came to Bangkok to find work. She was hired almost immediately at Seagate's Samut Prakan factory. "After about eight months in the company

I began to feel unwell. I had headaches, insomnia. My eyes hurt and I felt tired all the time. My speech was slurred, and I couldn't walk in a straight line," she says. "I went to the factory doctor, but all she did was give me headache pills. The symptoms did not go away, and so I went to see Dr. Orapun. She said I had chronic lead poisoning."

Lead poisoning can result from soldering fumes. But Seagate denies that this is possible at Samut Prakan. Says Lee Kuhre, Seagate's senior director for environmental health and safety security in California: "For lead fumes to be generated you have to heat lead to over 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. You don't get fumes or off-gassing below that temperature. Our soldering reaches a maximum level of 700 degrees Fahrenheit. Scientifically, there's no possibility of lead exposure."

However, an independent expert in lead poisoning disagrees. "The melting point of lead is 621.5 degrees Fahrenheit. Fumes are given off at any temperature above this," says Dr. Yvette Lolin, lecturer in chemical pathology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In fact, Orapun's survey of Seagate workers found elevated blood-lead levels to be especially prevalent among workers in those parts of the production line associated with soldering. In the wave-soldering section, for instance, almost 50 percent of the 148 workers tested had levels higher than 20 µg of lead per 100 ml of blood.

Seagate worker Pratumrat also worked with solvents. "We used one solvent called TP-35. My job was to brush circuit boards with the liquid in order to make them clean," she recalls. While Seagate has since stopped using TP-35 because it damages the earth's ozone layer, it says that the solvent, which consists mostly of the chemical Freon, is safe. "Freon is not dangerous to humans,"

insists Seagate's Kuhre. However, according to guidelines from the Asia Monitor Resource Center, a Hong Kong-based labor organization, "inhalation of some Freons has caused irregular heartbeat and sudden death by heart failure," as well as other, milder symptoms. Moreover, while investigating the Seagate factory in 1991, Orapun sent samples of the company's TP-35 to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for analysis. The CDC found that the samples were not pure Freon, but also contained toxic chemicals such as benzene, a suspected carcinogen.

Seagate refused to believe Pratumrat when she claimed she had chronic lead poisoning. So in December 1992, the 22-year-old

.....

"THE PROBLEM IS THAT NO HOSPITAL IN NORTHERN THAILAND HAS THE EQUIPMENT TO TEST FOR HEAVY-METAL POISONING"

.....

composed a long, shakily written letter to newly elected Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, describing her case and asking for assistance. Although Chuan did not reply in person, the local public health authority has recently agreed to pay some compensation for her hospital fees.

Pratumrat continues to work at Seagate in order to support her younger sister's college education. Thanks to Orapun's treatment, she's feeling much better these days. She maintains, however, that many of her co-workers are still ill. "They have headaches and

THOUGH NOT PERFECT, MULTINATIONALS ARE SOME OF THAILAND'S BEST EMPLOYERS

ALTHOUGH LARGE MULTINATIONAL companies sometimes draw harsh criticism in Thailand, they are often among the country's better employers. "Multinationals are normally best," says Preecha Seemeeasap, general secretary of the International Metalworkers Federation-Thai Council in Bangkok. "They comply with labor laws, and offer good pay and pension funds."

Despite the generous pay, workers at multinationals are susceptible to layoffs when the companies relocate. "And in Thailand, at the age of 35 or 40, you may be too old to get a good new job," Preecha notes.

Worker advocacy groups say the most common abusers of labor laws are the owners of small factories. Moreover, says Jaded

Chouwilal of the Bangkok-based Friends of Women Foundation, most hardship falls on Thailand's 3.5 million-plus women factory workers. "Thailand has about 250,000 factories, of which about 60 percent pay less than the minimum wage," he says. Thailand's national minimum wage currently stands at \$5 (125 baht) a day, yet this rule can be easily broken where workers are uneducated, or where competition for jobs is keen.

"Although Thailand has legislation concerning workers' rights, I believe only 49 percent of employers comply with the labor laws," says Preecha of the Metalworkers Federation. "The problem is worse outside Bangkok," he adds, and especially in the country's north.

— T.F.

ins
the
use

M
ph
Just
ric
err
19'
sta
to
for

ing
turi
T
four
adm
ferri
Acc
adm
rept
ativ
is el
chil
thei
Larr
The
Sep
par
sion

insomnia. Some have yellow fingertips, which I think shows that the gloves they give us cannot protect us against the chemicals we use. People are unwell, but they are scared to take action."

