

## Drug scourge clouds Myanmar reforms

By Thomas Fuller

EASY GAINS: Armed minority ethnic groups in Myanmar are involved in making heroin and methamphetamine, writes Thomas Fuller



Saw Lah Pwe (centre), the leader of a breakaway faction of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, salutes as he arrives for a press conference in Myawaddy, Karen state, Myanmar, close to the border with Thailand, recently. Saw countered Thai accusations that one of the Karen leaders was engaged in drug dealing, asking the Myanmar government to arrest the Karen leader to face drug charges. AP pic

THE good news coming out of Myanmar these days is of reform and reconciliation as it moves from military dictatorship to fledgling democracy. But what is coming across Myanmar's border into Thailand is a surge of illicit drugs.

One of Myanmar's biggest businesses -- heroin and methamphetamine manufacturing -- is thriving in the area along the border known as the Golden Triangle, led by members of well-armed minority ethnic groups.

"They are pushing out a vast amount of pills," said Maj Gen Somsak Nilbanjerdkul, director of a command centre set up by the Thai government to coordinate anti-drug efforts. "Democracy is flourishing in Myanmar, but illegal activities are moving to areas where there is a lack of law and order."

The increase in drug trafficking underlines the depth of the challenges facing Myanmar, as President Thein Sein pushes ahead with his agenda for change. Impoverished areas where the central government has little control remain the largest base of drug production in Southeast Asia. If he cracks down on drug syndicates, Thein Sein, who was previously a military commander in the Golden

Triangle, risks alienating the ethnic groups he is trying to woo for his programme of national rebuilding.

In the dark underworld of illicit drugs, no one can say for sure what is causing the upswing in trafficking, but Thai officials describe at least part of the increase as a kind of perverse peace dividend.

Thein Sein, who has been in power for 13 months, has pushed hard, and in many cases succeeded, in signing ceasefire agreements with rebel forces. "They don't need to fight any more," said Thanut Choommanoo, the head of a Thai police investigative unit, "so they've deployed their soldiers into drug production."

Somsak offers another explanation. He says there is a continued mistrust between the Myanmar government and ethnic groups and a feeling among traffickers that they had better make money from illegal activities while they can.

"They are unsure about what reconciliation means for them," he said. "They need to sell their illegal stuff -- as much as possible."

Cultivation of opium has been on the rise for several years, well before the democratic initiatives got under way. Analysts say farmers in the Golden Triangle area are returning to opium because prices have risen again in recent years and after previous government efforts to encourage them to switch to food crops proved insufficiently profitable.

But the most significant growth appears to be with the pill trade.

Thai authorities seized 31.3 million methamphetamine pills from October through March -- a 45 per cent increase from a year earlier, when 21.6 million pills were seized, according to a recently published Thai government report.

Part of this increase is from more aggressive policing, Thanut said, but it is "undeniable that more drugs are crossing the border".

Traffickers are using a variety of methods to get their drugs through. Often armed with grenades, they travel down small paths that cut through jungle-covered mountains. Some hide drugs in trucks carrying produce.

Last year, the police found 2 million methamphetamine pills hidden under a pile of pumpkins. Smaller drug deliveries are simply tossed across the border. The Sai River, which separates the two countries, is so narrow that traffickers can throw bags of pills to the Thai side, where accomplices pick them up.

For decades, opium and its derivative, heroin, were the main specialties of drug gangs in the Golden Triangle, which is defined by the area where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet.

Drug syndicates began focusing more on methamphetamines in the 1990s, when Afghanistan increased opium production. But over the past five years, opium farming, which is the main source of income for many villages in northern Myanmar, has rebounded, according to the annual survey released by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

Last year, as the democratic initiatives of Thein Sein were taking hold, opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar increased 14 per cent, the fifth consecutive annual increase, according to the survey, which is conducted using satellite imagery and helicopter surveillance.

Much of northern Myanmar is mountainous and ill served by roads, making it relatively easy to conceal illicit activity. But the large area dedicated to growing opium poppies -- 43,600 hectares, or about 100,000 acres, according to the United Nations -- suggests that the local authorities are at best turning a blind eye to drug production.

Somsak said Myanmar officials along the border were "absolutely" implicated in the drug trade. Myanmar officials often drive cars that cost the equivalent of US\$100,000, he said.

"Their salaries are actually lower than our sergeants," Somsak said. "Where do they get the money from?"

The relationship between the Myanmar government and drug trafficking is complex and intertwined in the delicate politics between the Bamar majority in Myanmar and the many other ethnic groups, who have fought the military on and off for five decades.

Government-allied militias in the north, officially called People's Militia Forces, are big players in the drug business. The government has supported these groups for years as a way to counterbalance the power of the largest ethnic minority groups, including the Wa, Kachin and Shan, all of which have large private armies.

But Wichai Chaimongkhon, director of the northern office of Thailand's Narcotics Control Board, a civilian agency that oversees the anti-drug efforts along the border with Myanmar, says illicit drug trafficking is even more prolific in areas outside the government's control.

"Most of the drug production factories are in special zones," he said, referring to areas controlled by ethnic groups. "It's beyond the ability of its government to enforce the law there."--NYT