

MECHAI VIRAVAIIDYA

In the days of Thailand's absolute monarchy, which ended only in 1932, it was rare for a commoner to achieve the rank of general. But Mechai Viravaidya's paternal grandfather (later known as Phraya Damrong Paetayakhun) did so. A doctor, he headed the Army Medical Corps. He was also physician to the queen. One practical consequence of his having gained the royal confidence was that his son, Samak Viravaidya, was admitted to a palace school founded by King Vajiravudh (subsequently named Vajiravudh School). When Phraya Damrong Paetayakhun died prematurely at the age of forty-two, Samak was sent on a King's Scholarship to Great Britain, where he attended preparatory school and later studied medicine at Edinburgh University.

It was at Edinburgh that Samak met Isabella MacKinnon Robertson, a young woman of Scottish descent (although born in Ireland) and a fellow medical student, whom he married. After completing their studies, the two returned together to Thailand. Here, as Isabella later confided, they traded the prejudice of the Scots, who looked unfavorably on liaisons between Whites and "colonials," for the prejudice of the Thais, who also frowned on mixed marriages. Nevertheless, Isabella committed herself to a life in Thailand and insisted that their children be given Thai names. Mechai was the second of their four children, born in Bangkok on 17 January 1941.

By the time Mechai was born, the couple had abandoned Samak's family compound, where his sister and mother also lived, for a quieter single-family dwelling some distance away. Isabella was a strong mother and hers was a household where certain Scottish sensibilities ruled. Healthy children drank lots of milk; ate fruit, not candy; and played outdoors in the sun. Waste was unpardonable: one should never leave food on one's plate. Frivolous purchases were frowned upon, but good shoes were worth good money. Always buy your shoes to last, she taught her children, and mind your manners. Dogs, she explained to them, have no hands; they have no choice but to bend their faces to their food. But proper children lift their food to their mouths. And so on. "My father knew what my mother was doing," says Mechai, and "he quietly supported her."

For all his mother's influence, theirs was not altogether a Western household. Indeed, the children were brought up to be at home in both the Thai and Western worlds. As a little boy, Mechai exclusively spoke

Thai with his father. His mother also knew Thai but usually spoke to the children in English. When she did so—especially when he was still very young—Mechai would answer in Thai. In time, the children spoke both English and Thai fluently. Moreover, they were taught to be mannerly in both the Western and Thai ways. And every three weeks or so, Mechai and his siblings would be sent off to their aunt's house across town. There, things were thoroughly Thai. Children were indulged with sweets and encouraged to play inside the house, away from the deleterious influence of the sun. Mechai relished these visits, in part because his aunt's house was in a livelier part of the city, with trams and shops, unlike his own bucolic neighborhood.

Both Mechai's father and mother established medical practices in Bangkok, and Samak later pioneered in the field of medical insurance. Isabella specialized in pediatrics and developed a clientele among expatriate Western women and Thai royalty. But, as Mechai remembers well, she also practiced among the poor. This was a matter of principle. Not a religious woman per se, she possessed a deep humanitarian compassion that expressed itself in practical ways. "She would help people, always," he remembers. Isabella was keen for her children to respect people of all stations, not only those who formed their own privileged social circle. One day, for example, when she witnessed a motorist honking his horn at an elderly Chinese woman laboring under a heavy basket, she said, "It is very mean. Here is a person who is already old. If she had a car, she wouldn't be walking like that. We need to help her." Lessons like these account for the fact that, today, Mechai thinks of his mother as the greatest influence in his young life.

Education was highly valued in the family. Early on, Mechai understood that he would be sent abroad to school, just as his father had been. But his formal education began quite close to the house, at Wattana Wittaya Academy, a private girl's school that accepted boys in its pre-school classes. As soon as he reached grade one, Mechai transferred to Bangkok Christian College for one or two years and then entered his father's alma mater, Vajiravudh School. King Vajiravudh had been educated in England and had used Harrow, his own public school, as a model for the palace school. So, although instruction was in Thai, in most ways it mimicked a British boarding school. Students played squash, tennis, cricket, and rugby. Senior boys, serving as prefects, disciplined and led the younger boys. There was a bagpipe corps. Even though the school was only eight kilometers or so from home, Mechai lived there as a boarder, in preparation for experiences to come.

Most of Mechai's classmates at Vajiravudh School were Thai, but at the local sports and polo clubs he also mixed with young people of other nationalities. On his twelfth year, his parents enrolled him in an English-language school for several months, as a prelude to beginning his education abroad. His elder sister had been sent to England, but for Mechai, his parents chose Geelong Grammar School in Australia, an

Anglican school in rural Victoria. In the months leading to his departure, his father took him to films depicting the “strange country” in which he would soon be living. With two older boys from Vajiravudh who were also going to Australia, but who were in need of his better English to smooth their passage through various travel formalities, Mechai departed Bangkok in 1954. He was thirteen years old. And he could not have been happier.

Stopping off in Singapore, the little band of travelers decided to try mutton, since they had been told that Australians ate lots of it. By happenstance, the first waiter they encountered spoke Thai. This impressed Mechai immensely. “What a country we come from!” he thought. “Wherever we go, people speak Thai.” He soon discovered that none of the other waiters spoke Thai, nor did virtually anyone else he met in Singapore. Moreover, the mutton smelled strange and he and his friends could not eat it.

Geelong Grammar School was Mechai’s home for the next six years. Its thousand-acre campus rested by Corio Bay and boasted fifteen cricket ovals, thirty tennis courts, several sailboats and rowing shells—indeed, facilities for virtually any sport or activity a boy could wish for. Like Vajiravudh School, Geelong was an English-style boarding school. Senior boys imposed strict discipline on junior boys. There was a proper uniform for weekdays, another for Sundays and special days. One’s teacher for math was likely, also, to be one’s coach for rugby or tennis. The day began with short, cold showers and chapel and was full of classes, games, and supervised study. It ended with roll call and a few lines from the Bible read by one’s prefect before lights out. It was an ordered and vigorous life and Mechai gloried in it.

Not a brilliant student, Mechai excelled at games. “I played cricket and Australian-rules football and rugby, then tennis, boxing, and shooting. I did everything,” he says. Eventually, he made the top school teams and was a champion boxer and tennis player. For a foreign student, sports was one way of fitting in. His father had told him to “do everything they do,” advice that Mechai readily took to heart. But where games were concerned, he needed no special motivation. “I did it because I liked it,” he says.

There were a few other Thai boys at Geelong Grammar, but Mechai’s best companions at school were Australian boys. Although these were the years of the White-Australia Policy, Mechai experienced no racial prejudice at Geelong. Instead, his friends invited him home for holidays. “Their mothers would kiss me goodnight,” he remembers warmly. “I felt I was one of the family.” In this way, Mechai was introduced to all parts of the country and to its far-flung cities and towns. Lifelong friendships formed. Mutton was no longer a problem.

