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Drug lord Khun Sa's troubles are mounting.

The Noose Tightens

Khun Sa faces a day of reckoning

By Bertil Lintner in Chiang Mai

It's as regular as rain. Each year, with the advent of the dry season, Khun Sa's demise is predicted. Then a few months later, the Burmese army's counter-insurgency drive grinds to a muddy halt amid reports that the Sino-Shan opium warlord is down but not out. And then the Golden Triangle gets back to business for another year.

This time, however, Khun Sa's survival won't be a matter of course. Burma's military rulers have ordered a massive troop build-up next to his territory, after first isolating it by striking a series of ceasefire deals with other ethnic rebel groups. Khun Sa's supply lines from Thailand are also at risk, with Bangkok pledging last month to cut them off. In addition, his movement has been weakened by ethnic tensions, expressed in the recent mutiny of a top lieutenant.

Military intelligence sources say elements of 20 government battalions have entered the area between the Salween River and the Thai border since the beginning of June. These units could total nearly 10,000 troops when fully deployed. They have already set up firebases on the southern flank of the territory controlled by Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army, or MTA. The deployment was made possible by a March ceasefire agreement between Ran-

goon and ethnic Karenni rebels, who control the deployment area.

With an additional 2,000 government troops concentrated north of Doi Lang, another MTA stronghold, most observers of the situation in the Golden Triangle expect major military action, maybe even before the rains end in November.

The Burmese army will face an MTA that has been economically weakened by a nearly two-year government blockade of Salween River ferry crossings north of Khun Sa's base area of Homong. The blockade has pinched supplies of the MTA's lifeline: opium from the fields of northern Burma, which it refines into exportable heroin in labs near the Thai border. Now, Thai officials say, those labs are cranking out amphetamines or heroin mixed with amphetamines.

"The MTA's been strapped for cash for more than a year," says a narcotics official in northern Thailand. "They're switching to amphetamines, but they mix it because it's of poor quality, as it's getting harder—and more expensive—for the MTA to hire good chemists. The area has become a war zone."

Khun Sa's most important remaining supply routes, through Thailand, now may also be at risk. Though Thailand has been protesting for years that it can't seal off its long and porous border with Burma, Thai Defence Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh led a military delegation to Rangoon in September and promised to try to do just that.

Burma has kept the main Tachilek-Mae Sai border crossing shut since March, when it accused the Thais of letting the MTA attack Tachilek from Thai territory. Chavalit, with a view to re-opening the border and normalizing the lucrative trade between the two countries, promised to cut the MTA's supply lines from Thailand.

The MTA's problems aren't all external. Tensions between the circle of ethnic-Chinese businessmen who control the MTA's economy and its more nationalist Shan rank-and-file erupted into open mutiny a few months ago. Led by veteran fighter Bo Dewing, a Shan who was once the MTA's nominal commander, and Kan Yawt, a young former member of a Shan State literary movement, the mutineers are said to number between 1,000



and 6,000 men—depending on the source's bias for or against Khun Sa.

The breakaway group, which calls itself the Shan State National Army, declared that it was opposed to "Chinese businessmen using the Shan national cause to conceal their involvement in the drug trade." This was an obvious reference to Khun Sa himself, who is half-Shan and half-Chinese, as well as to his Manchurian-born chief of staff, Chang Shu-chuan.

The mutineers also criticized the MTA for summarily executing villagers and recruiting very young boys into the force's ranks. They further accused Khun Sa—whom they referred to by his Chinese

name, Chang Chifu—of having ordered the assassination of many Shan national leaders. While sources close to Khun Sa may be right in claiming that Burmese military intelligence had a hand in the split, many Shans concede that the underlying grievances are real.

These developments augur poorly for Khun Sa, but they don't necessarily mean the drug trade will suffer. Other ethnic armies stand ready to take the warlord's place—armies that don't have Rangoon to worry about.

Since June, nearly 3,000 Wa, Akha, Kachin, Lahu and Palaung troops—mostly forces of the former Communist Party of Burma, which made peace with Rangoon in 1989—have agreed to join the Burmese army's campaign against the MTA. A fierce battle took place near Doi Lang on September 19.

The alliance between the Burmese army and these forces, which are Khun Sa's rivals for control over the trade, has raised questions about Rangoon's intentions. "There are now more heroin refineries in the former CPB area than under Khun Sa's control," says the Thai narcotics official. "Most of their business is being conducted through China, but if they manage to snatch Doi Lang from Khun Sa, they'll have a secure route down to Thailand as well."

So the Golden Triangle may indeed get back to business after the dry season, even without Khun Sa. As the narcotics official put it: "There'll just be another cast of characters running the trade."

The Chinese Connection

Twenty Burmese battalions may be enough to bottle up Khun Sa, but they can't change the law of supply and demand. The bulk of the Golden Triangle's heroin production is now making its way to market via the Chinese province of Yunnan, courtesy of the United Wa State Army, narcotics officials say.

The 15,000-strong Wa army is the main remnant of the former Communist Party of Burma's guerrilla force. The communist army received massive amounts of military aid from China before it fractured into four ethnic groups in the late 1980s, with the hill-tribe rank-and-

file chasing their old leaders into exile.

Most Western observers had assumed that China's contact with those armies ended then. They were intrigued, therefore, by the inclusion of a man named Lee Hsu-le, or Aung Myint, in recent Wa army delegations to Rangoon.

Officially vice-chief of staff of the Wa army, Aung Myint is an ethnic Chinese from Kawlin in upper Burma. He fled to China in the wake of Burma's 1967 anti-Chinese riots and was trained by Chinese intelligence before returning in 1968 to the Burmese communist "liberated area,"

where he became personal adviser to the party chairman, Thakin Ba Thein Tin. When the Wa rank-and-file revolted against the party leadership in April 1989, he escorted Thakin Ba Thein Tin into exile in China—only to return to Burma a few months later to join the mutineers.

An Asian intelligence official speculates that the Wa's growing role in the drugs trade, together with their troop strength, makes them too important for the Chinese to ignore. "After all, the Wa have more troops along the Chinese border than Khun Sa has along the Thai frontier," he says. ■ Bertil Lintner