

No: 16 - 06/2003

25 June 2003

Drugs

Speed being made to order

Although a number of refineries along the border have suspended their operations since Thailand launched its all-out war against drugs in February, there are still several others that continue to keep shops open under the patronage of the local military commanders so as to carry out orders placed by customers in Thailand, according to a reliable source in eastern Shan State.

Tachilek, opposite Thailand's Chiangrai, illustrates what is happening in other Shan townships like Monghsat, Mongton and Homong along the border, said the source who is a close relative of a Lahu militia chieftain. "To my knowledge, there are three of them still on the run here," he said. "Only they don't do it unless there is an order first."

One is the refinery at Nampoong, west of Tachilek. Owned by Nampoong militia leader Yishay, its security is provided by Light Infantry Battalion 359. It is said to have 3 compressors: the big one turns out 8 pills each time, the medium one 3 and the small one 1. It has been in existence for 4 years now.

Another at Jaka Village, is located along the Mekong, north of Tachilek and between Kenglarb and Mongphong. It is owned by Ai Tu, a Wa from Panghsang and has been in operation for 1 1/2 year. Security is provided by Htun Hla, 40, son of Javi, a militia leader of Nayao, and LIB 316 stationed at Talerh. Its products are said to have spread as far as Cambodia and Vietnam through Laos. "The evacuation of Wa troops from the area in March did not affect their operation," he said.

The third, owned by Maku, 35, a Lahu, and Tafah, 47, a Kokang, both leaders of Paniang Militia force, is located at Loi Tawmaw in Monghai tract, north of Tachilek. It has been there since February.

Asked whether they thought Burma would be rid of drugs by 2004 as declared, sources in Tachilek were skeptical. "It depends on whether the Burmese military officers can stop their extortions from us and the local people," said a trader. "Anything they want, they demand that we give it. If we refuse, it is forcibly taken from us. And what they've gotten out of us has merely serve to whet their appetite for more."

Ten years earlier, for instance, total kickbacks for a six-wheeler hauling Thai merchandise from Tachilek to Taunggyi did not exceed a maximum 100,000 kyat. "Now, I have to spend at least 3,000,000 kyat for each trip just to oil their palms, let alone other expenses."

Burma has pledged to wipe out drugs by 2004 and Laos by 2005, according to Bangkok Post, 21 June.

Wa, reputed to be the biggest drug organization in the world, on the other hand, has promised to be drug-free by 2005.

