

# Crackdown

## spurs a heroin clearance sale in southeast Asia



*Preparing for a government assault, armed ethnic groups in Myanmar are shifting increasing amounts of heroin to stock up on weapons, anti-narcotics agents say*

BY THOMAS FULLER  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE,  
DOI CHANG MOOB, THAILAND

For more than half a century heroin has been carried over the jungle-shrouded hills here, the first leg of a journey that delivers the drugs to cities as far off as Sydney and Tokyo. But anti-narcotics officials are rubbing their eyes at the spectacle they are now witnessing: A flood of heroin and methamphetamine is spilling out of Myanmar as traffickers slash their inventories in a panicked sell-off.

"It's a clearance sale," said Pornthep Eamprapai, director of the northern branch of the Thai Office of Narcotics Control, who has nearly three decades of experience tracking illicit drugs from Myanmar. "Some dealers at the border are buying on credit. They don't even need to pay in cash. This is the first time I've seen this."

The main reason for the surge in trafficking, officials say, is a crackdown by Myanmar's military government on armed ethnic groups along the borders with Thailand, Laos and China. The ethnic groups, many of which have a long history of illicit drug production, are steeling themselves for battle with the Myanmar junta and rushing to convert their stocks of heroin and methamphetamine into cash to buy weapons, anti-narcotics officials say.

"Various traffickers are liquidating their stockpiles," said Pamela Brown,

an agent for the US Drug Enforcement Administration based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. "They are trying to get large shipments of heroin out, and some have been successful."

Heroin seizures by the police in northern Thailand have increased more than twentyfold. From October of last year to this August, the authorities seized 1.2 tonnes of heroin, up from 57kg a year earlier, according to the Office of Narcotics Control.

The traffickers are also under increasing pressure in Myanmar, where the ruling junta appears to have become more aggressive in seizing illicit drugs. It sometimes has turned a blind eye to traffickers, but faced with the prospect of battling drug-financed armies, the junta had added incentive to crack down.

The ethnic groups are obscure to most outsiders — the Wa, Kachin and Shan, among them — but their fate is crucial to the future of the world's heroin supply, experts say. Although they now produce only 5 percent of the total supply, instability could allow them to create much more.

The Myanmar junta and its proxies beat back ethnic Karen rebels along the Thai border in June and attacked and defeated an ethnic Chinese group, the Kokang, in the north in August. The campaigns have the leaders of

other ethnic groups wondering if they are next.

The standoff between ethnic groups and the central government in the rugged and isolated northern hills of Myanmar is an anomaly in modern Asia, a throwback to much more unstable times. The Wa and Kachin have large, well-equipped armies and administrations akin to the small kingdoms that existed in Asia before European colonial powers introduced the concept of the nation-state.

### GUNS FOR DRUGS

Now, in a desperate bid to protect their fiefdoms, they are casting a wide net for more weapons, according to Colonel Peeranate Katetem, the deputy commander of a Thai anti-narcotics unit based in Chiang Rai, near the Myanmar border.

Three months ago, he said, he received a call from a Wa representative who said he was looking to spend about US\$25 million to purchase M-16 assault rifles and "anything capable of exploding." Peeranate said the group appeared eager to barter heroin for the weapons. He said he declined to help.

The Golden Triangle, as the region where Thailand, Laos and Myanmar come together is known, was once the world's pre-eminent source of heroin. In recent years, it has been eclipsed by

Afghanistan, which produces more than 90 percent of the global supply.

That could change, experts warn, if Myanmar's dormant civil war reignites.

"The drug trade would flourish," said Ko-Lin Chin, a criminologist at Rutgers University and author of a book on the Golden Triangle published this year. He believes the planting of opium poppies, now suppressed in many areas, could resume on a wider scale. "They would flood the world with opium."