MEANWHILE, IN THE northern Thai town of Lamphun, the problem of industrial poisoning may be resurfacing. Just 30 kilometers from Chiang Mai, Lamphun is a small town of rice fields, temples and, since 1985, the site of Thailand's Northern Region Industrial Estate. Between March 1993 and February 1994, at least 10 people have died there under suspicious circumstances. Many locals believe they died from on-the-job exposure to lead or solvents. All except a baby boy worked at the estate for foreign electronics companies. Most of those companies, includ-

wanted everything to be right for them."

Both of Chakraphun's parents worked in factories producing soldered electronic circuits. His father had been a machine operator at KSS Electronics (Thailand) Co. for three years. His mother did soldering for Tokyo Try Co. Another Tokyo Try employee, a 23-year-old woman, died recently. Other victims came from Hoyo Opto (Thailand) Co., Electroceramics (Thailand) Co. (a subsidiary of Hokuiku Ceramics Co.), Tokyo Coins Engineer Co., R.M. Brush Co. (the only U.S.-owned company) and two from Murata. According to co-workers and family members, all suffered headaches and fatigue. When contacted by *ASA, INC.*, both Murata and Electroceramics officials denied the deaths were caused by industrial poisoning and stressed that

they meet all the required Thai safety standards. Neither plans to conduct investigations into the causes of the deaths.

Mayuree Teviya was one of the lucky ones. Now 29, she began working at the Electroceramics factory in 1988. Like many other workers at the industrial estate, she lives in a simple village alongside the factories where the inhabitants have formed a new community, complete with shops and temples. Mayuree's job was to prepare ceramic-alumina plates for soldering, before their eventual use in television sets. She often used solvents in her work.

"I started feeling unwell in early 1993," she says. "My head and body ached. I felt slow and

tired. I went to the factory doctor and she told me it would go away in time, but it didn't. Finally, I went for an inspection at the McCormick Hospital in Chiang Mai. I spent a week there! They suggested I had aluminum poisoning."

Mayuree brandishes records of her illness, including the hospital's acknowledgment of inspection dated last July 21. "I told my manager what the hospital had said, but she didn't believe me — she was angry that I had gone by myself to the hospital." McCormick Hospital later withdrew its diagnosis of aluminum poisoning. Says Mayuree: "I think the doctor was scared of my boss." When questioned about the case, hospital medical director Charas Phimphilai became nervous and denied that Mayuree had ever come to the McCormick, even when told that she has her medical receipts as proof. Director Charas conceded, however, that he is not certain industrial poisoning can be ruled out as the cause of the recent deaths in Lamphun. "I am worried," he said. "The problem is that no hospital in northern Thailand



ing the fax-machine manufacturer Murata Manufacturing Co., are Japanese-owned.

The boy, Chakraphun Na Lamphun, was only four months old when he died last March. He was admitted to Chiang Mai's McCormick Hospital suffering from a swollen stomach and in obvious pain. According to his grandfather, Boonmi, from the time he was admitted until his death he never stopped crying. Local doctors reported that the boy had died of an intestinal disease, but his relatives continue to believe that the child was poisoned. In fact, it is theoretically possible for lead to be passed from parents to their children either through breast milk, or in the form of dust from their clothing. Less than a month later, the boy's father, Anan Na Lamphun, 27, died from heart failure after being ill for a year. The last of the family, his mother Doungtida, 28, died on September 17 after suffering headaches, an inflamed stomach, and paralysis for four months. "Anan had bought his family a television, refrigerator, steam iron, gas cooker," mourns Boonmi. "He

**AT LEAST 10 WORKERS
AT THE NORTHERN
REGION INDUSTRIAL
ESTATE IN LAMPHUN
HAVE DIED RECENTLY**

has the equipment to test for heavy-metal poisoning."

On the back of Mayuree's hands are smooth, dark-red patches. "These are marks I got four years ago when a liquid at work splashed on my hands," she explained. "The doctor said they were chemical burns. They still haven't gone away."

"After I learned that the hospital had changed their mind, I got worried. My symptoms got worse and I began to keep a diary of how my illness developed — just in case I died and people needed information. Then my friend Wongduen collapsed at work and later died in September. I didn't want to end up like her, so I finally left the company in October." Although Electroceramics confirms that one of its workers died last September from a brain hemorrhage, a common symptom of solvent poisoning, the company denies this resulted from industrial poisoning. Mayuree says she is now feeling slightly better, but adds, "I haven't received any compensation yet from either the company or the government."

Most workers at the Northern Region Industrial Estate are simply happy to have jobs. Many are migrants from rural areas of north or northeast Thailand who are eager to work long hours, even two shifts a day, to earn extra money. Factories offer financial incentives to their most productive workers and, ironically, the hardest-working are often among those who become sick, since they are exposed to factory conditions the longest. Mayuree, for instance, says she earned the highest daily bonus of \$12 because she managed to prepare 10,000 ceramic plates per day instead of the required 4,500. Anan Na Lamphun, who died in March 1993, worked 12 hours a day to pay off his debts from buying household goods for his family.

