

Drug Triangle Handshake

Khun Sa surrenders, but on his own terms

By Bertil Lintner in Bangkok

Until recently, Burmese government helicopters that dared to fly over Golden Triangle warlord Khun Sa's Homong base would have been targets for everything from small-arms fire to SAM-7 missiles. But early this month, the rugged hills that ring Homong were witness to the unusual sight of government choppers flying unscathed through rebel airspace.

What happened next was even more remarkable. As the helicopters landed in Homong, they were greeted by thousands of guerrillas standing at attention, their weapons at their feet. Since then, helicopters have been landing in the town almost daily. Meanwhile, government



Khun Sa cuts a deal.

troops have secured areas along the Thai-Burmese border that have been under the rebels' control for decades.

The official Burmese media portrayed the event behind the spectacle at Homong—the surrender of Khun Sa's 10,000-strong Mong Tai army—as a major victory for Rangoon. "When Khun Sa realized that his military position was hopeless, he agreed to surrender to government authorities and abandon the narcotics trade," state radio announced.

Khun Sa claimed until recently that he was fighting for the independence of the ethnic Shan people of Burma. Indeed, Mong Tai, as in Mong Tai army, means Shan state. But his name is more closely linked to the drug trade. Long reputed to be the biggest opium and heroin producer in the Golden Triangle, where the borders

of Burma, Thailand and Laos meet, Khun Sa was indicted by a federal grand jury in the United States in 1989. Washington has since demanded that he be extradited to the U.S. to stand trial.

Burmese television claimed on January 14 that 5,026 of Khun Sa's soldiers had surrendered since the peace agreement was sealed at a ceremony in Homong nine days earlier. Independent sources estimated that the rebels have turned over a third of their arsenal.

But most foreign analysts aren't convinced that Khun Sa has been truly neutralized. If anything, the deal between the warlord and the Burmese army has widened the already serious rift between Rangoon and Washington: "Relations were bad before," a U.S. official says, "but now they've reached rock-bottom."

This official states bluntly that Khun Sa must have struck a deal with Rangoon. "We still don't know the exact terms of the agreement between Khun Sa and the Burmese military," he says. "But it's obvious that he's getting something substantial in return for agreeing to all this."

Winston Lord, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, stated at a press conference in Bangkok on January 13 that Burma "can't expect relations with Washington to improve unless Khun Sa is extradited to stand trial in the U.S."

Shan sources talk about a 10-point agreement that includes an amnesty for the drug lord and promises that he won't be extradited to the U.S. He would also be allowed to retain a smaller militia of up to 3,000 men, to be supplied by Rangoon and be given the right to control certain areas of Burma's Shan state.

The Shan sources also dismiss speculation that the Burmese authorities plan to stage a show trial of the drug lord to appease the international community. Says one: "Khun Sa still doesn't trust the government. He believes that the moment he steps into a Burmese jail, they'll never let him out again. He knows too much, he has bribed too many officials during his years in the drug trade."

Khun Sa's unspoken threat to reveal such information is his guarantee that the Burmese won't double-cross him, say these sources. Indeed, he probably feels more threatened by his own men than the Burmese. Immediately before the surrender was announced, an entire battalion of government troops was deployed to guard him at Homong. The drug lord must fear that guerrillas who disagreed

with the peace accord will try to kill him.

His security has been strengthened for other reasons as well. "We have reports suggesting that Burmese forces beefed up their protection of Khun Sa after we announced a \$2 million award for information leading to his capture," says the U.S. government official.

Khun Sa is still at Homong. But given the Burmese government's ongoing drive to secure its borders, he probably won't stay there long. Indeed, it is likely that the territory which he will be allotted under the peace agreement will be elsewhere, perhaps in central or northern Shan state.

If Khun Sa secures a new stronghold in that area, his militia would also serve as a counterweight to the influence of the rebel Wa and Kokang forces. These offshoots of the former Communist Party of Burma control the territory east of the Salween river opposite Loi Maw and



Tang-yan and consider Khun Sa their arch-enemy.

Both the hill-tribe Was and the ethnic Chinese from Kokang have had cease-fire agreements with the government since 1989. But the truces have been shaky, and could now be broken altogether following the Rangoon-Khun Sa deal.

Whatever the changes in his military fortunes, Khun Sa's business affairs are expected to continue running smoothly. His daughter operates from Hong Kong and one of his sons, Sam Hong, also known as Paisal Changtrakul, appears to be assuming a more important role in his organization.

Khun Sa may now try and set up a new base for business at Tachilek, a government-held border town opposite Mae Sai in northern Thailand. The town is a notorious transfer point for drugs. Shan sources say that Khun Sa has already bought a three-storey building in Tachilek from which he could covertly continue his activities.