

International

Drones, money, cheap drugs: Laos route spewing meth into Thailand

Drug gangs now using drones along Thai-Laos border

NAKHON PHANOM: As dusk falls along the Mekong River, a nightly dance begins between Thai border security and Laos drug gangs now using drones, scouts and a pool of poor fishermen to shift record amounts of meth into Thailand. Landlocked, secretive and with ungovernable borders, Laos has become a sluice for transporting Made-In-Myanmar meth to the drug hungry markets of Southeast Asia and Australia, where billion-dollar seizures are now being made.

Whisked over the remote mountains of Laos - one of the world's last surviving communist countries - shipments are regularly slipping into Thailand, the region's drug superhighway. "It's coming in from over there," Thai navy captain Sumnuan Kamdee said, gesturing across the wide Mekong, which bisects Thailand and Laos.

"Drugs have become a national threat." Armed with M4 rifles and night vision goggles, his Mekong River Unit scours the water in speedboats in Nakhon Phanom, one of Thailand's poorest border provinces in the northeast. But the border is long and cannot be fully policed. Once inside the kingdom, tons of highly addictive crystal meth, known as "ice", and hundreds of millions of yaba pills - caffeine-laced methamphetamine tablets guzzled by everyone from laborers to ravers - are consumed or warehoused before being smuggled onwards. A months-long Thai military-led crackdown in the northern jungles of the kingdom's section of the notorious "Golden Triangle" has blocked the quickest drug route south. But with big money to be made, the narco gangs have carved new

routes west and east - through Laos and across the Mekong. In the fading light, as the limestone karst scenery of Laos elbows into the night sky, black-clad Thai military rangers wait in mosquito-infested bushes for suspicious crossings. But the drug gangs are also quick to adapt. "They have drones (from Laos) searching the river to see if there are any officials," Phoomsak Kampoo, district chief officer of Tha Utain district of Nakhon Phanom said. "And they have scouts watching for checkpoints on this (Thai) side."

Cheap as a beer

On smaller runs, Laos fishermen will cut their engines and drift close to the Thai bank before lobbing wax-covered parcels of 2-3,000 yaba pills towards the shore, where Thai couriers scamper out to claim them. But bigger, multi-million-dollar shipments are becoming more frequent. Experts say the Golden Triangle region is now likely to be the biggest meth production hub in the world. Yet without the ultraviolence of the Latin American cartels, it captures fewer headlines.

On May 31 the Mekong River Unit received a tip off that led to a 133-kilo haul of crystal meth a few kilometers down river in Mukdahan province. It was a fraction of the near three tons of "ice" seized by Thailand between just May 31 and June 4 - on top of nearly five million yaba tablets. Despite the intense anti-drug operations, meth is still getting through to more lucrative overseas markets.

Australian border authorities announced a record 1.6 tons haul of ice in Melbourne last

Friday - with an estimated street value of US \$840 million - wrapped in packets of Chinese-branded tea and hidden in a shipment of stereo speakers shipped from Thailand. At that price, losses are easily absorbed by the drug networks. "If just one out of ten shipments gets through, they still get their money," a senior Thai drug official told AFP, requesting anonymity. Inside Thailand, street prices are plunging - evidence of a huge oversupply from the meth lords who have slashed costs by using cheaper precursor chemicals. The tiny pink or green vanilla-scented yaba pills now go for as little as 30 baht (less than a dollar) in some border zones, drug officials told AFP - as little as a bottle of Thai beer. A kilo of ice is down to around \$11,000 in Bangkok - and just \$4,800 in Laos. "Meth is destroying lives, families and communities," police major-general Pornchai Charoenwong, deputy commissioner of the Narcotics Suppression Bureau said.

Spotlight on Laos

Under pressure, Laos is co-operating with neighboring law enforcement. "But frankly Laos really needs to up their game when it comes to tackling organized crime, drug trafficking and border control," said Jeremy Douglas of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The high profile 2017 arrest of Laos drug lord Xaysana Keophimpa at Bangkok's main airport was hailed as a new era of intelligence sharing. But with scant details from Laos it is not clear which of Xaysana's alleged associ-



NAKHON PHANOM: An armed Thai navy personnel rides in a boat during a patrol along the Mekong river bordering Thailand and Laos in Tha Utain, Nakhon Phanom province. — AFP

ates has been prosecuted. Meanwhile, meth continues to cascade across the Mekong region. Vietnam has made record seizures this year, including 700 kilos of ice hidden in tea packets in Nghe An province, which borders Laos. Cambodia is also reporting a spike in drug movements over its Laos border.

"Myanmar to Laos, then through Cambodia... this is now one of the main drug routes from the Golden Triangle." Cambodia's

Deputy National Police Chief Mok Chito said. The falling drug prices are curdling a public health and crime crisis in local communities riddled with addiction and petty drug dealing. In a remote Thai village near the Laos border, a recovering addict explained how his life slowly unraveled after being introduced to yaba aged 15. "I lost money, friends and my health," Nat - not his real name said. "It took away ten years of my life. I am trying to get it back." — AFP

Four passengers die in 'unbearable' heat on Indian train

NEW DELHI: Four people died in 'unbearable' heat while travelling by train in northern India, which has been in the grip of a heatwave for two weeks, officials and passengers said yesterday. The four died Monday while travelling from Agra - the city of the Taj Mahal - to Coimbatore in the country's south. "Heat seems to be a factor," Indian Railways spokesman Ajit Kumar Singh told AFP, "it is really unfortunate". "When the train was approaching Jhansi, we got a call from the on-board staff that one of the passengers is unconscious," Singh said. "We rushed medical staff to the station but they found that three of the passengers were already dead." A fourth person died later in hospital.