Heroin, which is refined from opium, typically travels through Thailand, Laos and Vietnam and ends up in Australia, Japan, Malaysia and Taiwan, anti-narcotics agents say. Heroin is also directly exported to China, where use of the drug increased significantly in the 1990s, creating a huge new market for traffickers. (The heroin sold in the US comes mostly from Colombia, according to US officials.)

Anti-narcotics officials say ethnic groups appear to be stocking large quantities of drugs near the Thai border and sending them across bit by bit. Small-time traffickers, often teenagers, can buy a fingernail-size bag of heroin for about US\$1.50 on the Myanmar side of the border, trek a few hours and sell it for up to US\$30 on the Thai side, Second Lieutenant Rungrot Lobbam-rung said at the military outpost here.

Left: A Thai colonel watches Myanmar from his side of the border in Chiang Rai. Below: Thai soldiers inspect a bus at a checkpoint in Chiang Rai.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Stopping traffickers is particularly difficult along Myanmar's mountainous borders. The Thai military has 1,500 troops dedicated to the interdiction of narcotics along the northern stretch of border with Myanmar, but it says it needs better equipment, like night vision goggles.

On the other side of the border, Myanmar has reported enormous drug seizures in recent months, including one in August of more than 726kg, anti-narcotics officials said. Several million methamphetamine pills were also seized in the Myanmar border town of Tachilek.

"There was nothing on that scale last year," said Leik Boonwaat, the representative of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime based in Laos. "This year has been quite unusual."

Another development that may be contributing to the increase in heroin coming through the Golden Triangle is what Thai officials say is a new trafficking route in which low-grade heroin produced in Afghanistan is shipped through Pakistan and India to the area controlled by the Wa in northern Myanmar, where it is further refined and re-exported.

This possible link between the world's two largest heroin producing regions — Afghanistan and Myanmar — could constitute a major shift in the heroin trade, combining the vast scale of Afghan poppy fields with the distribution networks and production expertise of the Wa.

In recent years the Wa have been concerned about their international image, especially in light of an indictment of eight Wa leaders by a US court four years ago that described the Wa army as "a criminal narcotics trafficking organization." Under pressure from China, the Wa forbade farmers in their territory to cultivate opium.

But such concerns could quickly dissipate in crisis, Chin said.

"If there's war, nobody cares about a good international reputation," he said. "Survival will take over."

## Migrants' children struggle with absence of loved ones

*According to various UNICEF studies, children of Filipino overseas workers bear the brunt of the 'painful effects' of separation*

BY GIRLIE LINAO  
AFP, SAN PABLO CITY, PHILIPPINES

Jocelyn Banez doesn't know how to tell her mother that she will not graduate with her class after missing all but nine days last year at a private high school in the Philippines.

"I just didn't want to study," said the 16-year-old, who spoke on the condition of being identified by a false name. "I also spent a big bulk of my tuition money to go out with friends, buy all the things I wanted and drink with my friends."

Jocelyn ran away from home for almost two weeks last year when her mother left for a job in Bahrain as a domestic worker.

"I was drunk most of the time," she said. "It was better than to think about what's happening at home."

Jocelyn is among an estimated 6 million children left behind in the Philippines by parents who went overseas to find better-paying jobs. There are currently more than 8 million Filipinos working abroad, an estimated 25 percent of whom are married with children.

Jocelyn and her three siblings, ages 4, 5 and 11, live with their grandparents in a small bungalow in San Pablo City in Laguna province, 90km south of Manila. Their father has been gone for more than 10 years, working as an electrician in Saudi Arabia, and they no longer expect him to return.

"My father has a new family in



Riyadh," Jocelyn said, wiping tears from her eyes. "The last time we saw him was in 2003 when he came for a visit, and we found out that he has a pregnant girlfriend. It was very hurtful, and I don't know how to tell my siblings."

Last year, Jocelyn's mother was forced to find work abroad because her husband suddenly stopped sending money home.

