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Drug Smuggling

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By Brodie Paul

Chronicle Foreign Correspondent

Rangoon

ALTHOUGH Burma's opium-growing areas are responsible for more than one-third of the world's illicit narcotics, this nation has long escaped the heroin problems plaguing other Asian countries and the United States. To Rangoon's dismay, however, Burmese are suddenly contemplating a drug problem which shows every sign of becoming a major domestic headache.

On the Shan Plateau in northeastern Burma, the restless hill people, the Shans, produce some 400 metric tons of opium each year. This is an estimated 55 per cent of the opium grown in the world's major illicit narcotics source, the so-called "Golden Triangle," the wild mountainous region in which the borders of Burma, Thailand and Laos come together.



There is no more lawless part of the world than northeastern Burma. Army and police have small garrisons in the towns, but the countryside belongs to a smorgasbord of armed malcontents — Burmese Communist Party guerrillas, Shan and Wa tribesmen who want independence from Burma, and opium warlords.

Though the warlords and their private armies often fight with the Burmese army against the Communists, they are mainly occupied with drug trafficking.

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THE PRINCIPAL warlord is "General" Lo Hsing-han, a 37 year old Burma-born Chinese who runs a private 1400-man army protecting the 1000-horse caravans which bring the opium out of the hills. Terminus of the "opium trail" is Tachilek (population: about 10,000) on the Burmese side of the border with Thailand.

In downtown Tachilek, just three blocks from the police station, Lo has a tin-roofed, frame building known as The Distillery. Ostensibly a rice-whiskey plant, the building houses huge stocks of opium, crude morphine and heroin, and a heroin "factory" (a laboratory for converting morphine into heroin).

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IN THE PAST six months, Thai and Lao police, with U.S. help, have had considerable success in closing down drug-smuggling routes and heroin factories in two of the "Triangle" countries. Most effective has been the Thai-staffed, largely U.S.-financed Special Narcotics Organization (SNO), whose five radio-connected narcotics-suppression stations across North Thailand have forced local factories to relocate in Burma.

SNO's success is known to have lately kept many traffickers from coming up from Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore to buy Lo's wares. As a result, the price of heroin has been dropping — down to levels within reach of the low-income Burmese.

Free from interference from Tachilek's thoroughly intimidated 20 policemen and 100 soldiers, the warlord and his business colleagues have been diversifying their markets by channelling drugs back into Burma.

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AS RECENTLY as December, 1971, the Working People's Daily, Rangoon organ of General Ne Win's socialist military dictatorship, was saying "Drugs are not a Burmese problem." Now that papers are reporting heroin cigarettes selling at 3 Kyats (the equivalent of 22 cents) each. "In Rangoon," the Burmese-language Mirror noted with alarm, "heroin and hashish are readily available at the betel-nut stalls."

Because the country's economy has been thoroughly wrecked by Ne Win's half-hearted socialist planning, a black market in consumer goods is widespread in Burma. "Retail outlets ready-made for narcotics peddlers thus exist in every Burmese shopping center," says a Rangoon editor.