



China's Mekong Drug 'War'

Written by Richard S. Ehrlich



Beijing puts its multinational security force on display

After executing four killers from Thailand, Laos and Myanmar last year, China's security forces have extended their reach into Southeast Asia by uniting the countries along the Mekong River into a "war on drugs" and arresting 812 people in the narcotics-rich Golden Triangle.

China's new push is described as an anti-drug operation and includes protecting commercial and passenger ships on the Mekong against thieves, kidnappers and guerrillas. The operation, which began on April 19, will end on June 20.

Critics have questioned whether China's interest is about drugs at all or whether the crackdown is just a convenient way for Beijing to project power into its strategic southern flank.

China found the opening it needed to form a multinational anti-drug squad, backed by armed patrol boats, as a result of outrage over the October 2011 execution of 13 Chinese crew members on two cargo ships by a gang led by Naw Kham, an ethnic Shan methedrine smuggler from Myanmar.

The Chinese caught up with Naw Kham and executed him and members of his gang in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan in February despite his recanting a confession and claiming that rogue Thai soldiers had staged the murders. As an indication of China's presumed fury over the incident, Naw Kham's execution and that of his henchmen included showing them being led away to die live on Chinese state television, although their lethal injections were not broadcast.

In response to the case, which included the discovery of 920,000 amphetamine pills, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos began for the first time to allow Chinese "border police" gunboats to lead four-nation patrols on the Mekong River beyond China's territory. Left unexplained is what involvement the Chinese boat may have had in the drug trade.

So far, security forces from the four countries say they have confiscated more than two tons of drugs, including heroin, opium and methamphetamine, plus guns and ammunition.

The 812 arrests include citizens from all four participating Mekong countries plus Vietnam, according to Lan Weihong, an official with the Narcotics Department in China's powerful Public Security Ministry.

Lan made the announcement at a command center staffed by drug enforcement agents in Jinghong, a Mekong River port in Yunnan, the state-owned China Daily reported on May 21.

The new center is a second-floor hotel room where 10-plus officers work alongside translators, allowing the four nations to "sit in the same room and talk directly with each other," Lan was quoted as saying. Previously, officials had to send documents and other evidence back to their home countries and ask their superiors how to coordinate cross-border raids, which slowed the process.

"Narcotics officers assigned to a four-nation campaign against smuggling on the Mekong River say reducing red tape and improving communication is boosting the war on drugs," China Daily said. The officers also "protect merchant sailors and residents along the major trading route through Southeast Asia," it said.

There was no immediate indication where the suspects were imprisoned after being busted in 560 separate cases during the past month. It was also unclear where they might stand trial or which countries they came from.

A few hundred miles longer than the Mississippi River, the Mekong originates in Tibetan glacier-fed peaks in China's Qinghai province, runs 2,700 miles, and empties through southern Vietnam into the South China Sea. But it is the river's midway section through the mountainous Golden Triangle which interests the joint patrols.

The region is part of China's southern frontier – where Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet – and was dubbed the Golden Triangle in the 1950s when warlords, rebels, criminals and corrupt officials in all three countries became wealthy from illegal opium and heroin production. Today, the Mekong's murky waters are a lucrative commercial lifeline, especially for Chinese goods exported south through Yunnan to be assembled or sold in Southeast Asia or abroad.

As the region modernizes, illegal drug production has also increased, and seizures are now alarmingly huge. For example, police in Bangkok said they netted Thailand's biggest-ever cache of illegal methedrine on May 22 when they retrieved 4.5 million speed pills, plus 60 kilograms of powdery "ice" – a slang term for smokable methamphetamine.

The drugs were found in suitcases in an apartment, which police said they raided before arresting three Thai couriers who allegedly also possessed four guns. In a separate raid on May 26, Thai police in the Golden Triangle near Chiang Rai said they stopped a convoy of pickup trucks going to Bangkok, arrested four minority ethnic hill tribesmen who were couriers, and seized 600,000 methamphetamine pills.

Thailand points Myanmar's northern Shan state as the source of most such drugs. Many of the region's illegal, makeshift meth labs are located there, though key chemicals in the formula are often purchased in Thailand. Shan state is also the world's second biggest source of illegal opium, which can be refined into heroin and morphine.

Some Shan state smugglers also secretly ferry their cargo down the Mekong to Thailand's Golden Triangle river ports of Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong, where modern highways link to Bangkok. Others send their illegal drugs on speedboats across a narrow section of the Mekong into Laos, and then march the loads across sparsely populated hills. Those drugs are then brought from Laos across a different section of the Mekong near Thailand's river ports, or north overland into China.

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