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EXTENDING THE DRUG WAR TO THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

George Bush last week rightly focused attention on stemming the demand for illegal drugs in the United States and combatting the flow of narcotics from Central and South America. These are the major sources of cocaine and marijuana.

Americans, however, also face a drug threat from Southeast Asia: heroin. A 25 percent increase in heroin-related hospital emergencies was recorded during the past three years, from 12,522 cases in 1985 to almost 15,800 in 1988.¹ Heroin seizures have skyrocketed: 370 kilograms (814 pounds) of heroin originating from Southeast Asia alone were seized in 1988, over triple the 1986 figure.²

Jungle Labs. The root of the heroin problem is Southeast Asia, now believed to exceed Southwest Asia and Mexico as the chief source of U.S.-consumed heroin. Southeast Asian heroin is made from morphine, which is produced in jungle labs from opium taken from poppy plants grown in the notorious (even legendary) “Golden Triangle” — the border region between Burma, Laos, and Thailand. Most Golden Triangle heroin comes from Burma’s northeastern Shan State, then is smuggled primarily by Chinese through Thailand to New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Some also is smuggled through China and India. In Laos, heroin is produced in jungle labs along the Burmese border, then shipped through Vietnam and

1 National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee, 1988 Report, p. 68.

2 *Ibid.* p. 86.

Thailand. The U.S. has accused the Laotian government of direct complicity in drug trafficking to earn foreign currency.

Golden Triangle heroin production has increased significantly in recent years, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). In 1988, Southeast Asia produced an estimated 1,833 tons of poppy, up from 1,200 tons the previous year. This year, the amount is expected to jump to as much as 2,400 tons. This is due to favorable weather conditions, the cessation of anti-narcotics efforts late last year by the Burmese government, and the cancellation of U.S. drug interdiction programs in Burma.

Little Leverage. Past American efforts to interdict the flow of heroin from the Golden Triangle were only partially successful. The U.S. provided intelligence, training, and communications support for Thai Border Patrol Police operations in the early 1980s against jungle heroin labs along the northwestern Thai border. These efforts, however, often were stymied by the ability of drug warlords to move their bases into neighboring Burma and Laos. In addition, U.S. assistance to Burmese herbicide-spraying operations was widely criticized as ineffective in stemming opium production. This spraying program was cancelled by the U.S. in late 1988 to protest Rangoon's political crackdown in August of that year. Moreover, strained relations between the U.S. and Burma and Laos have left the DEA with little leverage to force Rangoon and Vientiane to counter the narcotics trade more vigorously.

While a heroin strategy demands an interdiction effort extending across the entire smuggling pipeline, the U.S. should direct new programs against narcotics production and trafficking at the source of the problem, Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle. Specifically, the Bush Administration should:

◆ ◆ **Urge Japan and the Soviet Union to use their economic and political leverage with Laos to force tougher measures against narcotics trafficking.**

◆ ◆ **Urge China to expand its interdiction efforts against narcotics originating from Burma.**

◆ ◆ **Encourage Laos to work with the U.S. private sector in developing job alternatives that will decrease peasant reliance on opium cultivation.**

◆ ◆ **Provide communications and technical assistance to Thai anti-narcotics forces.**

◆ ◆ **Urge Thailand to increase anti-narcotics cooperation with Burma.**

◆ ◆ **Expand the number of U.S. customs training seminars conducted in Southeast Asia and encourage increased participation by Laos and Burma.**

BURMA

The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, renamed this June as the Union of Myanmar, is a military dictatorship. From 1962 until 1988, a military-led government under strongman Ne Win promoted socialist economic policies while keeping Burma isolated from the rest of the world. In July 1988, Ne Win resigned as chairman of the ruling Burma Socialist Program Party, but still is believed to wield behind-the-scenes control in Rangoon.

Since its independence in 1948, the Burmese government, dominated by ethnic Burmese, has faced rebellions by non-Burmese minorities such as the Kachins, Karens, Shans, and Wa. Dozens of insurgent groups continue to block Rangoon's attempts to rule the outlying provinces.

Cash Crop. Until 1988, Burma's narcotics trade was dominated by the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) and the Mong Tai Revolutionary Army (MTRA), led by the infamous drug warlord Khun Sa. This April, however, the BCP disintegrated, leaving Khun Sa in control of most of the Golden Triangle's heroin.

