

BRIEFING/WESTERN ASIA

Ex-Carter aide praises Burmese drug lord

Bourne calls him ethnic liberator

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BANGKOK — One of former President Carter's top anti-drug officials, Dr. Peter G. Bourne, said he was wrong to call Khun Sa an opium warlord, and that the indicted drug figure "is one of the most impressive national leaders I have met."

U.S. officials say 60 percent of the world's heroin originates in Khun Sa's part of Burma.

A Brooklyn grand jury indicted the half-Shan, half-Chinese guerrilla chief in December 1989 on 10 counts of smuggling heroin from Southeast Asia to New York. The indictment was kept secret for months as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) tried to kidnap Khun Sa for trial in the United States.

Dr. Bourne's endorsement of Khun Sa, 60, whose Chinese name is Chang Si-fu, came after the Bangkok Post on May 1 splashed a color photo of the two men smiling and shaking hands in Burma. Both wore the olive drab uniform and cap of Khun Sa's 10,000-strong Mong Tai Army (MTA).

An American Embassy spokesman in Bangkok told the newspaper Dr. Bourne did not visit Burma on U.S. government business.

"As far as we are concerned, Khun Sa is the single biggest heroin dealer in Burma, and we have warrants out for his arrest," the embassy spokesman added.

Dr. Bourne met Khun Sa at his headquarters several miles inside northeast Burma's Shan state, across from the Thai border town of Mae Hong Song. The Washington physician was present at a sendoff for 3,200 MTA guerrillas to fight Burmese troops that the Rangoon junta said it sent to crush Khun Sa and stop his horse caravans from carrying opium to Thailand, Laos and China.

Introducing Dr. Bourne to a Bangkok Post reporter who came for an interview, Khun Sa boasted:



Opium warlord Khun Sa addresses his soldiers at his headquarters near the Thai border several years ago. AP

"At one time, he treated me as a drug kingpin. Now he just comes and has meals with me."

Describing the current fighting, Khun Sa said: "Shan state has been encircled by the Burmese forces for four months. There was occasional fighting, with 300 soldiers killed and a large number of injuries on both sides, and we have to send more troops."

Khun Sa said: "If we don't defend ourselves, the Burmese forces will intrude on our territory. We have to push them back."

A week later, the newspaper published a long letter it received from Dr. Bourne in response to the photograph. He wrote: "I served as special assistant to the president of the United States and director of the Office of Drug Abuse Policy in the Carter White House.

"In my role as the top official formulating and executing drug policy for the United States government, the director of the DEA was one of several agency heads

reporting to me."

Dr. Bourne resigned in July 1978 as President Carter's chief adviser on narcotics after admitting that he had written a prescription for a controlled drug for a White House aide under a fictitious name.

The British-born physician had been an early supporter of Mr. Carter and established a drug-abuse program in Georgia when the president was governor of that state.

In his letter to the Bangkok Post this month after returning to Washington, Dr. Bourne said:

"I found him [Khun Sa] to be a person of great charisma and considerable depth. The epithet of 'drug warlord' attached to him by me and others in the past is both simplistic and unfair.

"He is clearly deeply committed to the cause of Shan independence and is moving in that direction with dramatic economic development in the areas he con-

trols. I regard him as one of the most impressive national leaders I have met."

Khun Sa is leading "a legitimate, popularly supported movement," he added. "What I found was a unified organization of dedicated people from diverse backgrounds determined to defeat the Burmese and establish their own nation — a reality that, sooner or later, Bangkok, Rangoon and Washington are going to have to face up to."

He said Khun Sa is "capable of delivering on his promise to terminate opium cultivation in Shan state if Burmese troops withdraw, peace is restored, and the international community recognizes the independence aspirations of the Shan people."

Khun Sa — fighting against an offensive by Burma's military junta, which is publicizing its "war against drugs" in a bid for recognition and foreign aid — has asked President Clinton to back Shan in-

dependence in exchange for an end to opium smuggling.

A few months ago, he wrote Mr. Clinton: "I have received assurances from the people that once the Burmese [troops] withdraw, they would destroy their poppies on their own."

His letter added: "How much longer the cause of the drug crusade will take is anybody's guess, but one thing is clear: As long as hostilities continue, both the people's sufferings and drug production — strange but inseparable bedfellows — will go on."

Burma's blossoming poppies, now reaching the stage where the sap can be harvested as raw opium, are expected to produce a bumper crop for the sixth year in a row, totaling more than 2,000 tons of opium, which will later be refined into morphine and heroin.

An MTA spokesman said this month that 20,000 Burmese soldiers are pressing Khun Sa's stronghold east of the Salween River near the Thai border.

"There has been heavy fighting near Mong Kyawt and Mongton. ... Reports from the battlefield say our troops are circling around the enemy," Yi Seng told Reuters in Bangkok by telephone. The news agency said the Rangoon government had deployed more than 2,000 infantry against the MTA.

Several of Burma's ethnic guerrilla groups have reportedly held discussions this spring with Khun Sa about forming an alliance to oppose the Rangoon junta.

Dissident Burmese students and others have told Reuters and other news organizations that representatives of the autonomy-seeking Karen National Union (KNU), tribal Mon, and Karenni guerrillas traveled to Khun Sa's headquarters in April to talk about military cooperation.

A close aide of Khun Sa confirmed the talks between the strictly anti-narcotic KNU and the Golden Triangle kingpin.

The KNU is led by Christians who have long taken a tough stand against narcotics, including the death penalty for drug smugglers. Karen leaders have in the past condemned Khun Sa for involvement in the opium trade.