Mechai’s happiness at Geelong compensated for the long years during which he was separated from his family. Two years passed between his first arrival there and his first trip home, at age fifteen. Thereafter,

the intervals were at least as long. And during his entire residence in Australia (twelve years altogether), his mother and father each visited him only once. Letters filled the void. Both of Mechai's parents wrote to him. But in his mother, Isabella, Mechai had a particularly avid correspondent. She wrote him weekly. Her letters were full of family news and advice and they also included corrections of the English in Mechai's previous letters. He remembers one such lesson from his first year in Australia. He had written, unconsciously translating into English a common Thai phrase, "It is raining down." She wrote back saying, "You don't have to say 'it is raining down' because it never rains up." Isabella also wrote to Mechai's teachers and to the families that so kindly embraced him at holiday times. Through her letters, she remained an integral and active presence in his life.

It was Mechai's father who encouraged his exposure to Christianity. Mechai had been raised, nominally, as a Buddhist. But the ritualized form of Buddhism that surrounded him as a child had not penetrated his understanding. When he entered Geelong Grammar School, his father had written the headmaster saying, "My son is a Buddhist. But could he please experience the beauty, the joy, of Christianity in the church? Will you allow him to attend?" The answer was yes and, as Mechai now reflects, "Christianity was the first religion I understood." Later in life, Mechai came to know Buddhism better and today considers himself a Buddhist. "But in reality," he says, "I am both Christian and Buddhist—just like turning out between English and Thai."

Since both his parents were doctors, not to mention his illustrious grandfather, Mechai naturally aspired to enter medicine, too, for a time at least. At Geelong, he set out by loading his schedule with sciences and mathematics. But the sciences did not really appeal to him. ("I have a nonscientific brain," he says.) And mathematics was quite beyond him. Then, on his first trip back to Thailand when he was fifteen, he assisted his father in a minor surgical operation. A man had accidentally cut off part of his finger with a saw. While Mechai held a tube controlling the auxiliary blood supply, his father amputated a portion of the remaining finger and sutured the wound. "After that," he says, "I felt very faint. I said, I can't be a doctor." Upon returning to school, he changed his subjects to British history and social studies and economics—and did much better.

Mechai's nascent leadership qualities blossomed at Geelong. Year by year, he rose through the ranks of responsibility and, as a senior boy, was not only a champion athlete but a prefect. He was so thoroughly happy at Geelong that, when the time came to choose a university, he gave little thought to leaving Australia. While other Thai boys pined to attend Oxford or Cambridge University in England, Mechai set his sights on the nearby University of Melbourne.

By this time, Mechai had ruled out studying medicine completely and sought an academic program that was both broad and practical.

Commerce was a mainstay of the University of Melbourne's curriculum, a field for which it was well known. Students of commerce studied accounting and statistics, of course, but also a wide variety of other subjects such as logic, ethics, jurisprudence, international law, and economic geography and history. Although Mechai detested accounting, the discipline of commerce suited him perfectly.

Life at the University of Melbourne paled in comparison to his halcyon days at Geelong. Mechai found it impersonal and spiritless. Finding plenty of diversions elsewhere, however, he meandered through his university degree slowly, taking five years rather than the usual three. He was an active sportsman. He was elected president of the Thai Students Association. He immersed himself in learning about Thailand and spent vast amounts of time away from the university, giving talks on his homeland to Rotary Clubs, schools, soon-to-be exchange students, and even to the International Epicurean Society. And every school holiday, he worked—driving Coca-Cola trucks and furniture trucks, collecting neighborhood “night cans” (“Very well paid,” he says), and looking after children.

For Mechai, these jobs opened up another side of Australia. At Geelong Grammar, his social encounters had been felicitous but narrow. In factories and on the road, he now met the so-called New Australians, immigrant families from Greece, Italy, and elsewhere who were putting down roots in an adopted country and often having quite a rough time of it. He found he was able to break out of Geelong's elitist mold and embrace these robust and struggling men and women. It was a lesson he would take with him back to Thailand.

Back to Thailand. By the time Mechai finally finished his university degree in commerce in 1964, he had lived in Australia for eleven years. He had made fast friends and developed an abiding warmth for the country. For two years, he had dated an Australian girl. His mother raised the subject of marriage. Were he to marry an Australian woman, she told him, it would be better if he remained in Australia so that the children could grow up with a clear sense of identity. But Mechai seems never to have considered this possibility seriously. “I may have entertained flashes of it,” he says now, “but never even halfway down, let alone deep down.” He and his Australian girlfriend parted. In 1965, after a year's stint of teaching Thai at the Royal Australian Air Force School at Point Cook, just outside Melbourne, he boarded a plane for the Philippines and then on to Thailand.

In the Philippines, an old friend of Mechai's father was serving as Thai ambassador. Since Mechai had given some thought to joining the Foreign Office, it was arranged that he spend a few days in Manila to observe diplomacy close at hand. The matter of employment was much on his mind, since upon arriving in Thailand he would be faced with finding a job. As it turned out, there were plenty of opportunities waiting. One obvious choice for someone with Mechai's academic background

was the Ministry of Commerce. It offered him a position in the insurance subdivision, a prospect he found unappealing. Private industry was another option. The head of the Shell Oil Company in Thailand was another of his father's old friends. He told Mechai, "You would be stupid to work for the government. Why don't you work for Shell?" But Mechai was not sure business was what he would like best and, besides, he had other reservations. His mother told him, "If you work for a company and make some money, that is fine. But who will work for the poor? If people like you, with an education, don't work for the poor, who will?"

The dilemma was resolved when Mechai met the secretary general of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), the agency that monitors Thailand's multifarious development efforts. As he recalls, "The secretary general explained what they did. It was such a broad field. Not just one aspect of Thailand...but agriculture, education, medical services—the whole thing. I jumped into it immediately."

But since working for the NESDB was a civil service position, certain bureaucratic niceties were required before Mechai could be hired. The Board devised a job description that only he could fill and arranged for him to take the civil service examination. Once aboard, he was assigned to the Development Evaluation Division. "Within days," he says, "I was thrown up-country."

In Thailand, the phrase "up-country" can mean anywhere outside the metropolitan center. Mechai's first assignment, to observe and report on a road-building project, was actually in the south. But he was soon becoming intimately acquainted with all the country's rural areas and, as he sorely remembers, their bumpy roads. "Development" was the watchword of the 1960s and Thailand was awash in foreign aid. Mechai watched as roads, dams, electrification schemes, and other development projects mushroomed in the countryside. As an NESDB evaluator—and, ultimately, chief of its Development Evaluation Division—he wrote reams of reports analyzing their social and economic impact.

Some of what Mechai saw disturbed him. He noticed, for example, that the teams of government officials he often traveled with spent almost no time at all in villages, still less talking with villagers; like the electric wires that flew above rural communities—bearing electricity to towns and cities but not to farmers—the government seemed insensitive to the true needs of rural people. He noticed that when foreign-aid-funded road builders paved over the old oxcart lanes, the new roads were forbidden to ox carts. And he noticed that as several huge United States air bases transformed the economies of formerly rural areas, tens of thousands of young peasant women were being drawn into prostitution. "Was this 'development' for them?" he wondered. Moreover, the countryside was full of children, poor children whose growing numbers seemed to negate any small gains that development might actually bring.

