

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### New haven for drug traffickers?

*As Burma descends into chaos, more and more narcotics are pouring into India through the Northeastern states.*

**T**he arrest of a peddler who claims to be a member of the Assam Regiment, and seizure from him of heroin worth some \$3 million or more on the international markets, in the Polo Bazar of Shillong in July, highlights the burgeoning problem of drug trafficking in India's strategically sensitive Northeast.

According to a recent study by the country's anti-drug agency, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), the four Indian states bordering Burma—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram—are already seriously affected by drug trafficking.

Poppy is grown in Burma by the Shan and various other "national liberation" armies battling the regime in Rangoon. From the Indian side, the chemicals acetic anhydride, along with caustic soda and aluminum chloride, are smuggled to Burma via Imphal-Morth, or any of a dozen other routes recently identified as the main avenues of smuggling between the two countries.

These chemicals are used in converting opium to heroin and other morphine-based narcotics in some 22 major refineries in Burma, mostly along the Burma-Thai border. In addition, the Shan United Army is said to control some 60 small mobile labs. Burmese heroin, intelligence officials point out, is highly rated because it is 96% pure.

Part of the heroin that flows back across the border is consumed in the Northeast, and the rest moves on into India or on out to Europe or the United States through Delhi, Bombay, or Nepal. The essentials of the racket are

not new; what is new is the rapidly growing magnitude of the traffic.

Officials fear that there is worse to come. NCB spokesmen believe that with the Thai government's increasing pressure on drug warlords in the Golden Triangle region, such as Khun Sa, the drug traffic will shift increasingly westward into Burma. From there, the logical step is India's Northeast, with access to Calcutta or Nepal, and from there to other Indian cities and the West.

A five-day visit to Burma and Thailand in July by Indian Minister of State for Revenue Ajitpanja (who oversees customs) and NCB Chief B.V. Kumar initiated a working dialogue on the problem. An agreement for law enforcement cooperation against drugs was reached with deputy premier and head of the narcotics control board of Thailand, Adm. Sontee Boonyachai. A similar draft agreement was considered by the Burmese cabinet, days before the Ne Win government fell in September.

Anti-drug cooperation may not be the only casualty of the current turmoil in Burma. As even the pretense of central authority in the country evaporates, and new rebels join the old army and create new ones, the drug traffickers are sure to seize the advantage. As of July, Indian narcotics officials have estimated that the Shan United Army itself was husbanding a bumper crop of some 1,100 tons of opium. But Shan is by no means the only player involved.

As one might expect, there is a larger geopolitical angle. The Burmese Communist Party, which is based

in Shan state and runs a large chunk of the poppy-growing and drug-running operation in the state, can be expected to step up its activities to finance new political initiatives, as leverage in the crisis. Some Western forces report that part of last year's unusually large "market offering" of Golden Triangle heroin actually came from China's Yunnan province, via Burma.

Although India's relatively tough anti-drug laws of 1985 did ban the movement of acetic anhydride within a 100-kilometer belt along the Indo-Burmese border, enforcement has been difficult. Most Northeast states have yet to extend the writ of the 1985 law. In some cases, local law enforcement is in league with the smugglers, as indicated by the open proliferation of "foreign markets" with Chinese and other sophisticated consumer goods in these otherwise impoverished towns. Fighting between the different enforcement branches is another problem.

The NCB, which could be expected to step into the vacuum, is itself woefully understaffed, with a total roster of some 80 officers to cover the entire country. NCB has provided assistance to the state government to train men in narcotics enforcement, and 50 officers from Manipur are currently in training. NCB has also proposed that a laboratory for testing drugs be set up in Imphal, to serve the region.

According to the NCB report on the threat in the Northeast, the transit problem is accompanied by a production and consumer problem as well. Opium poppy is grown on a commercial scale in Mizoram, they say, and in several districts of Arunachal Pradesh. While there are no official figures for the number of addicts in the Northeast, the problem is said to be "alarming" in both Manipur and Mizoram.