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Asia's Heroin Operations Are Growing, CIA Says

Washington

United States intelligence agents have identified at least 21 opium refineries in the tri-border area of Burma, Laos, and Thailand that provide a constant flow of heroin to American troops in South Vietnam.

Operated and protected in Burma and Thailand by insurgent armies and their leaders, and in Laos by elements of the Royal Laotian Armed Forces, the refining and distribution operations have grown by leaps and bounds until heroin rated 96 per cent pure is turning up in Pacific coast cities of the United States as well as in Saigon.

The Burma-Laos-Thailand border area, known as the "Golden Triangle," normally accounts for about 700 tons of opium annually or about half the world's illicit output. Burma is the largest producer in the region, accounting for about 400 tons.

But a recent Central Intelligence Agency analysis suggests that the area is expanding production and there are other indications that this year's output may reach 1000 tons.

The CIA analysis made these major points about recent trends in the illicit narcotics market in Southeast Asia:

- Refineries in Laos and Thailand that used to produce only refined opium, morphine base, and No. 3 smoking heroin are now converting most of their opium supplies to No. 4 or 96 per cent pure white heroin. The change "appears to be due to the sudden increase in demand by a large and relatively affluent market in South Vietnam."

- "Most of the narcotics buyers in the tri-border area are ethnic Chinese who pool their purchases, but no large syndicate appears to be involved."

- "An increased demand for So. 4 heroin also appears to be reflected in the steady rise in its price. For example, the mid-April, 1971, price in the Tachilek (Burma) area for a kilo of No. 4 heroin was reported to be \$1780 as compared to \$1240 in September, 1970." A kilo is 2.2 pounds.

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- "The reported increasing incidence of heroin addiction among United States servicemen in South Vietnam, and recent intelligence indicating that heroin traffic between Southeast Asia and the United States may also be increasing, suggest that Southeast Asia is growing in importance as a producer of heroin."

N.Y. Times Service