For a few years, these troubling observations remained embedded in Mechai's official reports. In 1968, however, Mechai persuaded

NESDB's secretary general to publish a "report to the nation" about "how development was going"—to come out as a supplement in *The World*, Bangkok's leading English-language newspaper. The task fell wholly to Mechai himself. *The World's* editor was pleased with the outcome and invited Mechai to write a weekly newspaper column on development issues. When Mechai broached the idea with his immediate superior, he disapproved it. Knowing Mechai's frank views, he feared that the column would reflect badly on the government. Mechai decided to go over his head. When he explained his idea to the secretary general, promising to use a pseudonym and to take a balanced approach, the chief said, "You go ahead. I don't know anything about it." Mechai's columns began appearing regularly thereafter. He signed them "GNP." To help meet his weekly deadlines, Mechai says, "I would only take out girls who were very good at typing."

As GNP, Mechai began to claim a small place for himself in the public eye, at least among the elite readers of *The World*. Other opportunities to do so soon offered themselves. When the announcer of a local English-language radio program solicited a replacement over the air, stipulating that he or she must not be Thai, Mechai was so outraged that he applied himself. Contriving to disguise his Thai identity, he submitted an audition tape with a phony Western name. Soon, he was presiding over a nightly radio show of music and talk as well as a weekend public interest discussion program. To his listeners, he was Nicola, after the Italian tennis champion Nicola Pietrangeli.

What really accelerated Mechai's emergence as a budding public persona, however, was a television series titled *Khu Kam*. *Khu Kam*, or "The Fated Couple," was a popular Thai novel about a World War II love affair between a Japanese naval officer named Kobori and a Thai woman. Mechai had recently tried his hand at acting in a local stage play, which is perhaps how he came to the attention of *Khu Kam's* producers. When they offered him five hundred baht for each show, Mechai laughed it off, saying, "You would have to pay me ten times that." The next day they agreed. He was abashed, but decided, why not? Mechai was soon a TV star, appearing as Kobori nationwide every Thursday and Friday nights for six months. He donated his windfall to a dictionary fund at Thammasat University where, incidentally, he was also moonlighting as an instructor in English.

It was in the midst of this busy life that Mechai attended the funeral of his brother-in-law and became reacquainted with a childhood friend, Mom Rajawongse Putrie Kritakara. Putrie descended from the Thai royal line and was King Bhumipol's cousin. Her father was a diplomat. Like Mechai, she had lived many years abroad, having attended high school and college in the United States. At the time of their reacquaintance, she was teaching at Khonkaen University. Mechai concluded quickly that "she was a great person to marry" and he did so on 22 January 1971. (Their daughter Sujima was born five years later, in April 1976.)

A short while later, when a by-election was scheduled to fill a vacant parliamentary seat for Bangkok, Mechai decided to stand as a candidate. He did so as an independent, but with the powerful backing of Kukrit Pramoj, an influential writer and public intellectual and owner of the feisty *Sayam Rat* newspaper. Mechai resigned from the NESDB and borrowed an empty office near a movie theater in central Bangkok. Breaking with precedent, he declared his personal wealth and refused political donations larger than one thousand baht. With Kukrit's help, he raised eighty thousand baht from small donations. To this he added his pension fund from NESDB: another ten thousand baht. Drove of volunteers rallied to his campaign. "So," he recalls, "90,000 baht went a long way."

In twenty-five days of whirlwind campaigning, Mechai blitzed the city, speaking about integrity in government, rural development, and how to involve citizens in decision making that affects their lives and well-being. "The small man and the honesty of the politician," he says, were the main themes of his campaign. In the Bangkok slums, people gave him their food, an experience he remembers now as a turning point in his "getting to the heart of the people." Thirteen other candidates vied for the seat, including the widow of its former occupant who had strong party backing. She won. But Mechai came in second, a good showing for an independent. As it turned out, however, in November 1971, Thailand's strongman, General Thanom Kittikachorn, dissolved Parliament and banned political parties. Had he been elected, Mechai would have served a mere three months.

Having made a clean break with the NESDB, Mechai now became senior economist with the Economic Cooperation Center for the Asia and Pacific Region (ECOCEN), a position that for a time he fulfilled in tandem with a similar one at the Thai Military Bank. Mechai's tenure with the bank ended prematurely, however, when he recommended that it invest some of its funds in a low-cost housing project for the poor. The bank would be filling a need, he said, and also earning a fair profit on its investment. When the directors rejected his plan to avoid competing with a real estate company owned by the deputy prime minister (a military general), Mechai left in disgust.

Fast on the heels of this disappointment, another vexing matter involving the economic interests of Thailand's rulers soon came to his attention. The government was about to build a new international airport called Nong Gnu Hao. Mechai learned through an insider that a massive contract for building the new airport had been assigned to Northrop Corporation without any open bidding whatsoever. Mechai approached Kukrit Pramoj and together they launched an exposé in Kukrit's newspaper, causing a public uproar that stalled the deal and, eventually, precipitated Northrop's withdrawal.

Among the legacies of Mechai's many years at the National Economic and Social Development Board was a nagging concern about unrestrained population growth in Thailand. As an NESDB evaluator, he

had chafed at the government's passive response to the problem. In 1968, the Thai population was growing at the rate of 3.4 percent a year and families of six or seven children were common. Less than a quarter of the rural population practiced contraception. Yet the government did little more than convene seminars to discuss the problem. It had no policy to speak of. In frustration, Mechai decided to pressure the government by generating a public clamor. In 1970, with assistance from Alan Rosenfield of the Population Council of New York, he organized a conference in Chiang Mai where radio, television, and print reporters were exposed to "four days of uninterrupted real issues of population and family planning." As he had hoped, the press carried the issues to the public and six months later a policy was passed.

In 1972, however, when Mechai became a consultant to the Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand (PPAT), Thailand's official efforts to limit population growth were bearing little fruit. Contraceptives were generally available only from doctors, yet many rural Thais lived miles away from the nearest clinic. Moreover, certain cultural reservations made the subject of birth control a private one, so that even women who had ready access to clinics were too shy to make use of them. Millions of Thais remained ignorant about the ways and means of family planning altogether. In light of this situation, Mechai's first encounters with Planned Parenthood were discouraging. Its idea of training, he remembers, "was bringing in the wives of governors and having a seminar." Mechai recruited some like-minded allies to promote a more dynamic approach and, in the next organizational election, became secretary general himself. Then he began innovating.