To fuel his heroin operation, Khun Sa buys poppy cultivated by peasants in Burma's northeastern Shan States. For the Shan minorities in Burma, poppy has been the only cash crop for the past decade. Poppy has several advantages: it can be easily collected; it is relatively small in size and easy to transport; it can be kept for long periods; and it can be used as a medicine. No other cash crop offers all these benefits to the peasant farmer in Burma.

The poppy grown by Shan farmers is refined in jungle labs on the Burma-Thai border. Many of these straddle the border and can be moved, thus enabling the drug lords to retreat across international boundaries when either the Burmese or Thai exert pressure. After being processed, the heroin mainly is smuggled through Thailand. Other routes bring the finished product through China and India.

Spraying Poppy Patches. To stem the heroin flow from Burma, Washington last year provided Rangoon \$8 million for drug suppression. Key to this effort was crop eradication using the herbicide 2,4-D. Last year, Burma sprayed 30,888 acres with 2,4-D; its effect was limited. For one thing, Burma's climate and mountainous terrain dispersed the herbicide. For another, because poppy patches are small and hard to identify, aircraft invariably sprayed people, vegetable fields, and animals outside the targeted areas, causing sickness and destroying legitimate cash crops. Lastly, Shan farmers were easily able to plant more poppy to maintain their output.

In addition to the herbicide eradication program, the Burmese government also launched military operations in areas dominated by drug lords. Example: in early 1988 the Burmese army launched what it called Operation Rolling Thunder XII against heroin refineries along the Thai border. Three refineries were destroyed and large quantities of processing chemicals were seized.

Free Rein for Drug Dealers. Following Rangoon's bloody suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations in August 1988, Burma's anti-narcotics efforts were set back. That September, for example, the U.S. protested Burma's crackdown by cutting off all assistance programs; Rangoon retaliated by terminating herbicide spraying. Burma also moved most of its troops from the countryside to the capital, giving drug dealers a free rein along the border. Recent reports even indicate that opium caravans have been passing through Burma with the acquiescence of the military. While political calm has returned to Rangoon, most observers doubt that the Burmese authorities will resume any significant anti-narcotics program in the near future.

Burma's reduced pressure on drug traffickers, combined with this year's good weather conditions, an increased use of fertilizers, and better planting techniques, are expected to boost Burma's opium production 25 percent this year over last year. This would amount to at least 1,600 tons of opium, over half of the world's harvest.

LAOS

The Kingdom of Laos officially became the Lao People's Democratic Republic in December 1975 following a communist takeover that May. The government is dominated by ethnic Laotians, who constitute slightly less than half of the population. Among several important minorities are the fiercely independent Hmong, who long have been persecuted for resisting central government rule.

Among the world's dozen poorest nations, Laos in recent years has sought foreign aid and trade. Vientiane also is believed to have turned to narcotics trafficking to raise hard currency. Coordinating much of Laos's drug flow is the Mountainous Area Development Corporation (MADC), a shadowy government agency closely linked to the military, which oversees activities in provinces dominated by hill tribe minorities. The MADC has been linked by the U.S. government to heroin and marijuana production and smuggling through Vietnam to the West.

Half-Hearted Cooperation. The U.S. government became aware of official Laotian involvement in the drug trade during the mid-1980s. However, the U.S. consistently "certified" Laotian progress in combatting the production of opium lest it jeopardize Vientiane's cooperation in resolving the fate of U.S. servicemen missing from the war in Southeast Asia. If a country is "decertified" by the U.S., it may face a cut-off of U.S. security and economic assistance. In the case of Laos, which receives no U.S. assistance, the threat of decertification was symbolic.

While Vientiane retained its certification from the Reagan Administration, Laos continued to produce narcotics smuggled into the U.S. In January 1988, for example, the DEA seized 35 kilograms (77 pounds) of Laotian-refined heroin in New York City. Two months later, over 56 kilograms (123.2 pounds) of Laotian heroin was discovered in San Diego. A sweep by the Laotian

military in June 1988 allegedly destroyed two refineries, but most observers considered the Laotian effort half-hearted and heroin activity reportedly returned to normal after just two months.

