

# Blind in Rangoon

## Aids epidemic rages, but the junta says no to NGOs

By Bertil and Hseng Nong Lintner in  
Chiang Mai, Thailand and Tachilek, Burma

Village fairs in Burma's Shan State used to be joyful occasions, with young people dancing to the beat of drums and gongs while older folk thronged market stalls and makeshift eating-places. The old festivals have not disappeared. But now the occasion for a gathering in a Shan village is often one of sadness, such as the cremation of a young person.

"You see funerals all the time," says Sai Hsai, a motorcycle-taxi driver in Tachilek, a Shan town near the border with Thailand. "People say it's Aids."

Aids is out of control in northern Burma, where the number of infected people has reached 350,000-400,000. According to the Southeast Asian Information Network, a Chiang Mai-based non-governmental organization, many are prostitutes who have returned from brothels in Thailand. Others are drug addicts. Aids is said to be rampant in Burma's many prisons, where disposable syringes are unheard of, homosexuality is common and heroin is quite freely available.

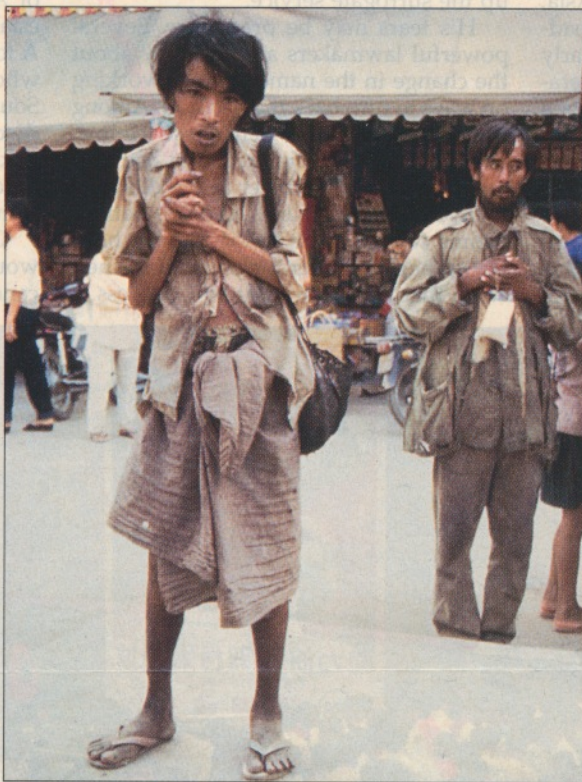
The HIV-Aids epidemic in Burma will figure at the ongoing Ninth International Conference on Aids in Vancouver, which has attracted thousands of medical experts as well as HIV sufferers. They will hear that the military junta in Rangoon has failed to take measures strong enough to stem the epidemic. But outsiders who could help often can't do so because the generals who run the country don't welcome foreign non-governmental organizations.

At least one international NGO which assists with HIV prevention programmes spent more than 10 months in 1994-95 waiting for the required memorandum of understanding from the government—which in the end failed to materialize. The NGO then pulled out of Burma; but as it still hopes to work there it asks not to be named. The International Committee of the Red Cross quit the country in mid-1995, citing the junta's refusal to allow visits to political prisoners.

A recent unpublished report by the United Nations International Drug Control Programme estimates that 60%-70%

of all intravenous-drug users in Burma are infected with the HIV virus. In Myitkyina in Kachin State in the far north of Burma, for instance, heroin is easily available in every market and 91% of drug addicts are said to be HIV-positive.

"Many people are dying. Entire families have disappeared: fathers have infected their wives, then the children have caught the disease too," says Lu Ja, a 25-year-old ethnic-Kachin woman who has just returned from the north. American State Department sources say that Burma's annual production of heroin has skyrocketed from 53 tonnes in 1987 to



The road to a funeral.

about 190 today, and shows no sign of diminishing.

Most of the heroin is exported, but large quantities are also sold locally all over the country. That's especially so in the north, where the drug is sold close to production sites and therefore relatively cheap. In Shan State, local village officials say heroin abuse is the most serious social problem facing young people today.

The Southeast Asian Information Network points an accusing finger at the authorities for the spread of this epidemic: "In an authoritarian state, where govern-

ment control of virtually all sectors of economic and social life is the norm, the high rates of heroin use among Burma's youth point either to the fundamental inability of the government to exert control, or an involvement, at least on some levels, of the government in heroin availability."

Local people agree. "Heroin is sold right under the noses of the local army and police. It's everywhere," says Nang Leun, a young Shan woman.

The situation doesn't appear to be very different even in Rangoon. "If you hold a meeting to discuss human rights, you get 15 years in jail. But you can sell heroin in the college dormitory and nobody will bother you," says a pro-democracy student veteran now living in the Thai border area.

But even young people who have never seen heroin are affected by the spread of the HIV virus. Na Mi, a teenage hill-tribe girl from Kengtung in eastern Shan State, is a case in point. She was lured away from her village and sold into prostitution in Thailand when only a child. After being kept in a Bangkok brothel for several years, she caught the HIV virus. Today, she lies in a hospital bed in Chiang Mai, pale, weak and with possibly only a few more months to live.

Na Mi is not alone. Local officials in Chiang Mai estimate that between 25% and 35% of those entering the sex industry in northern Thailand are migrants from northern Burma, and 40%-60% are already HIV-positive. As many as 80% of all women entering the industry will sooner or later acquire HIV, local sources say. Women returning from the Thai sex industry with HIV have been found in the Chinese province of Yunnan, in Shan State, even in central Burma.

Under the circumstances, Na Mi is luckier than others. At least she is in a clean hospital in Chiang Mai, where medication is available. The contagious-disease ward in the local hospital in the border town of Tachilek, by contrast, is extremely basic and suffers from an acute shortage of medicine.

A doctor who has spent time doing Aids research in Burma says that international organizations are already playing key roles in containing Aids in Thailand and India—two other countries where Aids has spread rapidly but where the rate of new infections is showing signs of slowing. But closed, isolated Burma remains the weakest link in the epidemic chain in Asia. He believes Burma's HIV epidemic "is poised to devastate the country for years to come."