

# Interpol heroin conference exposes U.S., EU hypocrisy on Myanmar

by Gail G. Billington

On Feb. 23-26, seventy-four officials representing 28 member countries of the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) gathered in Yangon, Myanmar for the Fourth International Heroin Conference. Joining these officials were some 16 media correspondents, including representatives of Britain's Reuters and the British Broadcasting Corp., Australia's ABC, Agence France Presse, Deutsche Presse Agentur, New Zealand TV, Japan's TV Asahi, *Asia Times*, and Russia's *Izvestia*. And yet, one of the most revealing aspects of the conference, is who was *not there*. Originally, 43 Interpol members had been invited, but the United States and the European Union boycotted the meeting, saying they were protesting the human rights record of the military council, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and Myanmar's position as an opium-growing country. The boycott comes on top of economic sanctions imposed on Myanmar by the United States and Europe.

This was supposed to be the conference that no one attended. One journalist, prior to the conference, was incredulous at Interpol's naiveté in allowing the conference to be held in Myanmar.

Naiveté? Interpol? About heroin? What's wrong with this picture?

Paul Higdon, director of Interpol's Criminal Intelligence Department, hinted at the fraud underlying the U.S.-EU boycott in his opening speech. "I regret a political situation that is viewed by many as a serious problem has held hostage the universally recognized problem of drug abuse. There is more to gain through dialogue than through boycott. There is not a single country which is not affected by drug trafficking and use. It is a global problem needing cooperation and mutual assistance," he said. Higdon challenged the boycotters' charge that Yangon is protecting top heroin lords Khun Sa and Lo Hsing-han, who reached amnesty deals with Yangon, ending two out of 16 insurgencies in border areas. Higdon noted with irony, "You can say we have two bad characters who are on the loose, but before the government could do anything with heroin, they had to do something with insurgencies. Sometimes you have to make a pact with the devil. You have to look at the totality of the situation rather than one little piece of it."

## EIR is the authority

To look at "the totality of the situation," as Higdon suggests, means to look at where Myanmar's drug problem came from historically, because it didn't spring up after the events of 1988, which far too often have been taken out of any historical context. On the opening day of the conference, the government daily *New Light of Myanmar* featured excerpts of an *EIR* Special Report, "Britain's 'Dope, Inc.' Grows To \$521 Billion" (*EIR*, July 26, 1996). The report was an update on *Dope, Inc.*, the now classic book produced by *EIR* staff under the direction of Lyndon LaRouche in 1978, now in its third edition. While the U.S. government was not present at the Yangon conference, the U.S. Information Agency ran the entirety of *New Light of Myanmar's* report from *EIR* in its Feb. 27 *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*.

The *EIR* report gives extensive detail on Britain's role in opium trafficking in the 19th and 20th centuries, from the Opium Wars to the present day—literally, how the British Empire was financed by drug money. *New Light of Myanmar* highlighted *EIR's* Ibero-America editor Dennis Small as saying that the best way to understand who is behind international drug production, distribution, and trafficking, is to use the criteria formulated at the Nuremberg trials: "knew or should have known." *EIR* correspondent Joseph Brewda's report, "Britain's Opium Wars: Two Centuries, and Going Strong," is used as the basis for *New Light* to draw the conclusion, "It . . . was an ideal policy of the British to use opium as a weapon to destroy China in the 19th century, and even in the current 20th century, they continue to use opium as a weapon against certain countries which they would like to destroy. It has been stated that opium is used not only as a business, but also as an instrument in a bid to revive the old British empire. Moreover, it is used as a powerful weapon to destroy social structures throughout the world."

*New Light* points out, based on the Brewda report, that around 1850, the British exported 3,210 tons of opium to China from India; in 1880, they exported 5,880 tons of opium. But, the author reports, "according to the 1995 record, only 2,560 tons of opium were produced in the Southeast Asia Golden Triangle region. It was one-tenth of the opium that the Chinese consumed and the British distributed in 1900. . . ."

Illegal opium production is 4,467 tons. It is known that 97% [is] produced from British monopolized nations and their business. The [other] 3% [is] produced from other nations including Myanmar. Joseph Brewda expressed . . . that it is the British who monopolized 80% of legal production and 97% of illegal production of opium.”

