

## Thailand offers rehab help to war-ravaged Sri Lanka

Amal Jayasinghe, *Agence France Presse*, 08/15/03

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra Friday offered help to rebuild Sri Lanka's war-torn areas and vowed to boost bilateral trade to a billion dollars. Addressing the Sri Lankan parliament, Thaksin said Thailand was ready to join the international community in supporting Sri Lanka's reconstruction effort and also granted 20 million dollars in export credits to the island. "We shall be pleased to share our experience in the reconstruction of East Timor, Afghanistan and now Iraq, especially in demining, education, health care, agricultural technology and rural development," Thaksin said. His address to the 225-member legislature, the first by a foreign dignitary since then-British premier Margaret Thatcher was accorded the honour in April 1985, focused on economic, cultural and religious ties. Thaksin said Thailand was expecting an economic growth rate of 6.0 percent this year, up from 5.3 percent last year, putting the country well on the way to making a full recovery from the 1997 economic crisis.

"Now that Thailand is well back on track, I am certain that this visit of mine to Sri Lanka, a country of such long history of cultural links with Thailand, will open a new chapter in our already close and cordial relations," he said. Shortly before leaving the island, Thaksin worshipped at one of Buddhism's holiest shrines -- the Temple of the Tooth -- in the picturesque hill resort of Kandy. The temple was bombed by Tiger rebels in 1998.

He was seen off at the island's only international airport, which was also bombed by the Tigers in July 2001, by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, officials said. Thaksin said he had "personally instructed" his officials to extend maximum assistance for the staging of Sri Lankan peace talks, which opened at the Thai naval base of Sattahip in September last year.

"We were happy to be of any assistance to contribute towards peace, harmony and prosperity in this land of friendship, and wish you well in your endeavours," he said. In official talks with Wickremesinghe, Thaksin discussed increasing bilateral trade to over a billion dollars within three years, up from the current 160 million dollars. The visiting premier said there was tremendous potential for cooperation in tourism, a crucial sector for the two economies, and spoke of establishing direct air links between Colombo and the Thai resort of Phuket.

Thaksin and Thai business leaders travelling with him held talks on trade ties and the prospect of joint ventures, officials said. The prime ministers Friday witnessed the finalising of the minutes of the Thai-Sri Lanka Joint Commission headed by foreign ministers Surakiat Sathirathai of Thailand and his host Tyrone Fernando. In his address to parliament, Thaksin made no reference to new developments at home following the arrest in Thailand of Hambali, Asia's most wanted man and the former operations chief of regional terror network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) blamed for the Bali bombings in October last year and the attack at Jakarta's JW Marriott last week.

However, he told Thai journalists travelling with him that the arrest was possible thanks to a tip-off from local residents. "The arrest is in line with the UN resolution (against terrorism) and the cooperation of many allied countries," he said. On Thursday Thaksin vowed to crack down on terror groups amid reports that Sri Lanka's Tiger rebels were using his country as a transit point for gun running. Thaksin said Thursday he would not allow Thai soil to be used to destabilise, plan or wage terror attacks against any other nation. "We don't want anyone to use our land for this," he said.