

This street vendor carts his products through the streets of **Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam**. Vietnamese officials hope that some free-enterprise reforms will help improve the country's economy.



## The Countries of Mainland Southeast Asia

### FOCUS

- ❖ *What are the physical, economic, and cultural characteristics of each country in mainland Southeast Asia?*
- ❖ *What are the political backgrounds of these countries? What are their current political situations?*

From east to west, the countries of mainland Southeast Asia are Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (with Laos to the north and Cambodia to the south), Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma). (See the map on page 531.)

**Vietnam** Vietnam is a long, narrow country that occupies the eastern portion of the Indochina Peninsula. The country's east coast faces the South China Sea. Laos and Cambodia form its rugged western border, and China is to the north. Mountains dominate Vietnam's interior.

Vietnam's population is heavily concentrated in the deltas formed by the Hong River in the north and the Mekong River in the south, and on

the coastal plain between the two deltas. The Vietnamese, who arrived from China more than 2,000 years ago, make up more than 85 percent of the country's population. The largest minority groups are the Chinese, who live mainly in the cities, and the Montagnards, who live in the mountains.

Vietnam, along with Laos and Cambodia, was part of French Indochina. When the French returned to Southeast Asia after World War II, they found that Communist forces (the Vietminh) had gained power in the north. The Vietminh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, demanded independence.

After eight years of fighting, the Vietnamese defeated the French in the north. As a result, in 1954 Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel. North Vietnam established a Communist government, with its capital at Hanoi (ha-NOI). South Vietnam established a government friendly to the United States, with its capital at Saigon (sie-GAHN). Both governments wanted reunification but could not agree on the terms. In 1963, North Vietnamese troops invaded South Vietnam. The U.S. military supported the South Vietnamese forces.

During the Vietnam War, more than 55,000 Americans and more than 2 million Vietnamese were killed. Due largely to the high human costs of the war, the United States withdrew its troops

in 1973. Soon after, the South Vietnamese government collapsed. In 1975, North Vietnamese forces occupied Saigon and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. The country was officially united in 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. More than 1 million South Vietnamese tried to escape the Communist takeover. Seeking a new homeland, many of these refugees found their way to the United States, Australia, and other Western nations.

The long war devastated Vietnam's economy. Soon afterward, the Soviet Union became the country's main trade partner. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Vietnam had to find new trade partners, such as Japan and Singapore. Sweden provided economic aid. Now, after a decade of struggle, the government's economic policy has been refocused on overseas investment and trade. The United States ended a ban on trade with Vietnam in 1994 and restored full diplomatic relations with the country the next year. Most of the economic growth has been in the two main urban areas of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, but even agricultural production has increased.

Vietnam has the resources necessary to build a strong economy. In the north, there are coal, oil, and mineral resources, while the delta of the Hong River is a fertile agricultural region. The south has the productive rice fields of the Mekong Delta as well as rubber plantations. Vietnam is now one of the world's largest rice exporters after Thailand and the United States. Other major exports include oil, rubber, and seafood. Although Vietnam is still a poor nation, it has potential for faster growth. In addition, many Vietnamese can now afford consumer goods such as motorbikes and televisions.

**Laos** Landlocked and mountainous, Laos is one of the poorest countries in the world. It was first unified in the fourteenth century under a Lao prince. From the 1890s until 1954, Laos was under French rule.

Although the country was officially neutral during the Vietnam War, major supply routes for the North Vietnamese crossed Laos. The United States bombed parts of the country in an attempt to block these routes. In 1975, Communist forces took over the monarchy and formed the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Laos's most important crop is rice, but the country also grows tobacco, corn, cotton, and coffee. Hydroelectric power exported to neighboring

Thailand is the nation's major source of income. Lumber is the other leading export. In 1990, in an effort to conserve its tropical forests, Laos banned the export of logs. Illegal logging by corrupt military leaders for export to Japan and other nations continues, however. The country has almost no industry and survives largely on foreign aid.

More than half of the population is made up of Lao, who are closely related to the Thais. The Lao are Buddhists and live mainly in rural valleys, especially along the Mekong River. The remainder of the population consists of highlanders and isolated mountain groups, such as the Hmong people. In total, Laos has more than 50 ethnic groups. The capital and only large city is Vientiane in the Mekong River valley.

