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AGREEMENT

Burma cease-fire could end decades of conflict

Myanmar (Burma) and the insurgent Mong Tai Army (MTA), headed by opium warlord Khun Sa, have concluded a cease-fire agreement that could end decades of fighting in Burma's north-east Golden Triangle region.

The MTA, with an estimated 12 000 to 15 000 well-equipped troops, was the last major rebel army opposing Burma's military controlled central government. Since 1989, over a dozen ethnic-based rebel armies operating in the country have struck similar deals with Yangon (Rangoon), allowing them a high degree of autonomy in their own areas in return for stopping fighting.

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Thousands of government troops were deployed last October to positions in the hills overlooking the town of Homong, Khun Sa's headquarters. The town is situated near the Thai border, opposite Mae Hong Son. The MTA responded by secretly contacting the local Burmese Army commander in the major garrison town of Taunggyi, and began negotiating an agreement in November.

On 22 December the MTA surrendered several key positions along the Thai border under a preliminary cease-fire accord. Late last month their

base at Doi Lang was handed over to the government. Soon after this, a Burmese helicopter landed in Homong to pick up a three-man MTA delegation headed by Khun Sa's uncle, Khun Hseng.

The MTA delegation concluded a peace pact in Rangoon, and on 1 January government troops began a peaceful entry into Homong - a sprawling community of 10 000 to 20 000 inhabitants with electricity, schools, hospitals, a well-laid grid of roads and a comparatively efficient MTA-run administration.

There has, as yet, been no official confirmation of the deal. It is likely to upset the US Drug

Enforcement Administration, which has for several years encouraged Rangoon to move militarily against Khun Sa. A federal grand jury in Brooklyn, New York, indicted Khun Sa on 15 January 1990 on heroin trafficking charges. At least 20 of his top aides - including peace negotiator Khun Hseng and MTA chief of staff Chang Chu-shuan - have since seen similar charges in the USA.

Burma's sector of the Golden Triangle produces over 80 per cent of the estimated 2000 to 2500 tons of raw opium harvested in the country annually. More than 60 per cent of the heroin sold in the USA after being refined from opium originates from Burma, and Khun Sa has for years been seen as a major player in this trade.

Other drug warlords, among them commanders of the now-defunct Communist Party of Burma, have, since the 1989 cease-fires, taken over much of the trade and Burma's opium production is estimated to have more than doubled.