

## **Rural settlement**

The dominant settlement pattern in Thailand remains the rural village, where the primary occupation is wet-rice cultivation. Migration to urban areas has increased significantly since the mid-20th century, but the majority of the country's people still consider their principal place of residence to be the village, even when they live and work for extended periods in urban environments.

There are a number of settlement types that vary depending on location. Villagers in the northeast live in houses clustered together on higher ground, surrounded by rice fields. In the north, by contrast, where most villages are found in the alluvial basins of major rivers, population growth and improvements in transportation have tended to disperse the villages away from the rivers and toward the main railroads and highways, reducing the amount of land available for growing rice. The north also contains the majority of the country's hill settlements, which are similar to, though smaller than, the nucleated villages of northeastern Thailand.

The Chao Phraya delta is densely settled along areas of high ground that are free from flooding. A vast network of irrigation canals has modified the pattern of settlement and transportation. The mobility offered by small motorboats utilizing the canals has made it possible to establish villages to the east and west, away from the rivers. New highways have also modified settlement patterns, especially at river crossings and canals where new towns have appeared.

In the south and southeast, plantations, especially those producing fruit, rubber, and palm oil, are scattered along the fertile slopes, alternating with the low and narrow rice fields; the villages are interspersed among these plantations and fields. Most are linked by good roads and highways. Alluvial deposits containing tin, no matter how remote, can be reached by road and waterway. Settlement is almost continuous along both sides of the peninsula. Many people living in coastal settlements have long been fishermen, taking their boats out into the Andaman Sea or Gulf of Thailand.

## **Urban settlement**

Urbanization in Thailand, as in many other developing countries, has proceeded rapidly since World War II, but growth has been highly uneven. The Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area, which generally includes Bangkok proper and its twin city, Thonburi, and the contiguous cities of Samut Prakan to the southeast and Nonthaburi to the north, remains the dominant and only major urban centre in the country. The total population of this area is some 30 times larger than that of Udon Thani, the next largest city, and several times larger than that of the next 10 largest cities combined. Nonetheless, cities such as Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchasima, Udon Thani, and Nakhon Ratchasima in the northeast; Chiang Mai in the north; Hat Yai, Surat Thani, and Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south; and Pattaya on the eastern seaboard grew quite significantly since the last decades of the 20th century and have assumed some of the urban characteristics of Bangkok.

## **Demographic trends**

Thailand's population rose rapidly in the 20th century, especially during the period between 1950 and 1970, when the government supported such growth. Since then, however, official policies and private family-planning programs have slowed this growth dramatically, making the country a model for other countries seeking to reduce their high population growth rates. The population profile that resulted from the earlier increase has nonetheless placed demands on the country's education, housing, health, and employment systems.

From the mid-19th century to World War II, immigration, primarily from China, contributed markedly to the growth of the population. In the postwar period immigration has been restricted, and most of the refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam who obtained asylum in Thailand after the wars ended in those countries were not allowed to become permanent residents of Thailand. Some of the refugees were resettled in other countries, and a small number were repatriated to their own countries. Since the late 1980s hundreds of thousands of

people from Myanmar have entered Thailand as refugees, as illegal immigrants, or, in a small number of cases, as legal guest workers. Although only a few of these people have been granted the right to remain permanently in Thailand, many have lived in the country for years or even decades.

Internal migration, notably the movement of people from the countryside to Bangkok, has produced major changes in the society. Bangkok has received a major share of all interregional migrants, most from the central and northeast regions. Although roughly one-third of Thailand's total population is classified as urban, the figure does not take into account the large number of people who work primarily in urban areas while still retaining official residence in their villages. As in most other regions of the world, these migrants are mainly young adults less than 30 years of age.