

# Golden Triangle dope flow on the rise

by Linda de Hoyos

On Feb. 12, Thai law enforcement authorities seized 1,280 kilograms of heroin in a ship in the port of Bangkok. The seizure is believed to be the biggest drug bust in history. The heroin shipment, all of it bound for New York, would have had a street value of \$2.1 billion. The amount of heroin seized has forced a revision of U.S. estimates of the amount of heroin and other drugs coming into the United States from Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle. The amount seized on Feb. 12—1.4 tons—exceeds the Drug Enforcement Administration's estimate of only 1.2 tons of heroin coming into the United States from the region in a single year! If we use the rule of thumb, that the amount of drugs seized by law enforcement agencies is one-tenth of the actual drug flowthrough, then the U.S. DEA had underestimated the Golden Triangle flow by more than 90%!

The Golden Triangle refers to the nexus of northern Thailand, northeast Burma, and Laos. Government programs have vastly reduced Thailand's production of opium, with Thailand now serving as a major transshipment point for drugs produced in Burma and Laos. It is estimated that the Golden Triangle will produce 1,400 tons of opium in 1988-89, according to Thai law enforcement officials. The decline in Thai opium growing has been more than made up for by a 200-ton increase in Burmese production in 1987 over 1986 estimates of 700 to 1,100 tons produced. In the early 1980s, opium production in Laos was estimated at 50 tons. The 1987 crop was estimated at 200 tons, but is likely far more.

## Opium, and very powerful marijuana

Opium is not the only product. In the last five years, marijuana has become an increasingly lucrative venture. Marijuana production is concentrated in northeastern Thailand and in Laos. Marijuana is also being grown in the Philippines in areas controlled by the New People's Army. Southeast Asian marijuana is not the same drug known in the Western countries, William O'Brien, president of the World Federation of Therapeutic Communities, told a conference in Bangkok earlier this year. "It's very powerful stuff. In the old days, the most powerful cannabis was called Vietnamese Red, and second was Acapulco Gold. What is being grown

currently in northeast Thailand in the plateau area is more powerful than Vietnamese Red. Now a generation that has been dealing with a benign substance in the United States is going to be hit by the real stuff."

The market for the increased Golden Triangle production is primarily the West, both Western Europe and the United States, with drugs still flowing through the drug superport of Amsterdam. However, the most massive expansion in drug consumption has been in Asia itself. In Thailand—a country of 60 million—300,000 people are believed to be heroin addicts—that is three-fifths of the number of people in the United States, a nation of 260 million! According to Australian police officials, in 1980, there were no heroin addicts in Pakistan, while now there are between 600,000 and 650,000. There are 20,000 addicts in Nepal; 35,000 in Sri Lanka; and 600,000 in India. Estimates for Malaysia are 100,000 heroin addicts.

The Asian countries have not hesitated to take strenuous law enforcement measures against the rise in consumption, which threatens the morale particularly of their youth. In Malaysia, the sentence for conviction of holding even a small amount of drugs is death by hanging. And in the last four years, 65 people, including two Australians, have been hanged for that crime. Singapore is now installing urine-testing machines at all entry points into the city-state, which will be used on all foreigners and Singaporeans suspected of drug use or showing signs of nervousness as they pass through customs.

In terms of enforcement, the Malaysian parliament March 24 passed a bill giving sweeping powers to the police to seize and confiscate property and profits believed to be the result of drug trafficking. The bill is aimed at drug syndicate financiers and money launderers who heretofore escaped prosecution since they never touched the drugs themselves. Similar legislation is under consideration in Thailand.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad is calling for governments to work jointly against drugs, including carrying out "hot pursuit" across international frontiers in a "total war" against drug traffickers. Citing the "increasing of drug barons," Mahathir told an East Asia and Pacific Regional Narcotics Conference in Kuala Lumpur March 15, "Drug abuse and illicit trafficking in drugs are among the greatest threats to mankind today. . . . The war against drugs has to be a total war."

## The Real Golden Triangle

Within Southeast Asia, Golden Triangle drug production is not under the control of governments. The Thai government's programs and law enforcement operations against the Chinese Kuomintang drug warlords in northern Thailand have brought production to a near standstill. In Burma, opium production is carried out by the separatist ethnic groupings at war with Rangoon, led by Chinese-Burmese warlord Khun Sa, head of the separatist Shan Army. The only exception is

Laos, where the government of Prime Minister Kaysone is known to subsidize drug production.

The real powers of the Golden Triangle drug nexus are not Laos, Burma, and Thailand, therefore, but the superpowers that oversee the international flow and financing of the drug trade in amicable accord—the People's Republic of China; the U.S.S.R.; and the United States.

Laos functions as Moscow's drug state in Southeast Asia, in the same way that the U.S.S.R. has been reaping the profits of the opium flow from Afghanistan. The financier overseer for the Soviets is the Moscow Narodny Bank, which is now increasing its trade in gold through Singapore, according to its own admissions, gold being a standard currency in the international drug trade. The Soviets are also believed to be the primary sponsor of the Burmese Communist Party, responsible for most of the opium production in Burma, although they in turn hand it over to Chinese-Burmese warlord Khun Sa for trafficking into the market. Khun Sa, meanwhile, has set up over 70 refineries in Laos, as his Shan operations were heavily hit by both Thailand and Burma.

The P.R.C., for its part, despite its "open door policy" toward the West and the U.S.-China rapprochement since 1972, remains as heavily involved in the dope trade as it was during the heyday of the Vietnam War, when turning American soldiers into heroin addicts was Chinese state policy. In the last two years, report knowledgeable sources, the Chinese have reorganized their drug operations, no longer relying on the Ch'ao Chou overseas Chinese as their financial conduits. The Ch'ao Chou, after years of such services, are no longer trusted by Beijing, since they have tended to pour their receipts into their home-base country instead of sending it back to the P.R.C. This is definitely the case with the Ch'ao Chou-owned Bangkok Bank, which was second only to the British-Chinese owned Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in its financing of Golden Triangle drugs. The P.R.C. is now relying upon gangs centered in Fu-chao, one of the main port cities in Fukien province, for conduiting drugs—still produced in Yunnan province—overseas for sale. The Fu-chao narcotics smuggling networks are reportedly closely tied to the Fukien Department of Public Security.

In the last six months, American financing of drug production in the "Golden Triangle" has also come to light. According to Thai law enforcement officials cited in the Bangkok press, Americans are financing marijuana production in Thailand, where the major marijuana producers are Vietnamese refugees settled in the northeast. According to the *Bangkok Nation* March 31, "The Americans come to Thailand, provide money, seeds, and fertilizer to Thai farmers, and induce them to grow marijuana." Modern agricultural techniques are used to ensure that the marijuana is of top quality. The Americans then buy the marijuana, pack it in waterproof wrapping, and ship it to the United States.

Other reports note that Americans are performing the same functions for marijuana growers in Laos.

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