KHALEEJ TIMES . 26 OCT 84

Tracking down drug-trekkers

By Bertil Lintner

BANGKOK — The wild and rugged hills of the Golden Triangle—where the borders of Thailand, Burma and Laos intersect—provide ideal terrain for both the cultivation of opium and the guerrillas who make a living from it.

For years, nationalist and communist insurgents—as well as purely business-oriented organisations such as the Shan United Army (SUA) of the notorious drug kingpin Khun Sa—have profited from the drug trade in the region, which supplies an estimated 500 to 600 tons of opium a year.

On July 4, however, a rebel army in Burma's Shan state which previously has been closely associated with this opium trade, took the unprecedented step of burning nearly 70kg of assorted drugs, captured in an ambush of a convoy belonging to the outlawed Communist Party of Burma (CPB).

A bonfire

"From now on, no opium trafficking will be permitted in our territory. Drug suppression shall not be used as a pretext for attacking us and we'll try to find a more respectable way of financing our activities," said Mo Heing, leader of the 2,500-strong Thailand Revolutionary Army (TRA), as he lit a bonfire of 47kg of raw opium and 21kg of heroin base.

The border price for those drugs would amount to about $22,000, but converted into pure heroin, it could have fetched as much as seven million dollars in the streets of New York, Amsterdam or West Berlin.

The drug burning resulted from the first successful attempt in many years to forge some kind of unity among the traditionally splintered ranks of the Shan rebels.

Last year, Mo Heing made several pleas for unity among the Shans. As a result, on April 1 of this year, his own Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) merged with elements from another group, the Shan State Army (SSA), and became the TRA.

Two months after the unification of the two forces, an ambush was laid on a convoy of 100 CPB-soldiers and porters, carrying opium and heroin base to the Thai border near the TRA's headquarters, Mo Heing said.



Part of nearly 70kg of narcotics, plus weapons, captured after ambushing a convoy

Fighting raged for several days, and when the dust had settled on the battlefield, the TRA captured 11 of the communists along with arms and the 68kg of narcotics.

According to one of the captured porters, he had been hired by a high-ranking CPB officer to carry the drugs to Thailand. Each porter carried eight to 10kg of opium on a trek that originated in the CPB's area near the Sino-Burmese border.

Trafficking in opium has been a main source of income for Burma's communist insurgents since Peking in 1978 decided to scale down its generous aid to the 14,000-strong, ultra-leftist CPB which had supported the "Gang of Four" during China's Cultural Revolution.

By striking at a CPB-opium convoy and washing its hand of the drug trade, the TRA may have made some political gains, but economically it will hit the organisation hard. A Thai intelligence source said: "If the TRA is really sincere in this, it could be suicidal since there are no other sources of income in the area. Tax on the transit of opium has always been the most important revenue for all insurgents in Shan state."

Thai intelligence sources and Western drug officials claim that few opium traders have passed through the TRA's territory during the past year, apparently intimidated by the SUA. They say it is obvious that the TRA now is trying to make the best out of a difficult situation by turning an economic disadvantage into a political gain.

Diplomatic sources in Bangkok have also expressed concern over a possible collusion between the business-orientated SUA—which does not pose any secessionist threat—and the central Burmese government in Rangoon.

The rapid build-up of the SUA and its increasing aggressiveness against rebel groups like the TRA, could be a result of that policy of tacit cooperation, said a ranking diplomat.

Shan rebels have been up in arms against Rangoon since 1958 but so far, they have not received outside support, or managed to win any kind of international recognition. Whether the TRA can succeed in its burning of opium and heroin and attempts to ban drug traders from its territory remains to be seen.—*DPA Features*