

BURMA

Hooked on the Junta

US drug agency assailed for links to Burmese generals

By Bertil Lintner in Washington and New York

Undercover drug agents have just bought narcotics from an unsuspecting street peddler in New York. Within seconds, a voice comes over the radio in a car parked nearby. Other cars come roaring up the block. The peddler panics and tries to run away, but there is nowhere to go. The streets echo with shouts and sirens. An arrest is made and drugs are seized. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has scored another success.

At Bangkok's Don Muang airport, a West African national is boarding a flight to Europe. He doesn't notice the DEA agent lurking in the background. Acting on a tip-off, plainclothes policemen search him and his luggage, and find two kilograms of heroin hidden in a secret compartment in his travel bag. Another DEA victory posted in the war on drugs.

Or is it? In Washington, many policymakers are now beginning to question the effectiveness of sting operations like these and to reassess the DEA's contribution to America's overall foreign-policy agenda. It is becoming increasingly difficult to tell, they say, whether the covert war on drugs is really achieving anything other than giving the agents involved a quick thrill and perhaps a sense of satisfaction.

All agree that the DEA's operations do not come cheap. The agency spends millions of dollars a year in the US buying drugs from small-time dealers in the hope of reaching bigger traffickers. In Thailand and other drug producing countries, the DEA is said to be paying up to 80% of the street value of drugs confiscated by local law enforcement agencies.

Street seizures and drug burning ceremonies in supplier countries have become increasingly popular methods of justifying multi-billion dollar budgets for drug enforcement agencies. Panama is a good case in point. On 8 May 1986, then DEA chief John Lawn sent a laudatory message to Manuel Antonio Noriega, then commander in chief of that country's defence forces. Lawn wrote that "I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate my deep appreciation for the vigorous anti-drug trafficking policy that you have adopted, which is reflected in the numerous expulsions from Panama of accused traffickers, the large seizures of cocaine and precursor chemicals that have occurred in Panama."

This document was subsequently

buried in the US Justice Department's files in an effort to avoid a major embarrassment. But now the same story seems to be repeating itself in Burma.

Official US policy has been to condemn the ruling military junta in Rangoon for its direct involvement with major drug trafficking groups in the Golden Triangle region, as well as for its gross violations of human rights. At the same time, however, the DEA has been praising the junta for its "vigorous anti-drug policies." Predictably, a conflict has arisen between the two government agencies involved — the DEA and the State Department. One result of this feud has been the disciplinary action taken against three consecutive DEA country officers assigned to Burma.

The first to go was Gregory Korniloff,



A DEA agent inspects an opium bonfire in Burma.

who reportedly ignored the orders of then US Ambassador to Burma Burton Levin to cease regular meetings with his Burmese military counterparts. This order was issued after the US officially condemned the killings of pro-democracy demonstrators in Burma in September 1988. Korniloff was ordered to leave Rangoon in December 1988 after making an unsuccessful attempt to arrange an unauthorised meeting with officials of Burma's powerful military intelligence service. Korniloff was said to be eager to resume normal ties with the military leadership in Rangoon, which he claimed had made significant headway in the war on drugs.

In February 1989, the US Government removed Burma from a list of countries eligible to receive US aid earmarked for combating the drug trade. The stated reason was Rangoon's inability to stem the flow of drugs coming from the Burmese sector

of the Golden Triangle. US satellite images showed that drug production in Burma was increasing at an alarming rate, and intelligence reports suggested high-level official complicity in the trade.

In July of the same year, however, a new DEA country attaché called Angelo Saladino arrived in Rangoon. On the assumption that the Burmese military had no imminent plans to relinquish its hold on power, the US Embassy had by then relaxed restrictions on contacts with the junta. But carrying the policy a bit further, Saladino saw fit to disagree openly with official US policies by claiming they hindered the DEA's ability to conduct narcotics suppression activities in Burma.

In February 1990 a Burmese Government delegation, led by the Foreign Ministry's Director-General Ohn Gyaw, visited Washington to lobby for resumption of US anti-narcotics assistance. The State Department refused to see the delegation, but the Burmese officials had better luck with Charles Rangel, Chairman of the Committee on Narcotics in the House of Representatives, and senior DEA officials. The

meetings embarrassed the State Department because the delegation included Brig.-Gen. Tin Hla, the commander of Burma's 22nd Light Infantry Division, a unit which not only had never participated in any anti-narcotics efforts but also had played a major role in the 1988 massacres in Rangoon.

To coincide with Ohn Gyaw's and Tin Hla's visit to the US, Saladino had encouraged

the Rangoon authorities to organise the first public drug burning in Burma, according to a source close to the DEA. Diplomatic representatives were invited to witness the ceremony and Saladino, together with Burma's powerful intelligence chief, Lieut-Gen. Khin Nyunt, attached a great deal of importance to it. Sources say that Saladino had, without the US Embassy's knowledge, arranged with the Burmese Government to use the drug burning ceremony as a means of publicising the DEA's previously covert presence in Burma.

What prompted the unofficial alliance between Burma's military rulers and the DEA is a matter of conjecture. Analysts speculate that the former were using the narcotics issue to improve their abysmal international reputation, while the latter wanted to justify its presence in Burma as well as, in the words of a source close to the DEA, to show Washington that "we're

doing something."

When the February 1990 drug burning ceremony failed to attract any attention from the international press, intelligence chief Khin Nyunt and the DEA orchestrated a media blitz a few months later. A key part of the plan was to keep the US Embassy in Rangoon in the dark. While Ambassador Levin — one of the junta's most outspoken critics — was out of the country, the DEA arranged for four foreign journalists to visit Rangoon at a time when no press visas were issued. While they were all experienced professionals, they were probably unaware of the covert manoeuvring by the Burmese intelligence agency and the DEA.