WORRIED BY PRESS speculation about the causes of deaths in Lamphun, the governor of the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand (IEAT), Somchet Thinaphong, called a press conference last November to dispel what he called false rumors. As tempers rose during the conference, he charged the press with irresponsible speculation motivated by personal profiteering and political maneuvering. Somchet blamed the workers' deaths on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). "All of the news which has been reported is hypothetical, but it damages the IEAT and destroys the investment atmosphere," he told Kamol Sukin of the Bangkok newspaper *The Nation*. Somchet claimed that reports

from the local health authority indicated that all of the workers who died had either left the factories, were not working directly with lead, or were HIV positive, that is, carrying the virus that may lead to AIDS.

AIDS, in fact, is becoming an increasingly serious problem throughout northern Thailand. Public Health Ministry surveys in 1993 found nearly 9 percent of pregnant women in Lamphun province and some 40 percent of northern Thailand prostitutes to be HIV positive. But if the link between industrial poisoning and workers' deaths has yet to be proved, the connection with AIDS is easier to disprove. Academics at Chiang Mai University claim that no more than three of the workers that have died recently were known to be HIV positive. AIDS also has different symptoms.

"If someone is HIV positive and then dies of the symptoms of lead or solvent poisoning, it can be assumed that they died of poisoning and not AIDS," says Dr. Khanchit Limpakarnjanarat, adjunct director of the HIV/AIDS Collaboration project between Thailand's Public Health Ministry and the U.S. CDC. "Death from AIDS normally comes from opportunistic infections like pneumonia or diarrhea, plus a marked weight loss over a period of perhaps a decade. Without symptoms like these, a patient cannot be said to have died of AIDS," Khanchit says.

Lamphun's problem also seems different from the so-called "Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome" (SUDS) seen in recent years among overseas Thai workers. According to Wisconsin professor

Shindell, SUDS generally occurs overnight without warning. In Lamphun, all victims were clearly unwell before dying. Samples from a 21-year old woman who died at Murata in December 1993 were analyzed in Chiang Mai's hospitals. These confirmed

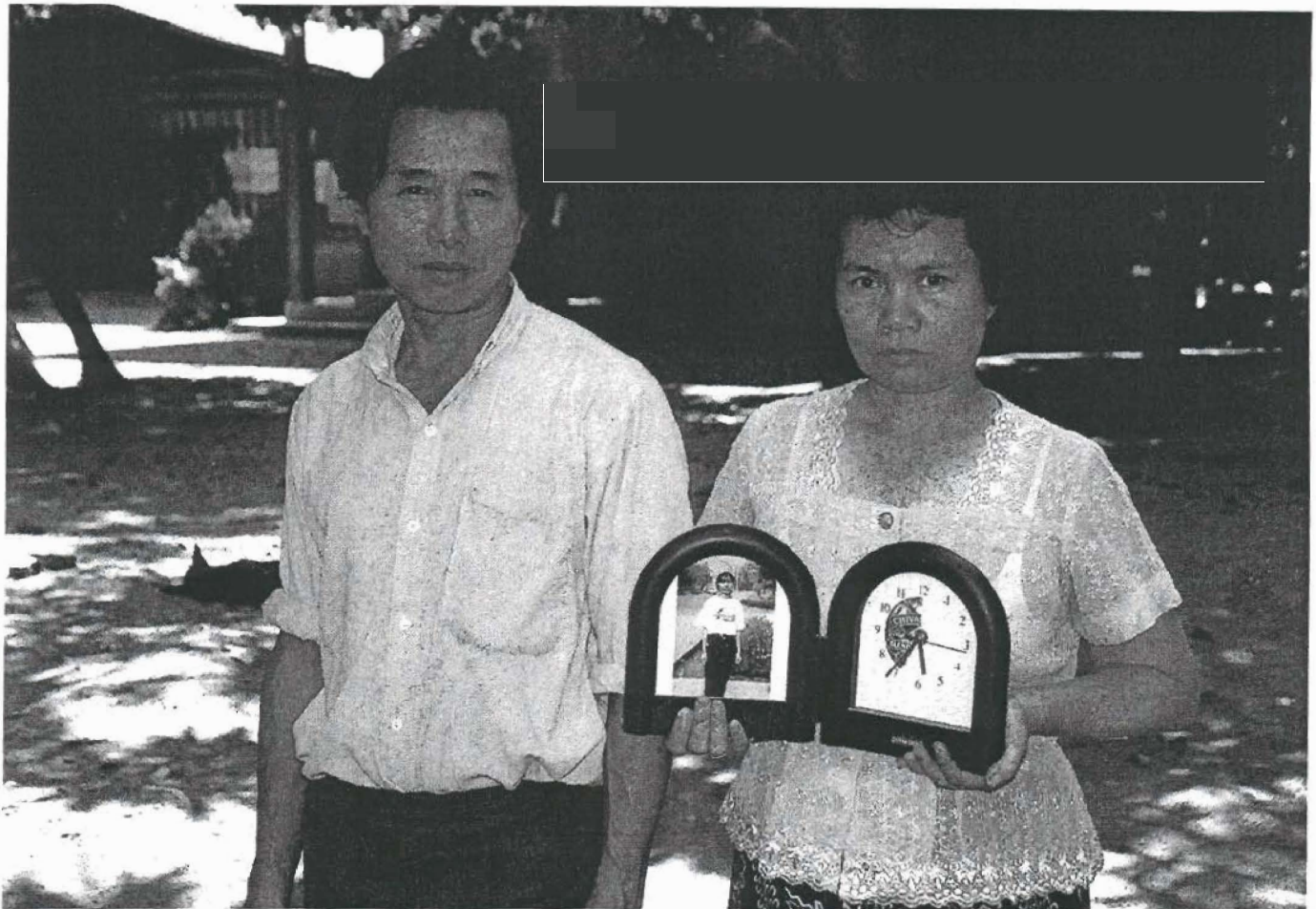
that she was not HIV positive. The samples have not been examined for heavy-metal poisoning, however, since there are no facilities for such testing in northern Thailand. Testing for solvents is even more difficult, and solvent poisoning would be hard to prove even if Thailand had proper testing facilities. Yoopin Nakmoon, 23, died on February 1, 1994, a month after leaving Tokyo Try Co., where she had worked for six months. According to family members, her skin had turned yellow, and she eventually died of water in her lungs. "Symptoms like these suggest she died of heart failure as a result of liver disease — a possible result of solvent poisoning," says Chinese University pathologist Lolin. "However, autopsies are unlikely to find solvents in the body because they evaporate or become absorbed. You then have to prove that solvents caused the liver disease, and that can be difficult."