Reluctant Efforts. In a departure from the Reagan Administration, the Bush Administration decertified Laos this March. For the first time, Washington officially accused a foreign government of active involvement in drug trafficking. While Laotian officials initially criticized the U.S. decision, they reluctantly have begun making an effort to curtail illegal drug smuggling. For example, Laos this year agreed to consider bilateral projects with the U.S., including economic development plans for hill tribes, that could decrease peasant dependency on opium cultivation. And this summer, Laos for the first time sent participants to U.S. seminars in Southeast Asia on drug abuse education and a U.S. customs training program.

Despite this progress, Laos has undertaken no known opium or marijuana eradication or interdiction effort this year. Moreover, no reform of the MADC has been announced. As a result, opium production, which has risen steadily since 1984, is likely to increase even more in 1989. This increase could be further assisted by favorable weather conditions, and a recent shift of traffickers to Laos from Thailand and Burma.

THAILAND

The Kingdom of Thailand, one of America's closest allies in Asia, long has strived to eradicate narcotics smuggling in its sector of the Golden Triangle. Bangkok has used several approaches in its anti-narcotics campaign, including military clearing operations, United Nations development programs, and crop substitution projects sponsored by the Thai monarchy. These efforts have decreased poppy cultivation and heroin processing in Thailand. For example, Thai opium production is expected to have covered 1,940 acres during this spring's harvest, half the total of three years ago. Of the heroin refineries that still exist on Thai territory, ten were captured by Thai military forces in 1988; six more were destroyed during the first half of this year.³

Cracking Down. Although poppy fields and heroin refineries largely have moved across the Thai border into Burma and Laos, Thailand remains a major link in the Golden Triangle: most of the business operations involved in smuggling are located on Thai territory, and the vast majority of heroin produced in Burma passes through Thailand to the West. To stem narcotics trafficking, Thai drug arrests are up from 42,500 in 1987 to over 46,000 last

³ International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, U.S. Department of State, August 1989, p. 105.

year. In addition, the amount of confiscated heroin nearly doubled from 1.3 tons in 1987 to 2.4 tons in 1988.⁴ This included a world record 1,100 kilogram (2.4 tons) haul destined for New York that was discovered in February 1988 inside sixty-two bales of rubber.⁵ The Thai parliament also is reviewing a proposed law that will allow authorities to confiscate the personal property of convicted drug dealers; the law is expected to pass next year.⁶

Investigating the Police. The U.S. long has taken a direct interest in Thailand's anti-narcotics efforts. The DEA has been active in Thailand, collecting intelligence and providing support to Thai customs, police, and army units involved in drug interdiction operations. After U.S. prompting this July, the Thai police launched an internal investigation of suspected corruption within its ranks. As a result, Assistant Police Inspector General Wet Phetborom was charged with heroin smuggling. Deputy Police Chief Wasit Detkunchon is scheduled to visit the U.S. next month to discuss the possible extradition of Phetborom to stand trial in the U.S. for his involvement in heroin smuggling.⁷

Although Thailand has made progress in stemming the drug flow through its territory, the U.S. still has reasons for concern. For one thing, since the 1988 upheaval in Rangoon, Thai-Burmese interdiction cooperation along the border has been downgraded to an occasional exchange of intelligence.⁸ For another, recent Thai efforts to promote timber trade with Burma have resulted in the construction of a network of border roads that could facilitate narcotics smuggling from the Golden Triangle.

CRAFTING NEW ANTI-NARCOTICS POLICIES

As Southeast Asian heroin arrives in U.S. cities in record amounts, the U.S. needs an invigorated policy to stop it. This policy can learn from past lessons. For example, Burma's lack of success in aerial spraying proved that this method has only marginal value in eradicating opium plants. In addition, U.S. and Thai customs interdiction alone cannot be an answer because drug smugglers have proved too adept at finding new ways of disguising narcotics shipments. Moreover, Thailand's creation of a market infrastructure for alternative products shows that hill tribe minorities can be weaned away from poppy cultivation if given a chance.

4 "Heroin Trafficking in Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia and the Middle East," Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, U.S. House of Representatives, August 1, 1989, p. 2.