### The money-laundering nations

The \$521 billion figure cited by *EIR* was an estimate of the annual proceeds from drug trafficking at the time. According to internet “chat-room” gossip on the Interpol conference in Yangon, Interpol officials discussed that 60-80% of these proceeds are laundered through financial institutions in the countries that boycotted the meeting, and that these same institutions would find it very difficult to kick the habit.

In his opening speech to the conference, Myanmar’s Home Minister Col. Tin Hlaing regretted the “unfortunate” decision of the United States and Europe to boycott the meeting, saying, “The international drug trade is an urgent problem which needs to be addressed in a spirit of mutual cooperation by the entire world community. As two of the largest markets for heroin in the world, the United States and Britain bear a special responsibility to work with the rest of the international community in every way possible. Their huge markets fuel a global narcotics trade which threatens to affect many countries in the developing world, including Myanmar. The Government of Myanmar . . . urges them to put politics aside, for the sake of the millions of people around the world whose lives are threatened by the drug trade.” Col. Tin Hlaing outlined Myanmar’s strategy to eradicate all opium poppy production within 15 years, noting that “should there be assistance from the international community, this goal will be achieved sooner rather than later.”

### Drug armies

The reference to border “insurgencies” by Interpol’s Higdon is crucial to Myanmar’s drug-production problem, and its solution. To this day, the government in Yangon does not control the integral territory of the state, and borders with neighboring countries have not been demarcated precisely because of insurgencies of ethnic armies that have waged war against the center, in some cases going back to the British-backed assassination of Gen. Aung San and his associates in 1947. *EIR* reviewed this history in its Aug. 29, 1997 issue, in a special report devoted to updating a profile of mega-speculator George Soros, the world’s leading promoter of drug legalization and whose Open Society Institute underwrites the Burma Project, one of the world’s leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs) backing Aung San Suu Kyi, head of the opposition National League for Democracy.

The possibility that Myanmar could succeed in eradicating opium poppy production has become a live option since



*Opium poppy cultivation in Asia. Interpol Secretary General Raymond Kendall said in a note to the meeting in Myanmar, “It is high time the international community became acquainted with the excellent work that is being carried out in Myanmar against the illicit production and trafficking of heroin.”*

its 1997 induction into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, because without collaboration with its neighbors, especially those adjoining the Golden Triangle, the cost of such an operation, especially in light of the economic sanctions imposed on the country, would be nearly impossible to manage.

Therefore, it is useful to see who *did* attend the Interpol conference in Yangon, including officials of the UN Drug Control Program, UN AIDS Asia-Pacific Inter Country Team (APICT), and Interpol members Australia, Brunei Darussalam, China, Ghana, Malaysia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Switzerland, Chile, Japan, Maldives, Mauritius, Nigeria, the Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, United Arab Emirates, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Russian Federation, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Israel, and Bangladesh.

This list includes many of what *EIR* has nicknamed the “Survivors’ Club,” led by the strategic triad of China, Russia, and India, backed up by the ASEAN nations, and Japan. The density of bilateral and multilateral accords that have been reached among Asian countries over recent months (see *EIR* March 19, p. 54) to secure national borders, to suppress all forms of smuggling, to allow extradition of criminals, and to reach agreement on economic development, are necessary prerequisites to accomplish what has been impossible for the last half-century. Myanmar is a

signator to a multilateral accord with the six Mekong River region countries, and has signed bilateral anti-drug accords with India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, the Russian Federation, Laos, and the Philippines. The most recent accord was that reached on March 8-9 between Myanmar's Senior Minister Than Shwe and Thai Premier Chuan Leekpai "to intensify the cooperation and coordination of law enforcement efforts with the aim of achieving the total eradication of illicit drug production, processing, trafficking and use in ASEAN by the year 2020."

At the end of the Interpol conference in Yangon, 10 resolutions were passed by the 28 attending countries aimed at coordinating the war on drugs, including cross-border cooperation, judicial initiatives, and extradition treaties.