Mechai understood the many barriers to success in slowing Thailand's population growth. Foremost among these, he believed, was the cultural one. In a test site in Bangkok, he demonstrated that slum women who shunned family planning services at a nearby hospital would readily accept birth control devices and instruction from one of their own neighbors—someone trained and supplied by Planned Parenthood. This simple concept became the core of Mechai's new community-based program, which he launched in 1973 with financial support from the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), PPAT's parent organization. Strains between Mechai and some of PPAT's conservative members remained, however. After several months of mounting tension, he decided to form his own organization. In 1974, he left his job at ECOCEN and became founding director of Community-Based Family-Planning Services (CBFPS).

Operating from a rented office in a Bangkok alleyway and supported by a five-year grant from IPPF, Mechai recruited a team of dedicated young workers and went to work. In the first year, he set out to introduce his program in twenty-four rural districts assigned to CBFPS by the government, each district containing some seventy villages. First, he and his team toured each district with the district officer, explaining to village leaders what they were about to do. Next, each leader was

asked to submit the names of four or five respected villagers as candidates for the program. Then, CBFPS team members, traversing the countryside on motorbikes, visited every village and selected one of the candidates for training at the district center. Afterwards, the newly anointed family-planning volunteer returned to his or her village, ready to motivate neighbors to practice family planning and laden with condoms and birth control pills, account books, and a big sign to identify the village family-planning depot—"much bigger than a Coca-Cola sign," as Mechai likes to point out. Thereafter, a CBFPS fieldworker visited each village every month to deliver fresh pills and condoms and to collect the proceeds and records. Government doctors in district centers provided medical assistance, such as inserting intrauterine devices and performing vasectomies and sterilizations.

For his grassroots approach to work, says Mechai, "The important thing is that the distributor is someone the people know. They trust and confide in him in a way they'd never trust some anonymous doctor or official from Bangkok. Also, he's there and they don't have to take a long, expensive bus trip whenever they want contraceptives." Some of Mechai's rural distributors were village elders, but many were also shopkeepers and farmers. In urbanized areas, hairdressers and taxicab drivers also served. An important element of Mechai's plan was that contraceptives were not to be given away. Villagers had to buy them. This established the important idea that contraceptives were worth paying for and also anticipated a time when CBFPS would not be so generously subsidized, as it was in the beginning. For their part, local distributors earned a small commission on each sale.

CBFPS expanded rapidly. In just over two years, its work grew from seventy initial villages southeast of Bangkok to cover eight thousand villages in sixty districts. After four years, it embraced fully one-third of the country and supported sixteen thousand community volunteers. Moreover, the program proved to be cost effective. In its parallel efforts, the Thai government was spending U.S.\$7.00 to recruit and support one registered family-planning participant. Mechai's cost was U.S.\$3.50.

As his program mushroomed, Mechai led a lively publicity campaign to demystify the subject of birth control. Employing a seemingly endless array of gimmicks and publicity stunts, he both shocked and amused the nation. Condoms, for example. As a form of birth control, the condom is both cheap and handy. It is also an effective prophylactic against sexually transmitted diseases. Yet prior to Mechai, condoms were something not to be talked about. They were available, to be sure, but discreetly placed on the shop counter and transacted for in whispers. Mechai made the condom the comic symbol of his campaign to get Thais to talk openly about sex and family planning. He fashioned a calling card with a condom attached and distributed it liberally at social occasions, pressing it on waiters, officials, diplomats, socialites—indeed, everyone he met. He blew condoms into balloons and held contests in factories and villages to see who could blow the biggest one. He had pretty girls distribute condoms to the Bangkok police and called the project "Cops and Rubbers."

The shock waves made the newspapers, just as Mechai intended. "Once people accept the idea that contraceptives are just one more item you can buy at the market—like soap or toothpaste or dried fish—they'll be more likely to use them," he says. "If I can accomplish that by blowing up condoms or filling them with water, then fine—I'll do it."

Mechai was driven. He toured the country, making hundreds of public appearances popularizing family planning, carnival style. He set up "sex supermarkets" to sell contraceptives at bus terminals. He manufactured T-shirts that said "Vasectomy University" and bikini panties saying, "A condom a day keeps the doctor away." He offered free vasectomies to celebrate King Bhumipol's birthday. On one such occasion in 1983, 1,190 men had the procedure. He taught children to sing "Too Many Children Make You Poor." And so on. In the process, Mechai became so identified with his zany but effective stunts that people began calling condoms, Mechais. They still do.

On a more serious level, Mechai invoked the authority of Buddhism to support his family-planning programs. He pointed out that the Buddha himself had only one child and recited a Buddhist scripture saying, "Many births cause suffering." Monks were induced to bless contraceptives and to lend moral support to the family-planning effort. He also targeted teachers—after monks, the most respected individuals in local communities. In the first four years of the program, CBFPS taught 320,000 teachers about birth control so that they, too, could help spread the word. In yet another strategy, Mechai devised clever incentives for villagers to practice birth control. Bonafide "family planners" qualified for larger loans from local banks and cooperatives, for example. In CBFPS's pig-breeding program, suckling pigs were given to village women to fatten for market; half the ultimate profit was theirs if they did not get pregnant in the meantime. (This was very effective.) In a somewhat later incentive program, shares in a village fund were allocated on the basis of the type of birth control couples used: eighty for vasectomy; forty for female sterilization; ten for the pill; and five for condoms.

Although the mid-seventies were years of remarkable political ferment in Thailand, Mechai avoided partisan politics. He was careful to maintain good relations with whichever political party was in power and, always, to describe CBFPS's efforts as complementary to the government's own. Avoiding the appearance of competition made it easier for the Ministry of Public Health and other affiliated agencies to absorb the lessons of Mechai's program and to apply them in the vast areas of Thailand where CBFPS did not operate. This is exactly what happened. The consequences for Thailand have been profound. By the early 1990s, the country's fertility rate had dropped from the 3.4 percent of 1968 to 1.3 percent. Over 70 percent of Thai households practiced family planning; and ninety-five of every one hundred couples said they desired two children, no more. Taking note of results like these, the World Bank called the Mechai-initiated program, "one of the most successful and effective family-planning programs in the world."

Fertility control, however, was but one element in the larger problem of rural poverty. As his program took root and matured, therefore, Mechai began connecting its family-planning work to other aspects of development. Already in the first few years of operation, for example, CBFPS's village volunteers were also distributing medicines to combat hookworms and other parasites. And many of the program's early incentives involved promoting village livelihood projects, such as pig breeding. In 1975, CBFPS fieldworkers began carrying village products and handicrafts to market—yielding higher returns for local producers—and selling seed, fertilizer, and other inputs to program participants at wholesale prices. By the time the government assumed direct responsibility for family planning, Mechai was experimenting in comprehensive village development schemes involving integrated farming (pig, chicken, and rabbit breeding; fish and duck ponds; plant nurseries; and enhanced rice plots) as well as new technologies such as biogas digesters to convert pig manure into fertilizer. In 1976, Mechai formed the Population and Community Development Association, or PDA, to supplant CBFPS and to serve as an umbrella organization for his ever-widening web of activities.