On their arrival in Rangoon, the journalists were met by officials from Khin Nyunt's secret police who took care of them throughout their stay. It did not take long, however, before the US Embassy staff found out what was happening. Perhaps inevitably, the differences which existed between the DEA and the State Department surfaced in a way which embarrassed all concerned. Television footage taken by the visiting journalists showed Chris Szymanski, the second ranking official at the US Embassy, and Saladino directly contradicting each other on camera.

While Saladino assured viewers the Burmese military was sincere in its anti-narcotics drive, Szymanski pointed out that drugs were pouring across Burma's borders in all directions and nothing substantial was being done to stop the flow. When Levin returned, Saladino was reportedly called in and roundly reprimanded for disobeying the embassy's orders.

The controversy reached new heights in March 1991, when it was discovered that Saladino had authored a memorandum addressed to Khin Nyunt. The memorandum, a copy of which has been obtained by the REVIEW, lists in detail the various ways Burma might try to impress the US Government and UN agencies. It also provided specific suggestions on ways to "deprive many of Myanmar's [Burma's] most vocal critics of some of their shopworn, yet effective, weapons in the campaign to discredit [Burma's] narcotics programme." Finally, Saladino recommended several options to the junta for silencing "its most biased critics."

"Be assured," Saladino concluded, "that I, and my staff, will continue to use our own professional credibility and that of the DEA as the premier narcotics law enforcement agency in the world, to ensure that your anti-narcotics efforts are accurately represented to the world at large, and that we will support your efforts with all the means available to us."

It took some time before Washington discovered the memorandum. When noises were made, Saladino reportedly flew back to the DEA's headquarters in the US at his own expense. He managed to convince his superiors that he had not, after all, actually sent the memorandum to Khin Nyunt, State Department sources maintain. A compromise solution was reached: Saladino had his tour of duty in Burma officially curtailed but was allowed to serve out his term which only had a few more months to run.

The DEA's participation in official drug

are currently accorded official status as local militia commanders, one result of the 1989 ceasefire agreement between the government and the former rebel forces.

Saladino's successor as DEA country attaché in Burma, Richard Horn, arrived in Rangoon in mid-1992. He lasted about one year before being recalled to Washington. Horn's undoing was a series of unauthorised meetings with officials of the Wa wing of the former CPB rebel army who had approached several US agencies, including the DEA, with a drug-eradication proposal. He is now suing the Clinton administration for what he claims was an improper transfer.

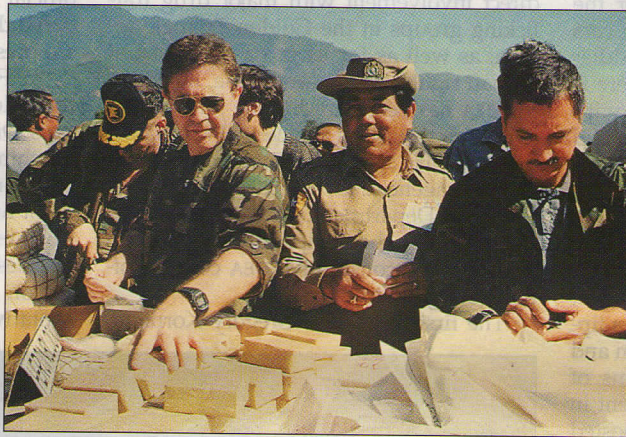
However, there is an alternative view of Horn's dismissal. To improve its image internationally, the Burmese Government invited several delegations of US politicians and former congressmen to visit the country. The DEA, contrary to the State Department's wishes, played a key background role in ensuring that the visits took place, according to State Department sources. One of these sources complained that the DEA "is trying to run its own foreign policy." One of the delegations visited Rangoon in March-April this year and, in an official

letter submitted to it, Horn continued the DEA tradition of praising the Burmese military's anti-narcotics efforts. In an even more embarrassing development, several of the visiting US politicians met some prominent Burmese drug traffickers, who were introduced to the apparently unsuspecting Americans as "leaders of the local nationals."

In August 1993, Congressmen Rangel — one of the Burmese Government's most vocal supporters in the US — and a few other US politicians were introduced to Lin Mingxian, a former CPB commander turned government militia commander in the hills north of Kengtung. Lin is considered the fastest rising star in the Burmese heroin empire, and his group is emerging as one of the most powerful drug trafficking organisations in Burma today.

While DEA agents in Burma have come in for particularly harsh criticism, they are not alone. The reputation of the entire agency was tarnished in a recent report from the US General Accounting Office which examined the DEA's operations in Southeast Asia and especially in Burma.

Dated December 1992, the report rebuked the DEA for the "poor performance" of some of its staff in Southeast Asia, whom it said lacked "the knowledge, skills and abilities recommended for their positions." The overall quality of the DEA's intelligence analysts assigned to Southeast Asia "has declined significantly since the late 1980s," the report concluded. ■



Saladino (right) and another DEA agent inspect a drug haul.



A DEA agent (right) with heroin kingpin Lo Hsing-han (in white cap).

burning ceremonies in Burma are the cause of much of the controversy. DEA personnel have argued that "some drugs burnt is better than nothing," while State Department officers have repeatedly dismissed the ceremonies as sham public relations exercises which have not affected the flow of drugs from the Golden Triangle.

It is by now well known in intelligence circles that the drugs burned on a number of occasions in northeastern Burma have actually been bought from the traffickers by the military authorities for the sole purpose of being publicly destroyed. The traffickers, mostly senior cadres of the now defunct Communist Party of Burma (CPB),