5 NNICC, 1988 Report, p. 84.

6 *Asiaweek*, July 28, 1989, p. 31.

7 FBIS-East Asia, August 7, 1989, p. 60.

8 *Asiaweek*, July 28, 1989, p. 31.

To combat Southeast Asian narcotics, the U.S. should:

◆ ◆ **Urge Japan and the Soviet Union to use their leverage with Laos to force tougher measures against narcotics trafficking.**

Japan is now one of the largest noncommunist donors of development aid to Laos, giving it considerable potential leverage over Vientiane. Japan consistently has refused to link U.S. foreign policy objectives to its foreign aid programs, despite the fact that many U.S. goals also serve Japan's security interests. For example, Tokyo has rebuffed Washington's attempts to have the Japanese aid program to Manila linked to the issue of U.S. basing rights in the Philippines. However, because of the importance of the war on drugs, the U.S. should insist that Japan do what it can to use its economic leverage in combatting heroin trafficking. Washington should urge Tokyo to link its Laotian aid program to reforms in the Mountainous Areas Development Corporation (MADC). Japan also can use its development aid to provide a transportation infrastructure and alternative occupational training for poppy-producing hill tribes.

The Soviet Union, too, has considerable diplomatic and economic leverage over Laos. With Moscow suffering its own drug problems, Washington should urge the Soviets to push for reforms of the MADC and a resumption of Laotian eradication operations. The U.S. should use the measure of Soviet cooperation in combatting drug-trafficking in Laos as an indication of Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's sincerity in improving Moscow's relationship with Washington.

◆ ◆ **Urge China to expand its interdiction efforts against narcotics originating from Burma.**

For decades, Sino-Burmese ties were strained because of Beijing's assistance to the Burmese Communist Party (BCP). In addition to paramilitary support, the BCP imported from China chemicals needed to refine its opium into heroin. In recent years, however, Beijing distanced itself from the BCP and its drug trade in an effort to improve ties with Rangoon. Yet, the Chinese connection to the Golden Triangle remains. Increasingly, drug traffickers are smuggling heroin from Burma through China and into Hong Kong. Following U.S. requests in early 1988, China expressed an interest in cooperating in anti-narcotics operations. Several drug seizures that year involving Hong Kong and Chinese connections were assisted by Beijing.⁹

Washington should press for increased coordination with Beijing on anti-narcotics efforts. This becomes especially important as China assumes control of Hong Kong in 1997. Areas of cooperation should include intelligence sharing, customs training, and possibly U.S. assistance for increased surveillance of the Sino-Burmese border. China should be reminded that such cooperation would demonstrate its desire to work with

9 *The New York Times*, March 31, 1988, p. A5.

the West, especially after its image was tarnished following the Tiananmen Square massacre.

◆ ◆ **Encourage Laos to formulate development programs with the U.S. private sector in developing job alternatives that will decrease peasant reliance on opium cultivation.**

The Hmong hill tribe minority in Laos traditionally has grown poppy as a cash crop. Due to failed socialist economic policies, which give Laos little of value to export, Vientiane has become involved in heroin smuggling to increase its foreign currency earnings. U.S. protests have led Laos to begin some measures against drug trafficking on its soil, but official involvement in narcotics smuggling still is suspected.

In recent years, Vientiane has sought increased aid and trade ties with the West to improve its economic situation. This may give the Laotian government less reason to rely on drug smuggling as a source of hard currency. Alternatives do exist. Example: gold and sapphire mining is a largely untapped industry in Laos, yet offers alternative occupations for peasant hill tribes that traditionally have grown opium. In addition, gemstone cutting and jewelry manufacturing industries can be established inside Laos. Western businessmen, including Americans, already have shown interest in developing these sectors for Vientiane, but are inhibited by Laotian red tape. Washington should urge Vientiane to permit U.S. private companies to enter the highlands and establish joint development ventures in mining and other gemstone-related industries.

◆ ◆ **Provide communications and technical assistance to Thai anti-narcotics forces.**

Thailand's army and Border Patrol Police long have fought drug traffickers on Thai soil. In 1982, a highly-publicized raid against drug lord Khun Sa cost hundreds of Thai police casualties. Since then, Thai military operations have pushed major heroin refining activity across the border into Burma and Laos.

