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U. S. Narcotics Officials Call Burma Site Asia Drug Capital

TACHILEK, Burma, Sept. 25 [AP]—United States narcotics officials say this sleepy river town is the drug capital of Asia and the gateway for Asian drugs destined for the U. S.

Somewhere in the town there is said to be a large-scale opium refinery owned by a mysterious Chinese named Lo Hsing-han and managed by his brother Lo Hsing-min. The factory turns out morphine base, red rock heroin, and pure No. 4 heroin for sale abroad.

Meets Hostile Silence

Questions about drugs are met with hostile silence from the townspeople—a mixture of Thai, Burmese, Laos, Shan,

Yunnanese, and hill-tribes people.

Tachilek, with a population of 10,000, is across the Mae Sai River from Laos in Thailand. The town is connected by a concrete bridge, the terminus of Thai Highway 1 running due south for 500 miles to the capital at Bangkok.

This highway is one of the most important arteries for Asia's drug traffic. Narcotics officials say drugs travel this route to Bangkok, Saigon, Laos, Hong Kong, and eventually the U. S.

The bridge here is guarded at the Burmese side by two soldiers, one of them carrying an old Thompson submachine gun. The Burmese flag flutters over the small customs office just off the road.

No Passports Needed

Stalls offer cheap Thai-made trinkets. The Burmese allow Thais to cross from Mae Sai during daylight hours. The Thais offer the same facility—no passports are needed.

Thai police and military officials who make the journey take off insignia of rank and leave them and their sidearms on the Thai side before they cross.

No cameras are allowed. Thai officials said a Thai who infringed this rule was arrested and has not been heard of since.

There is an air of conspiracy in this town.

Apart from being the headquarters of Lo Hsing-han, who is said to be the opium king of Asia, Tachilek is also a major smuggling center.

Goods from Thailand come in for sale in the flourishing Burmese black market, which feeds on the shortages of Burma's nationalized economy. The goods move from Tachilek north to Ken Tung and from there to Mandalay and eventually Rangoon.

Policing of Border

Policing of the border for smuggling and drugs is a hard job for both the Thais and the Burmese. The river is easily forded.

The Burmese have 14 check points in 11 miles along this section of the border. These don't seem to deter traffic in contraband. Opium traffickers use side roads and pony trails thru the hills, bypassing checkpoints.

The Thais developed an in depth tactic of five roadblocks in 37 miles on main highways in an effort to halt the drug trade. This paid off in recent months. In seizures in June and July the Thais made hauls worth many millions of dollars.

Most of the opium that finds its way to Tachilek is grown in Burma, especially in areas

close to the Chinese border. Mule caravans bring opium to the factory at Tachilek—the biggest of several along the border—for refining to heroin, narcotics officials say.

1,000 Tons a Year

About 1,000 tons of opium are produced each year in this border region of Laos, Thailand, and Burma, an area called the Golden Triangle.

The Burmese side of the border is a no man's land and the government has little control over it. Private armies roam freely.

The Thais, in response to prodding from the U. S., are making an effort to halt the flow of drugs across the border. They have established task forces in the towns of Lampang and Chiang Mai with help from the U. S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.

The United Nations has a coordinator in Chiang Mai who is assisting the Thais with a program which aims to convince tribesmen that they can prosper by growing crops other than opium.

In Burma, the government has been slow to take action.

"They don't want to stir the bees in the hive," said one official.

"That's why a heroin factory can function in Tachilek without fear of reprisals from the authorities."