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Death of a drug lord

By Bertil Lintner

CHIANG MAI, Thailand - Khun Sa, 73, once known as the "Lord of the Golden Triangle", is dead. Throughout his career as one the world's most prominent drug traffickers, he simultaneously had some very solid contacts - and protectors - in his native Myanmar and beyond.

The fact that he spent the last years of his life incommunicado inside a compound protected by Myanmar's secret intelligence

service gives some indication as to how important the country's ruling junta considered it after his surrender in January 1996 to keep him isolated and quiet. And, despite his surrender, drugs are still flowing across Myanmar's borders in all directions, which shows that the networks he once created and of which he was a part are still very much intact.

Khun Sa was probably one of the most colorful and controversial figures on the Myanmar drug scene. Despite being indicted on drug trafficking charges by a federal grand jury in Brooklyn, New York, in January 1990, he continued to live comfortably at his then headquarters at Homong near the Thai border opposite Mae Hong Son, where this writer met him on two occasions in the early 1990s. In fact, there was precious little evidence of the then supposed hunt for what the mainstream press often referred to as "the notorious warlord".

By no stretch of the imagination could Homong have been described as a "jungle hideout" - a common phrase used by the press in the 1980s and

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early 1990s. On the contrary, it was - and still is - a bustling town boasting well-stocked shops, spacious market places, a well laid-out grid of roads with street lights. More than 10,000 inhabitants lived in wooden and concrete houses amid fruit trees, manicured hedges and gardens adorned with bougainvillea and marigolds. Huge signs indicated where you could have your travel permits to Thailand across the border issued.

There were schools, a Buddhist monastery, a well-equipped hospital with an operating theater and X-ray machines - all maintained by qualified doctors from mainland China - video halls, karaoke bars, two hotels, a disco and even a small park complete with pathways, benches and a Chinese-style pavilion. Overseas calls could be placed from two commercially run telephone booths.

Local artifacts, historical paintings and photographs were on display in a "cultural museum", and a hydroelectric power station was being constructed, but never fully finished, to replace the diesel-powered generators then providing Homong with electricity. Other unusual construction projects included an 18-hole golf course intended for the many Thai, Taiwanese, Singaporean, Hong Kong, Malaysian, South Korean and Japanese businessmen who were then flocking to buy precious stones at Khun Sa's gem center, also located in Homong. As a young man, Khun Sa was an avid golfer, and over the years he was known to have made several influential friends on golf greens.

At that time, he was supposed to be the most wanted man in the world, but, in reality, he was pursued by no one. He lived in a one-storey concrete building surrounded by a well-tended garden featuring orchids, Norfolk pines and strawberry fields. But his house was also ringed by bunkers housing 50-caliber, anti-aircraft machine-guns and swarms of heavily armed soldiers. "You never know," he once told me during an interview. "I have an army, so I'm free. Look at poor [Myanmar opposition leader] Aung San Suu Kyi. She's got no army so she's under house arrest."

Humble beginnings

Khun Sa was born in 1934 in a small village in northern Shan state of an ethnic Shan mother and a Chinese father. But he grew up as an orphan as his father died when he was only three. His mother remarried the local tax collector of the small town of Mong Tawm, but two years later she died as well.

While his three stepbrothers went to missionary schools and were given the Christian names Oscar, Billy and Morgan, the young Khun Sa was raised by his Chinese grandfather amid the poppy fields of Loi Maw mountain in northern Shan state. His only formal education consisted of a few years as a temple boy in a Buddhist monastery. During one of our interviews, I noticed that all his correspondence had to be read to him and that his replies were dictated.

Khun Sa gained his first military experience in skirmishes with the Kuomintang, or nationalist Chinese forces who had set up bases in Loi Maw in the early 1950s. Following Mao Zedong's victory in China in 1949, thousands of Kuomintang soldiers came streaming south, and, supported by the surviving Republic of China government in Taiwan - and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) - they tried in vain to "liberate" the mainland from their new sanctuaries in Myanmar, then known as Burma.

The Kuomintang invasion resulted in a reign of terror for the ordinary people who lived in the areas, as the nationalist Chinese collected taxes, forcibly enlisted recruits and encouraged poppy cultivation in the area to finance their "secret" army. At the age of 16, Khun Sa formed his own armed band to fight the intruders. In the early 1960s, his small private army was even recognized officially as the "Loi Maw Ka Kwe Ye", a home guard unit under the Myanmar army.

"Ka Kwe Ye" (KKY), which literally means "defense" in the Myanmar language, was Yangon's idea of a local militia to fight the Kuomintang as well as local, separatist Shan rebels. The plan was to rally as many local warlords as possible, mostly non-political brigands and private army commanders, behind the Myanmar army in exchange for the right to use all government-controlled roads and towns in Shan state for opium

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trafficking. By trading in opium, the Myanmar government hoped that the KKY militias would be self-supporting.

The warlords, who were supposed to fight the insurgents, strengthened their private armies and purchased with opium money military equipment available on the black market in Thailand and Laos. Some of them, Khun Sa included, were soon better equipped than the Myanmar milirtary itself.

Khun Sa, then 33, decided to challenge the supremacy of much more senior Kuomintang opium warlords. In May 1967, he set out from the hills of northern Shan state with a large contingent of soldiers and a massive 16-ton opium convoy, destined for Ban Khwan, a small Laotian lumber village across the Mekong River from Chiang Saen in Thailand. More traders joined his convoy, and by the time it reached the city of Kengtung in eastern Shan state, its single-file column of 500 men and 300 mules stretched along the ridge for more than a mile.

