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VETERAN DRUG RUNNER JAILED

Laota Seanlee, 76, gets life for trying to sell 20kg of meth

BANGKOK

A THAI court yesterday sentenced a notorious 76-year-old drug trafficker to life in prison after he was allegedly caught trying to sell 20kg of crystal meth in the Golden Triangle drug producing region.

Laota Seanlee, a former anti-Communist guerilla turned drug runner who famously opened an eponymous coffee store in Thailand's far north, was nabbed with several of his relatives by undercover officers in a sting operation last year.

Laota, from the Lisu ethnic minority, had been detained multiple times over the decades, but authorities never managed to make major drug charges stick until now.

Bangkok's Criminal Court sentenced him to life in prison for selling "ice" to undercover police and possessing 20kg of the high-purity narcotic in his compound — charges he confessed to.

Laota's wife was sentenced to 25 years in prison while his two sons, who denied helping facilitate the drug sales, were handed the death penalty, a sentence rarely carried out in Thailand.

The sons, one of whom was a local administrator in Chiang Mai province, would appeal, according to Laota's lawyer.

At the time of his arrest, some commentators expressed surprise that such a wily survivor of the drug trade had allowed himself to be caught red-handed.

In a 2011 interview with the *Bangkok Post*, Laota shared details of his remarkable life.

He said he joined the anti-communist Kuomintang as a child soldier and rose up through the ranks.

Like many Kuomintang cadres, he fought for Thailand against communist insurgents in the

1970s in exchange for sanctuary.

He is thought to have had ties to Asia's most notorious drug trafficker Khun Sa, a Myanmar-based rebel leader who was one of the world's most wanted men until his death in 2007.

In recent years, Laota opened a coffee store, Lao Ta Coffee, visited by intrepid travellers journeying across Thailand's north.

During its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, the Golden Triangle was home to the world's top opium market in Myanmar, a designation it lost to the Afghan farmers who now dominate the trade.

But, the region is now the heart of Asia's methamphetamine production, with warlords pumping out record numbers of caffeine-laced "yaba" meth pills and the addictive crystallised "ice" version. **AFP**



Laota Seanlee