Unbeknown to Mechai, the Thai military was taking a quiet interest in his development activities. Combating a rural insurgency, its scouts in the hard-pressed northeast had come across village after village in which Mechai's volunteers and fieldworkers were considerably more active than either government agents or communist rebels. "Was this some new political force?" they wondered. A team of colonels was assigned to investigate. One day in 1978, they paid Mechai a visit. As he likes to recall it, "they gave us a clean bill of health. 'You're doing what you say you are doing,' they said, 'and you are doing it very, very well.'" The upshot was a request by the Army for help in training its village defense volunteers in family planning and other health matters. Mechai happily added this new task to PDA's roster of endeavors.

When Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 created a refugee crisis along Thailand's eastern border, the Army again called upon Mechai for assistance. Fleeing the war, tens of thousands of Khmers flooded into Thailand, where they were settled in makeshift camps awaiting repatriation or asylum. With funding provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international donors, the PDA became the major Thai civilian organization mobilized to meet their needs. Mechai approached the task holistically. "We provided food. We provided training. We provided development work," he says. Teams of some twenty-five PDA fieldworkers were posted to each camp, where they introduced family planning, health education, integrated agriculture, and skills training. Acting quickly to inculcate self-reliance, says Mechai, "We got them to do many things that paid workers had done before." In a PDA-initiated Food for Work program, refugees earned coupons (bearing Mechai's picture) that could be exchanged for extra food, clothing, and other necessities.

Just as PDA was plunging into its refugee work, Mechai was invited to become a research associate at the Center for Population and Family Health at New York's Columbia University. Loathe to leave his organization at such a critical period, yet eager to accept the appointment, he proposed that the university view Thailand as his laboratory. "I'll work in the lab for nine months," he told them, "and come and teach for three months." Columbia agreed, permitting Mechai to stay atop his burgeoning nongovernmental organization (NGO), while he also contributed through lectures and reports to the Center's work. One consequence of this arrangement was that training courses, which were originally to be offered by Mechai in New York, were transferred to Thailand. This marked the beginning of PDA's own training center.

The Khmer refugee crisis lifted PDA to a new level of activity. By 1982, Mechai's staff had expanded to six hundred and operated from seventeen field offices around the country. PDA had become the largest nonprofit organization in Thailand.

For several years, Mechai had been devoting himself completely to PDA. In 1982, however, he was asked to become governor of Thailand's Provincial Waterworks Authority, a struggling state enterprise. Even though PDA was, again, in the midst of an ambitious expansion, he decided to accept. It was a real manager's dream, he says, "every possible type of problem."

The Waterworks Authority was responsible for all the piped water systems in Thailand outside Bangkok and supported and supervised the activities of 225 separate water administrations. As governor, Mechai says his responsibility was "improving everything." With typical zeal, he solicited huge amounts of foreign assistance to do so, including a large grant from the World Bank. This enabled him to pay for a major expansion and upgrading of Thailand's water delivery infrastructure as well as for three new training centers and a new central office building. Mechai introduced a better financial control system to the Waterworks Authority and labored to break down the mistrust between the agency and its unions. He worked earnestly to address workers' complaints and made a point of meeting personally with them and their families. At ease high or low, this came naturally to him and, gradually, he won them over. In a vivid testimony to his success, virtually every one of them joined in a worker-initiated offer to forgo overtime pay for an entire year to help reduce the agency's deficit.

Mechai sums up his tenure at the Waterworks Authority by saying, "we were able to turn things around." Indeed, in three years' time he had reduced its annual operating losses from U.S.\$6.9 million to less than a million. The formerly beleaguered Waterworks was now a model state enterprise.

By the time Mechai joined the Waterworks, PDA was sufficiently mature to carry on without his daily leadership. For years now he had relied on Tawatchai Tritongyoo, a colleague from NESDB days and his able Number Two, to guide the organization in his absence. Yet, even as Mechai dedicated his days to the Waterworks—and, in the years thereafter, to a variety of other senior government posts—he still devoted

four or five hours each night to PDA. As one Thai newspaper reporter observed, “Mechai Viravaidya is the kind of go-getter who can make workaholics of the world feel bad.”

The PDA was now engaged in an extremely wide variety of projects. Aside from its original endeavors in fertility management—all of which continued in collaboration with government programs—the PDA was training villagers throughout Thailand in animal husbandry, cash crop production, marketing, environmental sanitation, home industries, and health care; subsidizing the construction of thousands of bamboo-reinforced rainwater tanks; and promoting the creation of community-owned and -maintained forest reserves in twenty villages and planting trees at rural schools, temples, and refugee camps. It was also conducting experiments in village bee-keeping and honey production; operating two drug rehabilitation clinics, a day-care center for the children of itinerant construction workers, and a counseling center for rape victims; establishing credit cooperatives to fund income-generating projects, especially for village women; and, through its Small Farmer Fair Price Program, purchasing grains and vegetables from villagers and distributing them to needy refugees. In addition, PDA was executing several training programs for villagers, government officials, and foreign guests.

Mechai conceptualized PDA's current phase of development in terms of preparing rural people to participate profitably in Thailand's growing market economy. People were poorest, he noted, where market skills were weakest. Thus, he promoted cash cropping and village-processed foods, commercial animal husbandry, and handicrafts and emphasized training in credit management and marketing.

To pay for PDA's programs, Mechai had become a master marketer himself, garnering hefty grants from foundations, governments, and international development agencies to supplement modest subventions from the Royal Thai Government. Among the donors in 1983, for example, were the Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, German Agro-Action, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the Federal Republic of Germany, German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO), International Development Research Centre of Canada (IDRC), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), International Planned Parenthood Federation, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

During a brief stint as deputy minister of industry in 1985–1986, however, Mechai realized that an important source of practical aid to rural communities had been overlooked. This was the business sector. “They have the money,” he said. “They know how to organize, how to finance, how to market. Why not let them have a role in development as a civic responsibility?” Mechai, thus, began introducing companies to the rural world and initiated what would later become one of PDA's signature projects: the Thai Business Initiative for Rural Development, or, felicitously, T-Bird.

During the next several years, PDA continued to flourish under Tawatchai Tritongyoo's day-to-day management, as Mechai assumed a string of senior government positions. As deputy minister of industry, he streamlined the licensing system for rural industries and accompanied Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn on several official foreign trips. (His wife Putrie now headed the personal affairs division of King Bhumipol's private secretary's office.) Then, from 1986 to 1988, Mechai served as official government spokesperson under Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda. Prem, in turn, appointed him to the largely advisory Thai Senate, in which he served until the Army disbanded it in February 1991. It was during these busy years of public life that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)—the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS—first surfaced in Thailand. Although busy with other responsibilities and often constrained by his official positions, Mechai was among the first to respond.