Close coordination between the U.S. and Thailand on anti-narcotics efforts, including U.S. intelligence support and training for Thai Border Patrol Police, continues. To improve its interdiction capabilities, Bangkok has turned to Washington for additional aid. For example, the U.S. was asked this May for X-ray scanners to detect heroin passing through Thai seaports. The Thai Customs Department also has asked Washington to train its officials in advanced narcotics detection techniques. This is especially important because, as Thailand's exports have surged, so to has the amount of narcotics smuggled in its products.¹⁰ The Bush Administration is considering these requests.

10 *Bangkok Post* (International Edition), May 28, 1989, p. 3.

The Thai Border Patrol Police, which has spearheaded past military operations against drug lords along the Burmese border, has asked for communications support from the U.S. To bolster Thailand's border forces, the U.S. should provide it with further assistance, including long-range communications and radio intercept systems that will allow the Border Patrol Police to gather data on drug lords inside Burma and more quickly respond to heroin smugglers crossing into Thailand.

◆ ◆ **Encourage Thailand to increase anti-narcotics cooperation with Burma.**

During the mid-1980s, Bangkok and Rangoon increased anti-narcotics cooperation to the point of coordinating military sweeps on both sides of the border. Following the August 1988 political instability in Burma, this cooperation was severely downgraded.

While Thai-Burmese anti-narcotics cooperation is now low, Thai economic leverage over Burma has been increasing. Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan has supported improved economic and diplomatic ties with Burma. With its floundering economy, Rangoon has encouraged these overtures. As a result, several trading agreements have been signed. In addition, Thailand has courted Burma by making the unprecedented gesture of inviting a Burmese military delegation to view the June COBRA GOLD exercises between the Thai and U.S. armed forces.

With a record poppy harvest expected in the Golden Triangle this year, it is important that Thai-Burmese cooperation extend once again into the area of anti-narcotics operations. This is especially vital because logging agreements reached between Thailand and Burma call for improvement in the road systems between both countries. These roads could increase the amount of heroin flowing out of the Golden Triangle.

Promoting Legitimate Trade. Washington should press Bangkok to use its burgeoning economic leverage with Rangoon to adopt a two-track approach toward drug suppression in the Shan States. First, Burmese and Thai forces once again should coordinate military operations against the main heroin refineries along their common border as they did in the early 1980s. Second, Thailand and Burma should begin long-term projects to wean hill tribesmen away from poppy cultivation. This can be done by using the logging road network to open the Shan States to legitimate trade activity. At the same time, a concerted Thai-Burmese oversight effort will be needed to insure that the roads are not used for drug smuggling. While Burma initially may oppose efforts to improve the living standards among Shan States minorities because of the traditional animosity between the central government and the Shans, U.S. and Thai officials should stress that a pacified, more prosperous border region will be less of a security threat to the central government in Rangoon. The U.S. also can assist this effort by encouraging Burma to allow U.S. and other foreign businessmen to develop a mining and gemstone-cutting industry in the Shan States as an alternative to poppy cultivation.

◆ ◆ **Expand the number of U.S. drug training seminars conducted in Southeast Asia and encourage increased participation by Laos and Burma.**

This year, U.S. narcotics education training programs and customs seminars for the first time were attended by Laotians. Such sessions have proved a useful and easy way to expand understanding of narcotics smuggling and have helped forge improved U.S.-Laotian bilateral cooperation against narcotics trafficking. The U.S. should increase the number of training seminars and specifically invite participants from Vientiane and Rangoon to attend.



Hitting the Source. To date, George Bush's war on drugs has focused on cocaine and crack. As a result, the threat from heroin smuggling has not been emphasized as heavily. With poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle reaching record levels, the U.S. can not afford to neglect the threat of increased heroin smuggling from Southeast Asia.

Combatting the increased flow of narcotics from Southeast Asia will require police action within the U.S. and interdiction efforts at key U.S. ports. More important are long-term eradication, interdiction, and development programs in the Golden Triangle that will stem the flow at its source. Much more can be done by the U.S.; and more must be done to invoke the assistance of other nations.

Kenneth J. Conboy
Deputy Director,
Asian Studies Center