

CHIANG MAI CHOKING

# Air pollution too bad, even for the angels, says official

Activists want to convince Chiang Mai authorities that the city's air-pollution problem needs urgent attention. This report by **Pim Kemasingki** is an excerpt from the full article to be printed in Chiang Mai's 'City Life' magazine on Tuesday.

**E**NVIRONMENTALISTS in the northern city of Chiang Mai often cite the “boiled frog” analogy when talking about its air pollution.

“If you put a frog into a bowl of boiling water it will leap out at the first opportunity,” says Duangchan Charoenmuang of the Urban Development Institute Foundation

“But if you place the same frog in tepid water and slowly heat up the bowl, the frog will boil to death without noticing.”

At a recent gathering at the provincial hall of senior officials and academics to discuss the city’s air pollution, Duangchan and her fellow activists offered more than just the frog story.

They cited statistics on the city’s lung-cancer rates and called on officials to take these seriously.

Almost half of all Chiang Mai residents had respiratory problems, they said.

In 1994, 33 per cent suffered breathing problems; by 1999 the figure was 45 per cent.

“Our air is progressively becoming dangerous and we are happily stewing in it,” she told Deputy Governor Prinya Panthong, who heads the Chiang Mai Transport Department, and other civic officials.

“Because the increase in air pollution is gradual, there is no quick significant change to alarm the public.”

A poll of 500 residents of Chiang Mai in 2002 showed that over 70 per cent thought their air was clean.

The amount of microscopic particles in Chiang Mai’s air in the dry months frequently is several times the acceptable level as calculated by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), she said.

Duangchan and fellow researchers called for an immedi-



## From the provinces

### CHIANG MAI

ate ban on urban burning, a weekly “clean air day” to educate the public and the creation of a public transport system to reduce traffic.

“You have sent a chill down my spine,” said Prinya. “Everyone talks about Chiang Mai being a hub for this and a hub for that, but it looks as if we can’t even sort out the problem of our most common denominator – air.

“The angels will soon be finding a new home as our skies are too polluted for them.”

He said the city’s location in a basin put it at a disadvantage. Bangkok and Songkhla were fortunate to have sea breezes to waft away their pollution.

Chiang Mai province has a population of 1.6 million and there are 900,000 cars and 700,000 motorbikes on the roads, causing increasing traffic problems.

Duangchan told the meeting that a tourist from Alaska who had booked a 10-day holiday in Chiang Mai, left after two days and sent a letter saying the city hadn’t lived up to its brochure claims.

“He was talking specifically about air pollution. Surely it’s an important issue for us all,” she said.

Po Garden, a researcher with the Unit for Social and Environmental Research, said there was a serious problem with 2.5-micron particulate matter, which is so tiny it could easily pen-

trate the lining of the lungs.

Health effects could include premature death, respiratory disease, chronic bronchitis, and decreased lung function in children and asthma sufferers.

Po said a recent test showed Chiang Mai had double the EPA standard levels of PM2.5. One cause was the local habit of burning yard waste, he said.

“Smoke and particulates that we breathe in town probably also come from the seasonal burning of crop residues and from clearing of vacant land around the city. Chiang Mai is surrounded by mountains and the air frequently gets trapped in the valley,” Po said.

There should be no burning before the end of May, he said, and residents should use yard waste for compost instead of burning it. “Rotting is a natural process and decay is inevitable – it works for everyone.



SMOG HANGS OVER CHIANG MAI, where the surrounding mountains make the pollution problem even worse.

“Pile the waste up and water it like a plant and if you want to speed up the process sprinkle on some urea fertiliser and the [bacteria] will eat it all up,” Po said. When composted, the waste is a valuable fertiliser and it causes no air pollution.

Asked what she would do if she had the power, Duangchan said: “I would tell people how serious the issue was and get the public involved. I would set yearly targets for [pollution] reduction and meet them. I would solve the garbage problem effectively and make recycling compulsory.”

Most of all, she added, “The people must stand up and start claiming our city and feel as though we own it”.

### Incidence of lung cancer in Thailand

2000 (Cases)