INDUSTRIAL ESTATE GOVERNOR SOMCHET THINAPHONG; HE BLAMED THE DEATHS IN LAMPHUN ON AIDS

ters
tly
hat

em
in
un
to
nd
is
m
ly
p-
nd
ol-
at
y
t,
l-
s
S.
es
t-
it
s.
t
"



WHEN INFORMED by ASIA, INC. of the deaths in Lamphun since his November press conference, Somchet, of Thailand's Industrial Estate Authority, vowed to investigate. "And if necessary, we can close factories that pose a health hazard," he said. The problem of providing health care, however, remains the responsibility of Thailand's Ministry of Public Health.

Dr. Narongsakdi of the ministry's Department of Health agreed that the deaths in Lamphun appear unusual. "We have sent a team of epidemiologists to investigate, but not Dr. Orapun because her hospital preferred her to stay in Bangkok." Orapun confirmed that a team of doctors was sent to Lamphun, but says that she was actually the one who organized the team after receiving a letter of complaint from the sick worker, Mayuree. If true, this suggests that no other government agency has yet filled the role of the NIOEM.

In search of answers, ASIA, INC. approached Staporn Kavitanon, director general of Thailand's powerful Board of Investment. A busy and important man, it was necessary to visit his office three times and then wait outside for two hours before being granted an audience. Inside, Staporn's welcoming style quickly grew agitated and tense.

"I did not threaten to close down any medical office," he fumed,

MANIT AND OOLAI
SAENSONG'S 21-YEAR-
OLD DAUGHTER MATIYA
DIED IN DECEMBER
AFTER WORKING AT
MURATA'S FACTORY FOR
20 MONTHS

lighting a cigarette. "That is totally lying, totally lying! The problem at Seagate was that the doctor was not trying to do a study, but instead exploiting a problem which led to a strike." Then, repeating the same theme raised earlier with Orapun, he added, "If you write this, you will hurt Thailand." Concerning the Lamphun workers' deaths, Staporn pointed to local reports of AIDS and denied that any of the workers' deaths were the fault of the factories. When asked about the potential risk from lead and solvents in Thailand's new electronics factories, he responded, "I am not a scientist."

Eventually, rather than disputing the allegations of industrial poisoning, he argued that Thailand is no worse on that count than other Asian countries. "Why write about Thailand? Why not the Philippines? Is Thailand the only country where workers die?"

Thailand's workers are undoubtedly *not* alone in that predicament. But to the friends and families of Lamphun's young, dead workers, that is little consolation. Many of them are now wondering whether more of their neighbors will die simply because their desire for a better life led them to jobs in the electronics industry. To communities close to northern Thailand's blossoming electronics assembly lines, the most important question is when Thailand's government will begin paying as much attention to its people's health as it does to wooing foreign investors. ■