"When Mama left, I lost my only ally at home," Jocelyn said, sobbing. "She was my best friend, my confidante, my biggest supporter. We even used to share one bed at night. I really miss her a lot."

According to various UNICEF studies, children of Filipino overseas workers bear the brunt of the "painful effects" of migration. "Migration can result in an orphan feeling among the children who are left behind, as well as prevent them from getting the sufficient knowledge of their social, cultural and historical background that is necessary for them to shape their identity," a 2007 study found.

Luela Villagarcia, a social worker with the Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative, a non-gov-

ernmental organization that helps the children and families of Filipino workers, said children go through greater adjustments when their mothers leave.

She said juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, psychological impairment, loss of self-esteem, early marriages and family breakdowns are some of the negative impacts of migration that greatly affect children.

"The kids may be getting every expensive gadget they want, but the emotional loss is huge for them," she said. "They suffer separation anxiety. Some of them are angry because they do not understand what was happening."

At the Lakes City Christian School in San Pablo City, about 60 percent of students have at least one parent overseas, mostly as domestic workers. Atikha has been holding counseling sessions for students with the help of their teachers.

Kyle Lorenzo Suarez, 15, burst into tears during one session as he revealed how he found out that his father was having an affair while his mother worked as a nurse in Canada. "It's very sad that my Mama is not here," he said. "Now, I just discovered



that my Papa is having an affair. He was drunk one night, and the woman called. My younger sister and I heard everything they were talking about, and it's so hurtful."

Kyle, who also asked not to be identified by his real name, said he does not intend to tell his mother about the affair, for fear that she might not return to the Philippines.

"I just use that information to blackmail my Papa to give me things that I want," he said, grinning.

In nearby Alaminos town, 70 percent of the more than 4,000 residents of Santa Rosa village have relatives working as domestic helpers in Italy. Most are mothers forced to leave their children in the care of fathers or grandparents.

Ernesto Sahagun, Santa Rosa village chairman, said that some fathers have become irresponsible, merely waiting for the monthly remittances from their wives.

"Instead of taking care of their children, they do nothing but hang out with friends," he said. "They drink, and some even have extramarital affairs. Since 2007, I've had to close down four beer houses in the village

to stop fathers from drinking."

Arlene Sanchez, 19, and her three sisters, ages 16, 15 and 10, know the problem too well: their father has become a drunk since their mother left in 2002 to work as a domestic helper in Milan.

"I don't even know where Papa is now," Arlene, who did not want to give her real name, said during a visit to their house. "I wouldn't be surprised if I see him drunk somewhere even if it's only nighttime."

Arlene admitted that after their mother left, she and her sisters got into trouble for skipping school, drinking with friends and squandering their allowances on shopping sprees.

"But our grandparents loved us as their own children, and they gave us second chances, so we learned our lessons well," she said. "Now we have matured, and we're doing better."

Arlene, who last year married her boyfriend and now lives with his parents who are working in Italy, said she was looking forward to leaving Santa Rosa and starting life with her husband in Tuscany, where she hopes to find work, too.

She said her mother was working on bringing her three sisters to Italy as immigrants so the family would eventually be together.

Asked what would happen to her father, Arlene said: "I don't know if my mother will work on his papers to come to Italy. She's mad at him."

For Jocelyn, who has gone back to school and plans to take up criminology in college, going abroad is not an option in the future. "Our lives became miserable when my parents left for abroad," she said. "We have more problems now, but we still don't have enough money. I don't care if we only have a small house or if there's only dried fish on the table, as long as we are all together as family. Nothing's more important."

Far left: A Filipino migrant worker leaves a remittance center in Hong Kong.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Left: Filipinos gather in Hong Kong's central business district.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Below: A boy helps his younger brother drink water from a bottle yesterday in a gymnasium that has been serving as an evacuation center for typhoon victims for nearly two weeks now because of continued flooding, in Pasig City, east of Manila.

PHOTO: REUTERS