The convoy crossed the Mekong and the Kuomintang rushed to intercept it. Fierce fighting raged for several days, but the outcome of the battle is still somewhat obscure. At that time, General Ouane Rattikone, the commander-in-chief of the Royal Lao Army, ran several heroin refineries in the nearby Ban Houey

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Sai area, and sent the Lao air force to bomb the battle site. Officially, he cheated both Khun Sa and the Kuomintang, and made off with the opium. Other sources told this correspondent that the opium had already been sold, and Khun Sa subsequently made his first significant investment in Thailand.

On attempting to contact the Shan rebels, perhaps to switch sides, in 1969 he was arrested and imprisoned in Mandalay. He

was charged with high treason for attempting to contact the rebels, not for drug trafficking, for which at the time he had informal government permission to engage in.

In April 1973, his men who had gone underground in the jungle kidnapped two Soviet doctors who were working at the hospital in the Shan state capital of Taunggyi. An entire division of Myanmar government troops was mobilized to rescue the doctors. The operation was unsuccessful and it was not until August 1974 that the foreign hostages were supposedly unconditionally released through Thailand. By strange coincidence, Khun Sa was released from prison shortly afterwards. It was later revealed that Thai northern army commander General Kriangsak Chomanan had helped to negotiate an exchange of prisoners.

Friends in high places

Khun Sa later slipped away to northern Thailand, where he established a new headquarters at Ban Hin Taek in Chiang Rai province.

His so-called "Shan United Army", SUA, was supposed to be fighting for Shan independence from Myanmar, but was, in reality, little more than a narco-army escorting opium convoys and protecting heroin refineries. In 1982, the Thai army decided to turn against him, and Khun Sa and the SUA were driven out of Ban Hin Taek. But they soon established a new base, this time inside Myanmar, at Homong, where new refineries were set up to process raw opium into heroin.

By then he was officially the most wanted man in the world, indicted by the United States and referred to by then-US ambassador to Thailand William Brown as "the worst enemy the world has". But, even so, the stream of high-powered visitors to his not-so-secret headquarters never ceased to amaze observers.

Among them was Lady Brockett, an American model turned British socialite, and her husband, Lord Brockett, who used to party with Britain's Prince Charles. Khun Sa even presented the lady with a pair of ruby-studded shoes, which he had designed himself.

Despite all the anti-drug bravado from the US, Khun Sa also had influential American friends, including James "Bo" Gritz, a highly decorated Vietnam War hero who used to spend much of his time searching for American prisoners of war and those missing in action in Indochina. Gritz's trips to Homong were allegedly financed by Texas oil tycoon Ross Perot, once a US presidential candidate.

Another American acquaintance was Shirley D Sac, a New York gem dealer and socialite who at one stage said she was going to sponsor a Shan human rights foundation. In Thailand, Khun Sa's representatives enjoyed a close and cordial relationship with that country's intelligence services, and, on the Myanmar side, his organization maintained an official trade office in Taunggyi.

The head of the eastern command of the Myanmar army at that time was General Maung Aye, now the second-highest ranking officer in the ruling junta. Not a single shot was fired between Khun Sa's army and Myanmar government forces while Maung Aye was in command. Perhaps those high-level contacts inside the Myanmar army influenced his decision to give it all up in January 1996, when he surrendered and disbanded his private army. He moved to Yangon with four young Shan women, who served as his mistresses in his retirement.

In return, his three daughters and five sons were allowed to enter into business in Myanmar. His favorite son now runs a hotel with a casino near the border town of Tachilek, while one of his daughters is well established in business in Mandalay. Many ethnic Shan nationalists, who had joined his organization believing that he was a devout Shan patriot, were devastated by his decision to lay down arms.

Remnants of his 20,000-strong army refused to honor the agreement with the government and went underground as the newly formed Shan State Army (South). They are still fighting for their ideals in the hills around Homong, now a government-controlled town and still a bustling center for the local drug trade.

Khun Sa's surrender and new deal with the Myanmar government was interpreted differently by one unexpected quarter. Barry Broman, the Yangon CIA station chief in the 1990s, said in an interview with the Asia Times newspaper edition on June 3, 1997, that "on their own, the Burmese [Myanmar] effected the capture of Khun Sa. They made a major dent in the drug trade and we gave them no credit."

In reality, Khun Sa was never "captured"; he gave himself up in exchange for a lucrative deal for himself and his family. And there was never any "dent" made in the narcotics trade he promoted. If Khun Sa's surrender proved anything, it was that the networks that controlled the trade were able to survive even without their so-called "kingpins".

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Lo Hsing-han was the designated "king" of the Golden Triangle. Following his capture and arrest in 1973 - also for treason, not drug trafficking, which he likewise as a government-approved KKY commander was permitted to engage in,

Khun Sa filled the gap and rose to drug dealing prominence.

Nowadays, it's the United Wa State Army's Wei Xuegang who controls the bulk of the illicit trade. The bottom line is that the drug trade could never flourish without those networks and official complicity in Myanmar, Thailand and elsewhere. Khun Sa may be gone, but that makes little difference. It is business as usual in the Golden Triangle, only with a new cast of characters.

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