

# Municipality plays down environmental concerns

■ *The Nation*

CRITICS SEE Chiang Mai as teetering on the edge of environmental disaster – officials say the claims are greatly exaggerated.

City Clerk Ken Santitham and Rongrong Duriyapunt, the municipal official directly responsible for the environment, deny the northern province is on the verge of a pollution crisis.

"I think the academics are exaggerating," Ken said. "Our air problems are not that severe. Our measurements show that there are peak times when they are high, but on average it's not that far above the accepted norm."

"We have been working for years now on the US-supported Maryland Project and we have created a master plan for Chiang Mai's air problems."

Authorities have fined people

for burning trash, published pamphlets and raised public awareness, planted trees and paved roads to control dust, he said.

Further, officials are trying to sort out a public transportation system currently in the hands of what they describe as a "very unreasonable and difficult" songtaew association.

"I think that our record has been impressive. A number of on-the-job training programmes have been implemented and a number of our employees have visited the United States, including the Lord Mayor – this shows commitment," Ken said.

"Also a detailed emission inventory of Chiang Mai's sources of air pollution was developed that will serve as a building block for scientific research and an ongoing management plan," he added.

Rongrong, however, com-

plained that the environment budget was just Bt400,000 a year, which covered her salary. "This is why we aren't as effective as we could be," she said.

"If it hadn't been for the help of the US government we would have achieved far less. I am trying my best to get a bigger environmental budget next year and in the meanwhile there is not that much that I can do."

US Consul General Eric S Rubin agrees. "The academics are correct in that there has been no real effort in this matter until recently, and the authorities are certainly complicit," Rubin said. He has been liaising between the municipality and the Maryland Department of the Environment, which produced the 2002 Air Quality Management Plan, and lately with Portland City, which took over the project when the

state of Maryland had a change in administration.

"I think that accusations can sometimes be overly harsh," he said. "Ten to 15 years ago, I have heard, the word environment didn't even figure in the normal vocabulary of Chiang Mai politics. Today, every time that there is a plan or a project, the word environment pops up."

"The Doi Suthep cable car project was shelved because of environmental concerns, and there were demands for transparency in the Night Safari and Doi Luang cable car projects."

"In the 1980s everyone thought tourists wanted to stay in high-rise condos. We now know that they don't – this is all part of a broader shift in attitude," Rubin said.

However, he said he believed that the central government has

not given the power or funding to the municipality to enable it to effectively combat pollution problems.

"I believe the municipality is committed to fight the air pollution battle," he said.

Also, Chiang Mai authorities need to communicate more with the people, he said.

"For instance there is much grumbling about the dredging of the Ping River," he said.

"People think that the river is being dredged to make way for traffic. That is very far from the truth, because what traffic is there really apart from a few tourist boats?"

"The truth is that years and years of toxic sediment has been festering in the river bottom. This needs to be removed to both increase the flow of the river as well as to clean it of toxic elements."