### **Give 'em a chance**

In his opening speech to the conference, Home Minister Col. Tin Hlaing detailed that, from September 1988 to the end of 1998, the government seized or destroyed 4,125 kilos of heroin, 28,358 kilos of opium, more than 26 million amphetamine tablets, 6,239 kilos of ephedrine, and more than 56,832 gallons of precursor chemicals, and torched 96 heroin-refining labs. Public destruction of captured drugs has taken place 12 times in Yangon and 19 times in border areas. Participants at the conference were given a tour of crop substitution projects in northern Shan State, and witnessed the 13th burning of drugs in Yangon, including 4,023 kilos of opium, 431 kilos of heroin, and 33 kilos of morphine base. Myanmar's top anti-narcotics officer, Col. Kyaw Thein, told reporters that 3,486 acres of opium fields have been destroyed since September, containing 15.25 tons of opium, and, according to official figures, 84,420 acres of poppy have been eradicated in the last decade.

Interpol Secretary General Raymond Kendall had intended to attend the Yangon conference, which would have been something of a "homecoming," as Kendall's father was saved by Burmese from capture by Japanese troops during World War II. Because of overwhelming political pressure, Kendall did not attend, but he sent this message to the meeting: "It is high time the international community became acquainted with the excellent work that is being carried out in Myanmar against the illicit production and trafficking of heroin."

From Bangkok, the UN International Drug Control Program praised Myanmar's anti-narcotics efforts and cooperation, while saying that it remains one of the world's largest producers of opium and heroin. Speaking at the Feb. 23 launching of the International Narcotics Control Board's 1998 drug report in Bangkok, UNDCP representative Christian Kornevall told the meeting that, for various reasons, chiefly poor weather, Myanmar's opium output in 1998 had fallen to 1,700 tons. But, he added, it was the first time the figures on Myanmar opium production provided by the UN, the United States, and Burma matched.

### **Fraud at Foggy Bottom**

U.S. State Department spokesman James Foley defended the U.S. boycott of the Yangon conference on Feb. 23, declaring, "The United States did not send anyone to this conference because we would have preferred that Interpol hold [it] in another location. The United States believes the regime would use the conference to create the false impression of international approval . . . for its counter-narcotics and anti-crime conformance. . . . [Its] counter-narcotics efforts, while improving, are far from what is necessary and [Myanmar] of course, persists in disregarding political and human rights."

But, on Feb. 26, the State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs released its 1998 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, which makes major, historic concessions on Myanmar's anti-drug efforts. Most important, for the first time in a decade, the United States holds out the possibility of resuming cooperation in anti-narcotics activities, something two former Drug Enforcement Administration heads have supported.

The State Department says that 1998 crop estimates for opium poppy were down 16% from 1997, resulting in an anticipated maximum amount of opium gum that "is the lowest potential production figure in ten years and a drop of 26% from 1997. The government engaged in significant opium crop eradication efforts in 1998. During 1998, seizures of methamphetamines tripled, although opium and heroin seizures were below last year's levels."

The report criticizes the government for doing little "against money laundering" and for cancelling a U.S.-funded crop substitution project—without giving the reason why Yangon might have done so—but makes a huge concession on who controls the drug-producing areas: "Burma currently accounts for approximately 90% of the total production of Southeast Asian opium. Most of this supply of illicit opiates is produced in ethnic minority areas of Burma's Shan State. Over the past few years, [the government] has increased its presence in this region. . . . Since 1989, Rangoon [Yangon] has negotiated cease-fire agreements with most of the drug-trafficking groups that control these areas, offering them limited autonomy and development assistance in exchange for ending their insurgencies. The regime's highest priority is to end insurrection and achieve some measure of national integration; counternarcotics interests in these areas are a lesser priority."

Even among those "ethnic drug-trafficking armies" that have made cease-fire agreements with the government, the report notes parenthetically that these are "not permanent peace accords," and that some of these groups (such as the United Wa State Army and MNDAA-Kokang Chinese) "remain armed and heavily involved in the heroin trade. . . . Burmese troops cannot even enter Wa territory without explicit permission."

The report continues: "There is no evidence that the government, on an institutional level, is involved in the drug

trade. . . . The Burmese have said that they would welcome information from others on corruption within their ranks.”

Under the section titled “The Road Ahead,” the report further admits: “Based on experience in dealing with significant narcotics-trafficking problems elsewhere around the world, the U.S. Government [USG] recognizes that ultimately, large-scale and long-term international aid, including development assistance and law-enforcement aid, will be needed to curb fundamentally and irreversibly drug production and trafficking. The USG is prepared to consider resuming appropriate assistance contingent upon the Government of Burma’s unambiguous demonstration of a strong commitment to counternarcotics, the rule of law, punishment of traffickers and major trafficking organizations (including asset forfeiture and seizure), anti-corruption, enforcement of anti-money-laundering legislation, continued eradication of opium cultivation and destruction of drug-processing laboratories, and greater respect for human rights.”