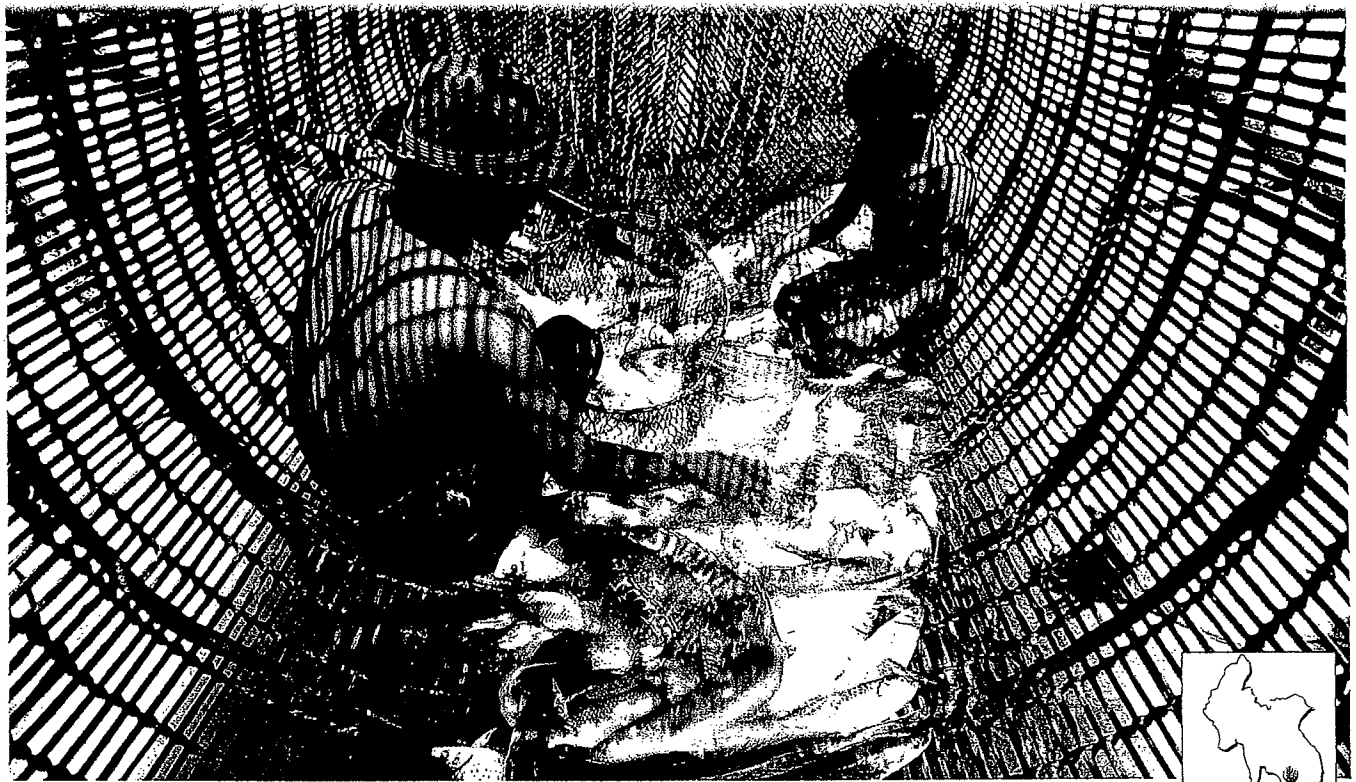
The main problem facing Laos is poverty. More than 80 percent of the people are subsistence farmers who live in small, isolated villages. Most of these villages are not served by roads. There is little government spending on health care, and life expectancy is nearly 20 years less than that in neighboring Thailand.

The government, though Communist, allows privately owned businesses and religious freedom. Since the Vietnam War, more than 10 percent of the Laotian population has fled the country. Many now live in the United States and Australia. Thousands more remain in refugee camps in Thailand.

**Cambodia** Cambodia, the successor of the Khmer Empire, lies between Vietnam and Thailand. Most of its population are Khmer and Buddhist. The people are concentrated in Cambodia's fertile rice-growing region along the Mekong River. Rice and fish are the main food sources. The capital is Phnom Penh, located in the rice-growing region of the south.

Located in the northwest is Tonle Sap, Southeast Asia's largest lake. Tonle Sap supports a fishery and acts as a reservoir during the monsoon season. It helps reduce flooding downstream by filling with overflow water from the Mekong River. After the monsoon, water drains back into the Mekong.

Since independence from France in 1953, Cambodia has experienced much political unrest. During the Vietnam War, the United States bombed North Vietnamese supply lines in Cambodia. In 1975, Communist forces called the Khmer Rouge seized power. The Khmer Rouge



These fishers check the haul in this fish trap at Tonle Sap, a lake in western **Cambodia**. The freshwater lake supports an important fishing industry in the country.

government isolated Cambodia and launched a program to establish a "Khmer peasant nation."

The goals of the Khmer Rouge were similar to those of the Cultural Revolution in China. The methods of achieving a simple, pure society were much more brutal in Cambodia, however. Cities were emptied, the educated were executed, families were separated, and citizens were forced into field labor. More than 1 million Cambodians and others, such as Vietnamese, were killed.

Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia in 1978 and overthrew the Khmer Rouge. Vietnam finally withdrew nearly all of its troops in 1989. Today, Cambodia, one of the world's poorest countries, faces many challenges. Many Cambodians remain in refugee camps, thousands of mines are buried throughout the country, and the government is divided and corrupt. In addition, an entire generation of leaders, educators, and other professionals were executed and the country's resources looted by the Khmer Rouge. Cambodia will need help from the world's nations to make progress.

**Thailand** *Thailand* means "land of the free," and it is the only Southeast Asian country that was not a European colony. The Kingdom of Thailand occupies the central part of the Southeast Asian mainland and extends south into the Malay

Peninsula. Rugged, forested mountains form Thailand's border with Burma in the north and west. The Mekong River forms its eastern boundary with Laos. To the southeast is Cambodia.

The plains along the Chao Phraya River in central Thailand are the most populated and productive part of the nation. The climate is mostly tropical savanna and is driest on the Khorat Plateau in the northeast portion of the country. In the south along the narrow Malay Peninsula, the climate is humid tropical. All of Thailand is subject to seasonal monsoonal rainfall.

Thailand leads the world in rice exports and is a major fish exporter. Sugarcane, corn, and rubber are other export crops. Many of the country's food exports go to Japan, Thailand's major trade partner. Forests provide valuable tropical hardwoods, but extensive forest loss has affected the water supply and has caused other serious environmental problems. Thailand's minerals include tin, tungsten, and lead. The country also has oil resources and large offshore natural-gas deposits in the Gulf of Thailand.

The economy of Thailand has grown rapidly with the help of foreign investment, especially from Japan. The textiles, electronics, and automobile assembly industries have experienced rapid growth, while tourism provides one of the nation's

largest sources of foreign income. Major imports include automobiles and machinery from Japan.

Bangkok, Thailand's largest city and capital, is built on the Chao Phraya. Much of Bangkok is connected by canals, called *klongs*, for which the city is famous. Bangkok also is well known for its palaces and Buddhist monasteries. In recent years, it has become known for its traffic jams and air pollution. As more and more water is drawn out of wells, the city is slowly sinking.

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with a king, and popular support for the royal family is strong. Through much of Thailand's history, however, political power has been in the hands of military leaders.

More than three-quarters of the population is made up of Thais, who are Buddhist. The remaining population includes Chinese, Lao, and many mountain peoples. Along Thailand's eastern border areas are thousands of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. This border region has also been an area of tension between Thailand and neighboring Cambodia and Laos.

**Myanmar** Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, occupies the mountainous northern and western part of the Southeast Asian mainland. It borders China on the north, India and Bangladesh on the

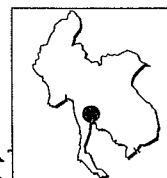
west, and Thailand and Laos on the east. The country's southernmost tip extends to the narrow Isthmus of Kra along the Andaman Sea.