The first known case of AIDS in Thailand was diagnosed in 1984 and by mid-1987 there were still only eleven full-blown cases. But Mechai's campaign to promote contraception in Thailand had made him intimately familiar with his country's sexual habits and its wide-open sex industry. He was well known, for example, for his condom-promoting forays into Bangkok's notorious sex entertainment districts, where prostitutes entertained hundreds of thousands of Thai and foreign clients daily. PDA counselors had long since included the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in their repertoire of advice, since many young Thai males habitually visited prostitutes. So, when Mechai came to understand the deadly nature of the new disease and its insidious sex-linked pattern of transmission and long incubation period (during which untested HIV carriers might unwittingly pass the disease to many others), he realized that Thailand was in for trouble. "I saw the Thai sex practices," he said, "and they were pretty inviting." By early 1987, PDA had begun educating prostitutes and male youths about the dangers of AIDS. In August of that year, it launched an all-out national campaign.

Mechai sounded the alarm himself. "We have to try to keep the disease under control. If we don't do it now, it may be too late," he said, stepping out of his role as government spokesperson to inaugurate PDA's new AIDS program. Using techniques it had perfected over the years, PDA mounted exhibitions and slide and video shows to educate the public about AIDS. It distributed books and audio- and videotapes about AIDS free to schools, factories, and offices. It mobilized its community-based volunteers to spread the word among their neighbors. It dispatched teams of doctors and scholars to give lectures to any organization that asked. And it accelerated its condom distribution program, for the condom, providentially for Thailand, given Mechai's bold publicity campaigns, was the single most effective weapon in combating the spread of AIDS among sexually active people.

Just as importantly, PDA urged Thais not to panic. Its materials dispelled myths about catching AIDS by simply touching infected per-

sons or receiving coins from them. "The public has to really understand how the disease is contracted," Mechai explained. He was also quick to discern the human rights implications of the AIDS threat. In launching PDA's program, he cautioned people not to stigmatize the victims of the disease and inveighed against fear-driven solutions, such as confining them in quarantine stations.

As Mechai well knew, however, the best PDA efforts were but a drop in the bucket relative to the scope of the possible disaster. But, in government, no one wanted to do anything. Many people felt that talking about AIDS in public stigmatized Thailand and undermined the country's lucrative tourist industry, in which sex entertainment played a conspicuous part. (Tourism is Thailand's largest source of foreign exchange.) Best to keep the dirty linen hidden, all the more so since 1987 had been officially declared "Visit Thailand Year." In rebutting this line of thinking, Mechai argued that tourists would be more alarmed if they believed that Thais were still ignorant about AIDS. "But it fell on deaf ears," he says. "They wouldn't listen."

When Prem stepped down as prime minister in 1988, Mechai also resumed the role of private citizen. Almost immediately, he left for Harvard University, where he was to be a visiting scholar at the Harvard Institute for International Development. He spent the better part of the following year brainstorming with people at Harvard and around the United States about the many issues that interested him. His T-Bird project was much on his mind and he gathered some good ideas from the Harvard Business School. But AIDS was also on his mind. Through his old friend, Alan Rosenfield, he met Sheldon Siegel of the Rockefeller Foundation and explained the compelling need to prevent an AIDS epidemic in Thailand. This meeting led to a Rockefeller grant of U.S.\$100,000 to support PDA's AIDS education work. Reaching for the widest possible audience, Mechai used it to make television videos.

Back in Thailand, however, the government remained intransigent, despite the fact that the AIDS virus continued to spread. Speaking before an international AIDS conference in June 1989 held in Montreal, he recited the history of AIDS in Thailand. It had begun, he said, with Thai homosexuals who had contracted the disease abroad or from infected foreigners in Thailand. It had spread to intravenous drug users, 43 percent of whom were HIV positive by September 1988; of these, all but 5 percent were male and the vast majority were heterosexual. Now the disease was spreading rapidly to women and, through prostitutes, to legions of non-drug-using men. Already, HIV-infected babies had been born to drug-free Thai mothers. "While the AIDS virus may have come to Thailand from outside," he said, "we must accept the reality that transmission is now overwhelmingly among Thais. For Thailand to have any chance of preventing further spread of AIDS, we require full mobilization."

But when Mechai approached the government about showing his Rockefeller-funded AIDS videos on its television stations, it said no. "In fact," he says, "there was an order: no news, no information about AIDS

on government television. So I went to the Army.” In August 1989, Mechai found an ally in General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh who, as Army chief and acting supreme commander, controlled 126 military-run radio stations and two of the country’s five television networks. Chavalit not only agreed to make military stations available for PDA’s anti-AIDS campaign, he also agreed to help Mechai spearhead a three-year blitz to halt the spread of the disease. The Army immediately established an anti-AIDS center and, in September 1989, General Chavalit personally presided over the testing of all the military’s personnel, including its temporary civilian staff. Some 260 soldiers tested positive for HIV.

Mechai also found an ally in the Ministry of Public Health under Chuan Leekpai, which mounted a nationwide AIDS-information drive funded by the World Health Organization (WHO) and distributed forty-three million condoms donated by USAID. Another ally was Governor Chamlong Srimuang of the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, which began educating the city’s drug addicts and introduced AIDS information into school curriculums. Respected public figures, such as Dr. Prawase Wasi, also addressed the crisis and spoke frankly about the need for Thais to change their sexual customs. “We have to stop thinking that going to prostitutes is a show of manhood,” said Prawase, “or that senior students must take freshmen to brothels, or senior officials visiting provinces must be welcomed by girls being sent to them.” Princess Chulabhorn, the king’s third daughter, publicly abhorred the country’s sex industry and supported the campaign against AIDS. For his part, Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan agreed to set up a National AIDS Committee. But he declined Mechai’s suggestion that he chair it himself and, while touring Europe, announced that AIDS was not a problem in Thailand.

Mechai pressed on relentlessly. As chairperson and secretary general of PDA, he organized high-profile seminars for government officials, NGOs, and business leaders. He used his gift for publicity to keep the AIDS story in the newspapers, once again making provocative, on-camera visits to the country’s famous red-light districts and telling bar girls and their customers, “This [condom] will help save your life. If you’re not careful you’ll die.” He marshaled expert opinion and saw to it that newspapers and other media were supplied with a steady flow of up-to-date facts. All the while, PDA produced a flood of educational brochures as well as audio- and videotapes for the public and provided AIDS-prevention training for the staffs of government agencies. Observing the Mechai-inspired momentum in late September 1989, an official from the WHO said, “This country has had the quickest response to the problem that we have ever seen.”

But the facts remained grim. By this time, thirty-one Thais had already died of AIDS and there were twenty-five known full-blown cases. Ten thousand were HIV positive and that number was growing by seven hundred a month. Moreover, half of all intravenous drug users were testing positive and the incidence of HIV among prostitutes was clearly

on the rise. Public Health Minister Chuan Leekpai estimated that 6 percent of sex industry workers were infected, but a survey of one thousand female prostitutes in the northern city of Chiang Mai revealed that 44 percent carried the AIDS virus. Medical researchers feared that the true picture might be far worse. To date, eight hundred thousand people have been tested, but that is only 1.5 percent of the country's 55 million population.