### **Time to move forward**

U.S. Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio) delivered a powerful message on human rights in Myanmar, in a statement issued after his Jan. 9-18 trip to Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. There clearly was friction with Aung San Suu Kyi over distribution of humanitarian aid. Hall appealed in his Jan. 21 statement, that “people who really care about Burma’s people—and not just the cause—have an obligation to let others who care about Burma’s people do the life-saving work that is desperately needed. No one faction has a corner on concern, and humanitarian needs should be given a much higher priority than they are getting now. . . . Burma is a noble cause . . . but it is also a country of 48 million people who need help. I challenge activists for human rights to work as hard to meet Burma’s people’s humanitarian needs, and I stand ready to help anyone who is willing to do both.”

Truthfulness in identifying and addressing the historical root of problems Myanmar faces, under *any* government, is essential for the health and welfare of the nation. On this count, the powerful and influential international “Burma lobby” backing Aung San Suu Kyi has been a major source of fallacy of composition, which can only make the process of national reconciliation more difficult—assuming, of course, that such reconciliation is the objective.

A March 1999 issue of *Focus International*, published by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, discusses for six pages the military government’s human rights violations against the National League for Democracy and “ethnic minority groups,” but nowhere identifies these “ethnic insurgents” as drug-running armies. Similarly, in the Burma Project Report, 1994-96, posted to the “www.soros.org” website, Project Director Maureen Aung-Thwin studiously omits any mention in her eight-page report on the history of the country, of the British Empire’s opium policy, which so richly blessed British Burma with its current addiction. Aung-Thwin does

report, however, that the Burma Project received \$1.2 million per year in 1994 and 1995, and \$1.8 million in 1996 from Soros’s Open Society Institute. A demonstrative gesture in support of human rights in Myanmar would be for “Burma lobby” NGOs to go “cold turkey” on Soros’s money.

A June 18, 1998 statement issued by Dr. Thauung Htun on behalf of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, the government-in-exile, states: “The restoration of peace and national reconciliation and the establishment of the democratic form of governance are the most important prerequisite for the success of drug eradication. Only after that, could the way be paved to introduce an alternative development plan in the opium growing areas.” The statement points out that “the United Wa State Army alone has 20,000 armed forces that cannot be maintained without the source of income from the drug trade.”

The insurgents may have other ideas. On March 8, Kristian Nystroem, Singapore-based correspondent of Denmark’s leading daily *Jyllands-Posten*, reported that “not without bitterness, the [ruling council] pointed out to the Australian delegation, at the Interpol conference, that every time the government has attempted to reach either a military or a political settlement with one of the well-armed ethnic militia groups, ‘the West has attacked us for violations of human rights.’” Nystroem adds, “The military regime has not directly accused Aung San Suu Kyi and her [National League for Democracy] for being involved in illegal narcotics activities. But at least three of the parties supporting her are ethnic separatist groups with connections to the international Maoist movement, Revolutionary International Movement (RIM), which is notoriously deeply involved in the narco traffic.”

*Jyllands-Posten*, citing *EIR* as its source, reported that “RIM is a terrorist umbrella organization based in London, which . . . also includes the Kurdish PKK, the Peruvian Shining Path, the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers and the Mexican Zapatistas. According to the *EIR*, 80% of all heroin in Europe in recent years is smuggled through Turkey, and the PKK sits on the lion’s share of this.”

### **No simple solutions**

On the closing day of the conference, Interpol’s Higdon declared that he is confident that the Yangon government is committed to eradicating opium production. “I am confident that there is the political will on the part of the Myanmar authorities,” he said. Higdon encouraged conference delegates to “challenge” Myanmar on its drug policy, while saying that Yangon officials’ speeches were “open, candid, frank.” He described the 15-year eradication plan as “not a program that has been put together with chewing gum and baling wire. I am confident it will succeed.” However, referring to the EU and U.S. boycott of the meeting, he said that eradication “could be done quicker with outside help.” Australia’s Ambassador Lyndall McLean added, “There is more to gain through dialogue than through boycott.”