SCIENCE

Science in Southeast Asia

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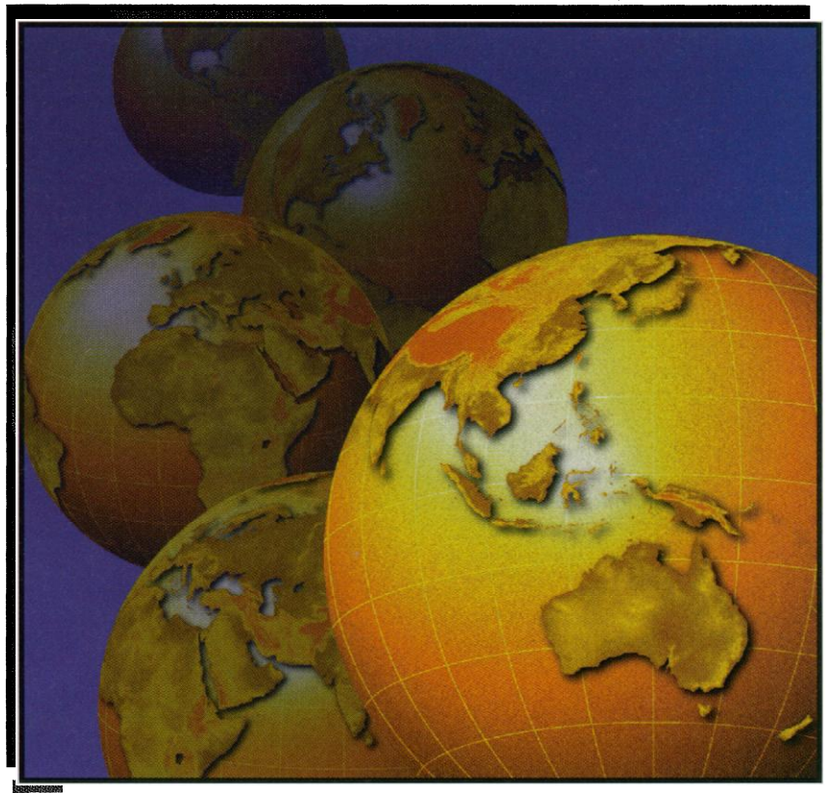

For more than a decade, a surging regional economy has given the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines a chance to build up their countries' capacity to do science. The results are evident in labs and developments across the region, including a new university rising from the forest in Sarawak, Malaysia; a top-class volcanology center in the Philippines; a biomedical institute in Indonesia that draws on a century-old tradition of Dutch research; and a multimillion-dollar basic biology initiative in Thailand.

Such developments have won an appreciative audience among a handful of researchers in the industrial world. But they are not widely known in the West, which pays at best sporadic attention to events in Southeast Asia. That anonymity ended last fall, however, when a currency crisis brought on by unwise financial management practices spread across the region and triggered fears of a global crisis. Now, the most critical issue facing scientists in all four countries is whether the gains of the past 10 years will be slowed, or even reversed, under the stringent fiscal measures being adopted.

This Special News Report takes a look at what these four countries have been doing to develop their homegrown science—from creating a pool of scientific talent and injecting more peer review into decisions on research spending, to strengthening universities and collaborating with foreign institutions. Rather than focusing on individual countries, the section explores broad issues that stretch across the entire region. It is peppered with the stories of people who are setting down and carrying out the policies and the research that will allow their countries to compete internationally.

We make no claims to be comprehensive in a survey this brief. Rather, our aim is to provide a broad-brush picture of science in the region, with some fine detail for emphasis and illustration. We hope that you will find the articles interesting and that you will share your reactions with us.

–Jeffrey D. Mervis and Dennis Normile