NARCOTICS

Wandering warlord

Opium king Khun Sa will meet with resistance in any attempt to re-establish a Thai stronghold

By A Correspondent

Mae Hong Son, northern Thailand: After apparently failing to re-establish himself in the Burmese border enclave of Doi Larng, Shan Chinese opium warlord Khun Sa is now making a new attempt to the southwest. According to eyewitness accounts and local intelligence sources, hundreds of heavily armed Shan United Army (SUA) soldiers are massing in rebel-held hill country in Burma north of Mae Hong Son, Thailand's northwestern province.

The SUA contingents arrived after a long and strenuous march from their previous strongholds at Doi Larng and reportedly even from Ban Hin Taek, from where they were driven more than a year ago by Thai Government forces (REVIEW, Feb. 19, '82). They are reportedly surveying the area, trying to regain strength and to forge military as well as trading links with other armed insurgent groups.

Although the SUA tried to move secretly, Thai spotter aircraft shadowed the columns as they proceeded along the border, and measures are believed to have been taken already to prevent the SUA from infiltrating into Thailand once again. "For the Thais, it's now become a matter of face," noted one local observer. "They have shown the world that they mean business when dealing with the narcotics overlords and they just can't leave the job half-done."

Even if the SUA still has a considerable presence on the other side of the border, its chances of setting up new headquarters near the Thai border are regarded as slim by most analysts. Any battle for the Mae Hong Son border area would be bitter. Khun Sa managed to slip back into Thailand just a few months after the evacuation of SUA soldiers from Ban Hin Taek in January last year only to be driven out a second time by a fierce Thai counter-attack.

Last July the SUA confronted forces from the Burmese Communist Party in a series of clashes at Doi Larng, and Khun Sa was able to play his strongest card against the Thais — that he was defending Thailand from communist penetration, a notion local Thai authorities had been willing to accept until the battle of Ban Hin Taek. The Thais had previously treated the SUA and its clandestine activities with benign neglect.

But this time it did not work: the Thais sealed the border and rejected the possibility of any conciliatory steps towards the SUA. For this reason, local analysts argue, the SUA seems naive in believing that it can manage in Mae Hong Son what it has already failed to do in both Ban Hin Taek and Doi Larng.

The SUA initially entered the Mae Hong Son area in 1977. At that time, Khun Sa aide Chang Puak — a warlord and former ally of Lo Hsing-han, Khun Sa's predecessor as opium king in the Golden Triangle — brought down troops from Ban Hin Taek to the border crossing point at Namonawn. Trading links were established between Mae Hong Son and Taunggyi, the Shan state capital, and considerable amounts of raw opium, jade and other contraband has been transported along this route over the years.



BERTIL LINTNER

SSA troops: taxing the SUA.

In-fighting in the SUA's camp, however, resulted in Chang Puak being killed by his own men in 1978. Since then, the commander of the SUA's Mae Hong Son forces has been Ronald Chang, or Khun Hseng, Khun Sa's uncle and one of the few well-educated officers among the SUA's top leadership.

So far, the Mae Hong Son area has been one of secondary importance to the SUA. The Namonawn camp has never housed more than soldiers, and control of the area has been in the hands of a rival organisation, the Shan State Army (SSA), to whom the SUA has had to pay taxes for jade being transported through its territory. The opium convoys are believed to have been conducted along more secret trading routes in the jungle.

Now, however, with the strengthening of the SUA's forces at the Mae Hong Son border, the situation has changed drastically. No clashes have occurred as yet and SSA officers in the area seem to be confident that they can handle the new and more dangerous conditions.

Since the SSA is extremely short of ammunition and has been undergoing severe financial difficulties during the past year, it is likely that they will try to solve the problem diplomatically rather than through military means.

It is still too early to say what might happen, but it is certain the Thai authorities are prepared to counter any SUA attempt to set up a new base area in Mae Hong Son. Apparently, many SUA soldiers are aware of this. Large numbers of them have already defected. Some are hiding in small villages in Mae Hong Son or Amphoe Pai. Others have returned to their homes in Shan state. The defectors tell of low morale within the SUA, and confidence in the SUA commanders' ability to rebuild Khun Sa's shattered forces is reportedly declining.

For SUA leaders, the next few months — or even weeks — will thus be important for the future of their army. Mae Hong Son will be the SUA's last stand: if they fail there, they will have nowhere to go. ■

