

THE NARCO-TERRORIST

DESPITE ITS IMPRESSIVE arsenal of surface-to-air missiles, heavy machine guns, and mortars—turned over in part to Yan-gon in the wake of his surrender a month ago—it was the revolver and dynamite which were the main weapons of Khun Sa's Mong Tai (Shan State) Army when it came to direct action. The purpose of the heavy weapons was to deter any rival party from attacking his opium convoys or the heroin refineries under his control. According to an anti-narcotics official: "In essence, it was a mini-version of the cold war's balance of terror."

Combat in such a situation would only have upset the balance—and been bad for business, which turned out to be precisely the case when the MTA actually fought his main rivals, the United Wa State Army, over Doi Lang, a barren border mountain village northwest of Chiang Rai. Its only value was as caravan station and base for heroin laboratories, functions which became impossible to continue once fighting broke out.

Khun Sa's standing army of fifteen hundred boys, many barely in their teens, was trained to be a defensive force. Perhaps not surprisingly, it proved unable to face up to the Myanmar Army a few years ago when its Ho Mong headquarters, between the Salween River and the Thai border, was the target of an offensive, events which eventually led to the surrender of the MTA to Yangon on 7 January of this year.

The opium warlord's strength as an insurgent leader actually lay in his and his men's ability to carry out kidnappings, assassinations, and bomb attacks in urban areas. "His targets were always well selected and the strikes carried out with precision and professionalism," says a narcotics intelligence officer. "And the people who carried out these kind of attacks were not young, illiterate hill-tribe recruits but well-trained hitmen in their thirties or forties, urban gunmen who knew their job."

The first such strike was carried out for the benefit of Khun Sa himself. Khun Sa had been arrested by Burmese government authorities in October 1969 and was lingering in jail in the northern city of Mandalay. After going underground, his men planned a daring raid in April 1973. Charlie Win, a young Sino-Burmese, entered the Shan State capital of Taunggyi in broad daylight with soldiers from Khun

Sa's private rebel army. They were looking for a foreign ambassador who was reportedly visiting the town. Unable to find him, they spotted two Caucasians and their wives out for a morning stroll.

To the horror of the screaming women, the rebels raised their pistols at the foreigners and took the men to a waiting car. They demanded the release of Khun Sa in return for the captives, who were Russian



SO LONG TO SHAN STATE LEADERSHIP

doctors inspecting a Soviet-built hospital.

An entire division of government troops was deployed to rescue the Russians. The operation was unsuccessful, and it was not until more than a year later—in August 1974—that the doctors were eventually released through Thailand. Khun Sa was set free a month later and rejoined his men in the jungle. He rewarded Charlie Win with a trading house in Chiang Mai called Saha Charoenmit, which officially dealt in jade and other precious stones.

Mr Win, also known by his Thai name Chalee Yangwirikul, was eventually arrested in November 1994, when the Thai authorities in cooperation with the US Drug Enforcement Administration raided a string of MTA safe houses in northern Thailand. The sweep, code-named "Tiger Trap," landed Mr Win in jail, where he is now awaiting extradition to the US along with ten of Khun Sa's top lieutenants.

In Thailand a similar pattern of terrorism followed when Khun Sa in the 1980s built up his drug empire in the North. The half-Shan half-Chinese Khun Sa's first "enemies" were Shan national leaders, whom he perceived as political rivals because control over their movement was to become Khun Sa's political fig leaf—gone now that Khun Sa has surrendered to Yangon and, many say, his true colors as

a drug warlord are revealed.

The essence of Khun Sa's perception of military strategy became evident when he took over the Mong Mai-Ho Mong area in early 1983 to make it his headquarters. A heavily armed, three-hundred-strong force marched into Mong Mai which was then controlled by the Shan State Army (SSA). The intimidation worked: Without firing a single shot, the SSA was pushed out of the area and retreated across the Salween to the north.

At the same time, gunmen carried out a string of assassinations in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, on the Thai side of the border. About a half dozen SSA leaders were gunned down. The remaining Shan leaders either decided to retire in northern Thailand—or joined Khun Sa, who then showered them with presents and new titles within his organization.

Khun Sa's most spectacular urban raid was carried out in March 1984, when his men blew up the Chiang Mai residence of his main business rival Li Wenhuan, a former general with the Kuomintang. A truck full of explosives had been parked inside Gen Li's compound on Faham Road. Early that morning, it was detonated by remote control. The blast, which could be heard all over the city, left Gen Li's fortified villa in rubble and damaged forty nearby buildings. It was unclear how many were killed, but Gen Li himself survived as he was not present. Behind the blast was Sao Noom, a Yangon-educated engineer and explosives expert, who later established a munitions factory for the MTA at Ho Mong.

Terror tactics were also deployed within Shan State. Controlling the MTA's thousands of forcibly recruited Shan village boys was not an easy task, and desertions were common. Ex-soldiers from the MTA tell that if a deserter was caught, he was handed over to Khun Sa's own executioners who used bamboo clubs to beat him to death. The head would then be severed and sent back to the soldier's unit as a warning. "But if a deserter was not caught, Khun Sa's men would find his family and kill a brother or another close relative," a former MTA soldier says. According to the anti-narcotics official: "Khun Sa was actually never a warlord. He was the ultimate narco-terrorist."

—Bertil Lintner