In light of this, Mechai clamored for a national policy. In late 1989, the Council of Social Affairs ministers declared "war on AIDS" and tasked the Public Health Ministry to devise an AIDS-prevention strategy to be incorporated in the country's Sixth and Seventh National Development Plans. At the same time, government-linked politicians initiated an anti-AIDS bill in Parliament. As these measures germinated in the months to come, Mechai kept the pressure on Chatichai personally to embrace the AIDS cause. The prime minister, he said, would be remembered in history as "either a savior or the real unwitting devil."

Increasingly, Mechai raised the dangers posed by Thailand's lucrative sex trade, which he now dubbed the "industry of death." Although illegal, brothels operated ubiquitously as so-called massage parlors and nightclubs. In August 1990, he challenged Chatichai to shut the brothels down—not permanently, but for several months. This would cause a great national stir, he argued. Everyone would be talking and thinking about AIDS. And this would create a climate in which three important things could be accomplished. First, prostitution could be made legal and subject to strict supervision, with the use of condoms required. Second, a strong public relations campaign could be mounted "telling parents not to sell their children into prostitution." And third, AIDS education could be introduced into all primary and secondary schools. The aim was to "change the male attitude toward prostitution," he said. "We want to present prostitution as a health issue and as a form of degradation of women."

Mechai reiterated these themes at year's end, when the Chulabhorn Research Institute sponsored an international congress on AIDS in Bangkok. By this time, the number of Thais verified as HIV-positive had climbed to twenty-four thousand. He told participants at the congress that, at current rates of transmission and acceleration, two million Thais could be infected with HIV by the year 2000. Aside from the human costs, this would represent a loss to the Thai economy of U.S.\$5 billion in productivity gains.

On 23 February 1991, Prime Minister Chatichai's government was toppled by a military coup led by Army chief Suchinda Kraprayoon. By this time, Chatichai's three-year-old government was in such a state of ill-repute that virtually no one objected openly. Still, many Thais had hoped that the days of military rule were over. Acting to avert criticism, Suchinda and his junta constituted themselves as the National Peace-Keeping Council and delegated day-to-day management of the government to a civilian prime minister, Anand Panyarachun. Anand, a former

diplomat and prominent businessman and civic leader, proceeded to appoint a cabinet that many people regarded as the best in the country's history. Mechai was one of its members.

As minister to the Prime Minister's Office, Mechai headed the government's information and tourism bureaus and was in charge of the National Zoo. First and foremost, however, he spearheaded the new government's attack on AIDS. At Mechai's urging, Prime Minister Anand himself chaired the National AIDS Prevention and Control Committee, with Mechai and the minister of public health as co-secretaries. It was this committee's task to draw up a comprehensive five-year plan to reduce HIV transmission in Thailand and to mobilize the country's public and private sectors as well as international agencies in the fight against AIDS—a task it had completed by the following September. As chief of the AIDS Policy and Planning Coordination Bureau in the Prime Minister's Office, Mechai was assigned to coordinate all the government's AIDS-related efforts. He became, in effect, Thailand's AIDS czar.

Not surprisingly then, Thailand's enhanced AIDS plan under Prime Minister Anand bore the stamp of Mechai's thinking and methods. Honest, accurate, and timely information was the key. Every government department was required to educate its own staff (and the public it served) about AIDS and given funding to do so. School teachers, district officials, the police, agricultural extension agents—all were to be enlisted and trained. Each of the government's 488 radio stations and five television stations, including the military networks, was required to broadcast a half-minute AIDS message every hour. And everyone, not just government, was to be involved: private schools, the media, religious institutions, NGOs, and business. Mechai prevailed upon movie theaters and video distributors to display AIDS information before the main feature, for example. And he convinced mass-market companies to insert AIDS information in packaging for soap, sanitary napkins, and cosmetics. With government assistance, the insurance industry trained its salespeople to educate its policyholders and potential clients. Meanwhile, government health and social service agencies enhanced their services for AIDS patients, with the explicit proviso—reflecting Mechai's thinking—that such services be humane and non-stigmatizing.

Prime Minister Anand's government did not shut down the sex industry, as Mechai had been advocating. Instead, it initiated a "100-percent condom use" policy whereby, in stages, government's coercive powers were mobilized to make the sex trade safer. Under this scheme, brothel owners in targeted provinces were summoned to a meeting in which they were educated about AIDS and told that their "girls" would be subjected to regular testing for sexually transmitted diseases. If one was found to be infected, the brothel was closed down for one day; at the second instance, for a week; at the third, for a month; at the fourth, for a year. This approach worked because it penalized owners. With characteristic frankness, Mechai explained "If they lose a girl, they can easily get another one. But here they lose money."

Mechai's leading involvement in the Anand government's AIDS initiative naturally affected his role as head of the Tourism Authority of Thailand. For years, many in the country's tourist industry had resisted

Mechai's efforts to publicize the danger of AIDS, all the more in connection with Thailand's sex industry, which attracts legions of European and Asian "sex tourists" each year. To their consternation, but not to their surprise, Mechai did not tone down his message when he became tourism chief. Rather, he made eradication of sex tourism one of his priorities, saying, "We believe it's time that developed countries do something to prevent their citizens from coming out to the developing world to exploit women and children." With a promotional campaign called "Women's Visit Thailand Year," he sought to raise the dignity of Thai women and, at the same time, to expose women from developed countries to see "what their men have got up to." In concert with his efforts to promote "tourism with dignity," Mechai also took steps to protect Thailand's parks and wildlife from predatory tourists and tour operators. Although these measures were not popular, Mechai steadfastly took the view that they were in the country's long-term best interest, and the tourism industry's as well.

Prime Minister Anand stepped aside in favor of a new government following elections in March 1992, only to be returned briefly to power a few months later following violent clashes between pro-democracy advocates and the new government. General Suchinda, the coup leader of 1991 and not, importantly, among the newly elected members of Parliament, had been named prime minister. Mechai retained his ministerial responsibilities, minus tourism, during Anand's brief reprise as premier, but this lasted only until the following September.

Mechai's tenure as a cabinet minister had been brief, less than a year and a half. Even so, there were signs that his efforts had borne fruit. In three years' time, the rate of condom use in Thai brothels had risen from 10 percent to 90 percent, a remarkable behavioral change. During the same period, the government also measured a 77 percent drop in bacterial STDs such as gonorrhea and syphilis. And, most significantly, the rate of HIV transmission among intravenous drug users and female prostitutes had stabilized and even declined in some provinces. Moreover, Mechai was able to note with satisfaction that Bangkok's massage parlors seemed to be doing less business. But as he stepped down, he hastened to point out that these gains were tentative and, indeed, could be squandered if succeeding governments failed to execute vigorously the program launched under Anand.