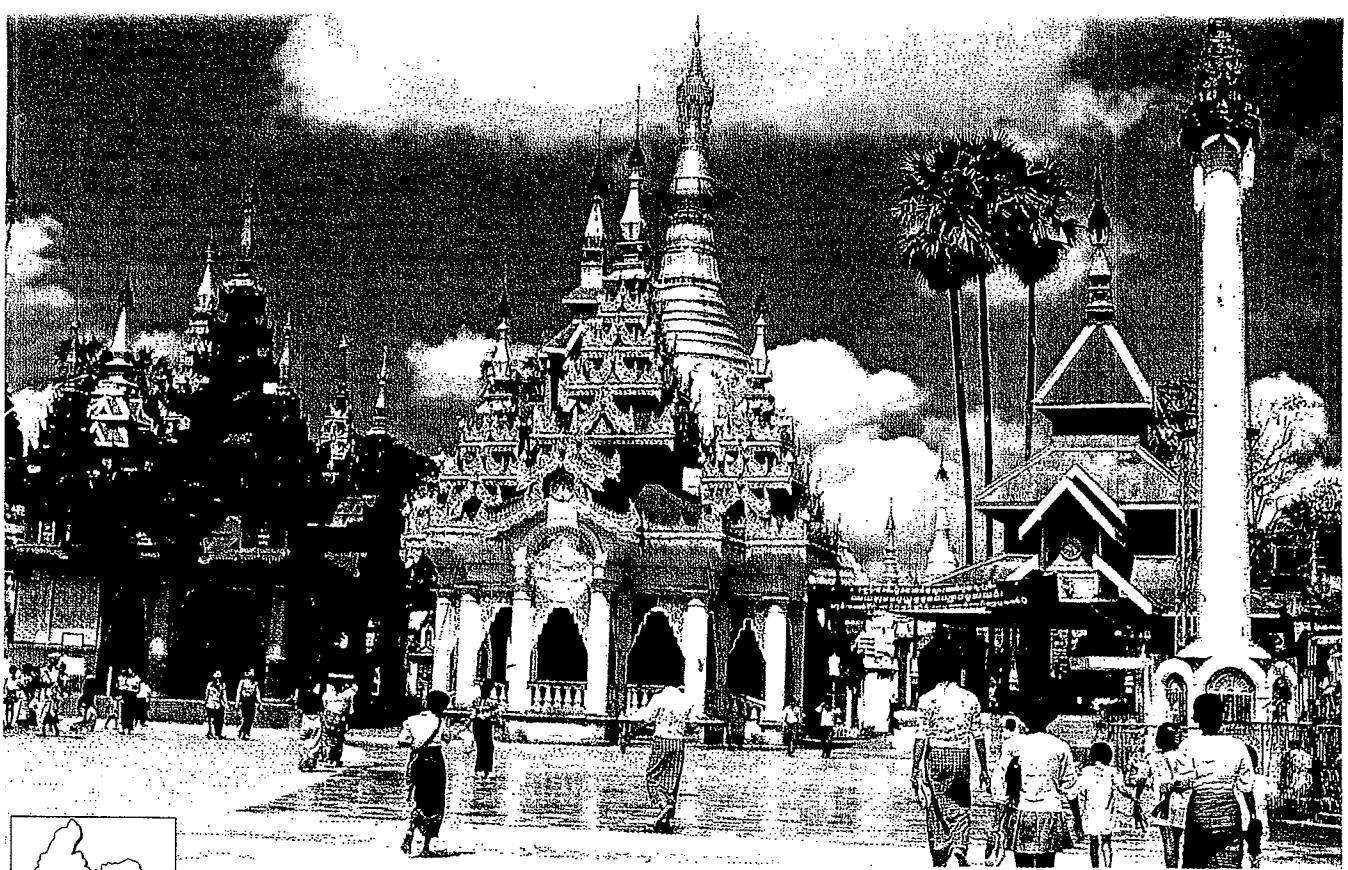
All of Myanmar is tropical and strongly influenced by the monsoon. The southern part of the country has a humid-tropical climate and receives up to 110 inches (279 cm) of rainfall annually, mostly during monsoonal downpours between June and September. Myanmar's northern part, which falls in a mountain rain shadow, is drier and has a tropical-savanna climate. Because mountains block most of the summer monsoon rains from the Indian Ocean, annual rainfall here can be as little as 32 inches (81 cm).

The broad north-south Irrawaddy River valley, much of which is cultivated, dominates the central part of Myanmar. A series of mountain ranges runs north to south over most of the rest of the country. Tropical forests cover much of the nation and contain the world's largest reserves of teak.

Ethnic Burmans form more than half of the population. They are Buddhists and have a culture rich in art, architecture, and literature. Many ethnic minorities live in the mountains, but most of the population is crowded into the Irrawaddy River valley. The country's capital and largest city is Yangon (also called Rangoon).

This *klong* (canal) in **Bangkok, Thailand**, features a floating market. Bangkok's system of canals is important to the local transportation of people and goods.





The Shwe Dagon pagoda, a Buddhist place of worship, is one of the most famous buildings of **Yangon, Myanmar**. Nearly nine of every ten Burmese are Buddhists.

Rice, Myanmar's chief crop, is grown on the river floodplains. The country was once Asia's largest rice exporter, but today rice accounts for only a small part of the country's exports. Instead, lumber and seafood are the major exports. Myanmar also supports a large illegal opium trade. Smugglers distribute the drug as heroin in the United States, Europe, and many other parts of East and Southeast Asia.

Oil production in the lower Irrawaddy River valley is limited and goes to meet local needs. Mines in the northern mountains contain jade, and the central and southern parts of the country are rich in other minerals, including silver, lead, zinc, copper, tin, and tungsten. Offshore gas deposits have been discovered but not yet developed.

Myanmar gained its independence from Britain in 1948. In 1962, a military government took over all business and trade and created a socialist economy cut off from foreign influence. Indians and Chinese who lived in the country were driven out to neighboring nations.

In 1989, the military government changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar, but

the U.S. government still recognizes the country as Burma. Although pro-democracy protests have taken place in the country, the military government remains in power. Government troops continue to battle minority and rebel groups in the northern mountains, and thousands have fled into neighboring Bangladesh to the west. To strengthen its position and the economy, the government now seeks foreign investment. Reformers still are pushing for democratic changes.

## SECTION 2 REVIEW

1. What ethnic groups live in each country of mainland Southeast Asia? To which countries in the region is the production of rice important, and how?
2. How would you characterize political events in the region over the past few decades? What type of government does each country in the region have today?
3. **Critical Thinking** Compare and contrast post-World War II political developments in Vietnam to those in Korea.