

All road contracts plagued with graft

State audit body slams local authority work

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Road and bridge construction projects under the supervision of local administrative bodies are all plagued with corruption or sub-standard contract work, a study from the Office of the Auditor-General has revealed. A study of road and bridge construction contracts undertaken by tambon and provincial administrative bodies, worth 13,552 million baht, revealed that "not a single contract of the 2,096 contracts studied was transparent", according to State Audit Commissioner Kriengsak Watanawarangkoon.

"We have inspected more than 100 road and bridge building projects throughout the country this year, and not one of them was constructed the way it was supposed to be built under the contract," said Mr Kriengsak, referring to the study, called the Distribution of Fiscal Year 2004-2005 Budget Requested for the Construction and Repair of Bridges and Roads.

In some projects where a road was supposed to be a certain length, it was built more than one kilometre shorter. The money put aside for that extra bit of road could not be found and probably went into someone's pockets.

The study said corruption in the tambon administration organisation of Ratchada in Phuket province amounted to one million baht to five million baht.

One project worth 48 million baht was to build a bridge to connect Sirae island to Phuket town, with four million baht set aside for a temporary road until the bridge was completed.

However, the temporary road was never built and the four million baht put aside for it just vanished, said Mr Kriengsak.

Surin's provincial administration organisation wrote in one contract that one million baht was needed for transport costs and obtaining soil and earth.

However, the soil was dug from the area where a road was being built at no extra cost.

One of the smaller cases involved the tambon administration organisation of Mae Wadi in Roi Et province. A road was supposed to be built with steel-reinforced concrete. However, the concrete was sub-standard. Under the Power Decentralisation Act, local administrative bodies get funding from the Interior Ministry for use according to their needs.

Construction projects proposed by members of local administrative bodies are subject to scrutiny by local councils.

Mr Kriengsak said the problem was people in small communities knew each other and often shared business interests, so for a corrupt contract to pass through the local council was relatively easy.

It could be in people's interests to give a dodgy contract the nod.

The State Audit Commission (SAC) has filed nearly 100 complaints as criminal lawsuits with police or the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC), or in minor cases requested salary cuts for the individuals involved to compensate for the money lost from irregularities. The SAC on its own authority could also fine 10-12 times the pay of an accused person's earnings if a case can be proven.

The SAC yesterday released a code of conduct for local administrative bodies to follow in drawing up contracts.

The Association of Provincial Administration Organisations of Thailand disputed the SAC's findings, insisting only a small number of local bodies were corrupt and that spending of public money must go through several checks to ensure it was spent honestly and that contracts were transparent.

Association president Witoon Chatpatimapong said the local bodies accused of fraud represented only a minority

The country has more than 8,000 local bodies comprising more than 6,700 tambon administration organisations, 1,200 municipalities, and 75 provincial administration organisations as well as Bangkok and Pattaya.

He said local administrations were new bodies and needed time to develop but things were looking up.

“We have agencies looking over our shoulder at each and every step.

“For example, tambon administration organisations are under the eye of local civil societies, and district officials and provincial administration organisations are monitored by provincial councils.

“Then there are governors, various regulatory agencies including the SAC, and complaints can be filed with the Administrative Court,” said Mr Witoon.

As a result, few irregularities could be found at local administrative bodies, contrary to what the report suggested.

“The problem concerns individuals. You can't just assume the entire organisation is at fault,” Mr Witoon said.