Once again a private citizen, Mechai returned wholeheartedly to PDA. He guided its efforts to establish local foundations to provide community support for AIDS victims and threw himself into promoting its Thai Business Initiative in Rural Development. Under the T-Bird program, companies such as Toyota and Bangkok Bank initiated livelihood-enhancing projects in their "adopted" villages and funded school lunch programs, AIDS education, low-cost loans, and scholarships for secondary education. Mechai had nursed this project along during all

his years in government. Now, as Thailand's economy boomed and as donations from foreign agencies began to lag, he posited the T-Bird concept as a pragmatic approach to bridging the gap between Thailand's rich and poor. Already, forty-one companies had active projects, from gem cutting and motorcycle repair to embroidery, shoe making, and mushroom farming. Mechai now recruited dozens more.

Among the specific goals of the T-Bird program is to enhance the livelihood prospects of rural women so that they will be less vulnerable to the blandishments of the sex industry. In some villages, for example, women are being trained to cut hair, in others, to sew clothing and raise animals. Everywhere, they are being encouraged to stay in school.

Mechai's life today is busy with work, and this is what he enjoys. (He has given up golf.) Aside from chairing PDA, he serves on national commissions and is a board member of several Thai universities and NGOs, not to mention quite a few companies, whose fees he donates to PDA. He also serves on the boards or advisory committees of a variety of international organizations, such as the Population Council based in New York, the Global Commission on AIDS (part of the Swiss-based WHO), and the World Wildlife Fund. He is asked to advise other countries. And he is showered with praise and awards, including an honorary doctorate from his Australian alma mater, the University of Melbourne, presented in May 1993. His ties to Geelong Grammar School also remain strong. His daughter Sujima has enrolled there in his footsteps.

Where AIDS is concerned, Mechai remains sober. He notes with some alarm that governments in the wake of Prime Minister Anand have not pursued the AIDS policy as rigorously as they should have. There has been "a slowdown," he says. Nevertheless, many of the gains remain. The public knows about AIDS. Condoms are accepted and used. The rate of HIV growth has leveled. Health services have improved. And fewer Thai women are becoming prostitutes. But the country's sex trade remains and continues to be replenished by poor women, many of them these days recruited from uprooted communities of Burmese, Chinese, and Laotian refugees living in northern Thailand. With these women, Mechai notes, the cycle of ignorance is beginning all over again.

How to break the cycle? For Mechai, the answer still lies in changing behavior, in particular, the behavior and attitudes of Thai youths and men. The sexual license that Thai men feel entitled to is not only dangerous, it is also degrading. Men must learn to respect women. During his tenure as head of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Mechai notes, people often told him that Thailand needed a new image. "I would like to challenge that," he says. "We cannot create a new image. We have to change the old reality. Then the image will follow."

James R. Rush

References:

- "AIA T-BIRD: A Step Towards Community Development." *Bangkok Post*, 31 May 1991.
- Berthelsen, John. "Thailand Steps Up the Fight against AIDS." *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 26 September 1989.
- "Big Revamp Planned for Water Works." *Bangkok Post*, 13 April 1982.
- Cantlay, Carolyn. "Thai Family Planner Uses Humor, Good Sense." *Planned Parenthood Review*. N.d.
- Cimi Suchontan. "Mechai Gives Farmers a Fighting Chance." *Bangkok Post*, 8 August 1984.
- Cody, Jennifer. "Helping Girls to Say 'No.'" *The Nation* (Bangkok), 28 August 1992.
- "Combating AIDS a Top National Priority." *Bangkok Post*, 13 October 1989.
- Gray, Denis D. "Thailand Launches Anti-AIDS Campaign." *Asahi Evening News*, 26 January 1990.
- Handley, Paul. "The Lust Frontier." *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 November 1989.
- Hsu Yuen Lin. "Method in the Madness of the Condom King." *South China Morning Post*, 18 November 1984.
- "Interview with Minister Mechai Viravaidya." *Global AIDS News (The Newsletter of the World Health Organization Global Programme on AIDS)*, 1992.
- Mathews, Linda. "What Makes Mechai Run, or How to Curb Births of a Nation." *Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 1976.
- Mechai Viravaidya. "AIDS, Prostitution, and Sexual Culture in Southeast Asia." Paper presented at Awardees' Forum, Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila, 2 September 1994.
- _____. Interview by James R. Rush. Tape recording, September 1994. Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila.
- Mechai Viravaidya, Ardis Venprasitti, Curtis J. Clawson, John S. Galantic, and James C. Kralik. "Corporate Sector Must Help Rural Growth." *The Nation* (Bangkok), 27 October 1989.
- Mechai Viravaidya, Stasia A. Obremsky, and Charles Myers. *The Economic Impact of AIDS on Thailand*. N.p., October 1991.
- "Mechai Urges Greater Private Sector Role at Rural Level." *Business Post*, 22 August 1989.
- "Meechai Weerawaithaya: Dead Customers Don't Buy." *Manager*, 13-16 August 1990.

- Moreau, Ron. "Thailand's 'Mr. Condom.'" *Newsweek*, 10 February 1992.
- _____. "Thailand's War on AIDS: Battling for Hearts and Minds in the Go-Go Bars." *Newsweek*, 8 September 1989.
- Muqbil, Imtiaz. "Mechai: The Man Who Changed Thai Tourism." *Bangkok Post*, 30 March 1989.
- Mytri Ungphakorn, Peter. "Private Firms Join Rural Development: Toyota, Bangkok Bank Take Lead." *The Nation* (Bangkok), 6 February 1986.
- Nagorski, Tom. "Mechai's One Company, One Village Dream." *Business Review*, 15–31 March 1989.
- Neher, Clark D. "Political Succession in Thailand." *Asian Survey* 32, no. 7 (July 1992): 585–605.
- Office of the Prime Minister. *The National AIDS Prevention and Control Program of Thailand*. Bangkok: AIDS Policy and Planning Coordination Bureau, Office of the Prime Minister, n.d.
- Pana Janviroj. "Mechai: Polluters Won't Be Subsidized." *The Nation* (Bangkok), 8 April 1991.
- Promporn Pramualratana. "Thai Perspectives Aired at World's Biggest Conference." *The Nation* (Bangkok), 8 June 1989.
- Saowarop Panyacheewin. "Fostering Hope in the Villages." *Bangkok Post*, 20 February 1991.
- _____. "It Takes Just a Few Drops of Water." *Bangkok Post*, 12 February 1991.
- Tasker, Rodney. "Home-Town Jobs." *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 April 1994.
- "Thailand's Mr. Contraception: Making Family Planning Fun with Games Like 'Cops and Rubbers.'" *Time*, 23 March 1981.
- "Turn the Clock Back on AIDS at Our Peril." *Bangkok Post*, 29 April 1992.
- Wallace, Charles P. "Miracle Man of Thailand." *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1990.
- Wright, Victor Bong. "The Man behind the Image." *The Nation* (Bangkok), 7 December 1986.
- Wyatt, David K. *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Young, Denise. "Campaign against AIDS Puts Curb on Sex Trade." *Seattle Times/Seattle Post Intelligencer*, 24 September 1989.
- Various interviews with and letters from persons acquainted with Mechai Viravaidya and his work.



John White