Temperatures have hovered around 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit) in Jhansi, in northern Uttar Pradesh state, in recent days, Singh said the Kerala Express train had no technical problems, but the tourists were not in air-conditioned coaches. A passenger who was a part of the group that boarded in Agra said the train was stiflingly hot. "Shortly after we left Agra, the heat became unbearable and some people started complaining of breathing problems and uneasiness," the passenger was quoted as saying by News18 television.

"Before we could get some help, they collapsed." One of the dead was 81 years old, the channel said. Much of India has been sweltering in temperatures that have risen above 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) in northern Rajasthan state. A number of deaths from heatstroke have been reported. Temperatures touched 50.3 degrees Celsius in the Rajasthan town of Churu recently, just below India's record of 51 degrees. — AFP



UTTAR PRADESH: Indian people fill water from a tanker of the Allahabad municipal corporation near Sangam, the confluence of the rivers Ganges and Yamuna and mythical Saraswati, during a hot day in Allahabad. — AFP

Three killed in fresh political violence in India's West Bengal

KOLKATA: Three people died in fresh political violence between members of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party and a local rival in restive West Bengal state, authorities said yesterday. Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Trinamool Congress - which runs the state - have accused each other of instigating weeks of violence during and since India's recent election.

A police official said the bodies of two BJP members were found hanging from a tree in Howrah district over the past 48 hours, while a Trinamool stalwart was killed by a

crude bomb blast late Monday, east of Kolkata. On Saturday four people died and at least 18 were injured in gun battles between BJP and Trinamool supporters in Sandeshkhali district.

The BJP, which has traditionally held sway in the Hindi-speaking belt in the north, has been trying hard to pick up support in West Bengal. In the elections that ended last month with a big national victory for Modi, the BJP increased its tally of seats in the state to 18 from just two at the last vote in 2014.

Yesterday locals in Sandeshkhali remained tense. "There is a continuous sense of fear," resident Rabin Mondal told AFP by telephone. "We are spending sleepless nights. Many have fled." Last month, a BJP supporter was shot dead in the state capital Kolkata, and a car belonging to a Trinamool member was pelted with rocks. In February, a Trinamool lawmaker was shot dead. Political killings are rife across India. National Crime Bureau data showed more than 100 political murders in 2016, but experts say the figure was likely much higher. — AFP

Indian town on edge after murder of 2-year-old girl

NEW DELHI: Indian authorities yesterday deployed hundreds of police and suspended the internet in a northern town following the brutal murder of a two-year-old girl over a \$144 loan owed by her family. The mutilated body of the Hindu girl was found on a rubbish dump last Sunday in the Aligarh district of Uttar Pradesh state. The fact that her alleged killers were from India's minority Muslim community has stoked tensions with the majority Hindu population in the Tappal area where she lived.

Right-wing Hindu groups, including those backing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have led the protests in Tappal, urging authorities to mete out "instant justice" to the perpetrators. A prominent leader of the far-right Vishwa Hindu Parishad group was stopped by police from visiting the girl's family on Monday, and on Sunday members of another radical group gathered to demand the death penalty for the accused.

The groups also tried to organize a "grand assembly" but police thwarted their attempt. "We have clamped section 144 (prohibiting unlawful assembly) and internet has been suspended in Tappal," district magistrate Chandra Bhusan Singh said yesterday. "Additional police forces have been deployed as a precautionary measure. The situation is normal as of now." Police were also clamping down on those sharing fake social media posts which were likely to "inflame communal passions", the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

Despite police reporting the child is not believed to have been sexually assaulted, unverified social media posts have claimed otherwise-tapping into deep-seated anger about sexual violence against children in the country. The Times of India daily reported yesterday that a Muslim family in a minibus in the area was allegedly attacked on Sunday by men on motorcycles and only escaped because a Hindu woman was travelling with them.

"They beat me, my daughter who wore a veil and our driver," Shafi Mohammad Abbasi, one of the seven members of the Muslim family, told the newspaper. "Pooja (the Hindu woman) stepped out and boldly confronted the attackers." — AFP



WEST BENGAL: Indian supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hold placards as they observe 'Black day' during a silent protest rally against the recent killings in Sandeshkhali in West Bengal. — AFP

News in brief

Businessman paid to spy

WASHINGTON: A United Arab Emirates businessman linked to a probe of illegal donations to Donald Trump's political campaign was paid by his country's intelligence agency to spy on the US president's administration. The Intercept reported Monday. Rashid Al-Malik received tens of thousands of dollars a month for gleaning information on Trump administration policy toward the Middle East in 2017, the website said, citing a former US official and documents. He reported back to the UAE's National Intelligence Service on topics of interest to the oil-producing Gulf state-including US efforts to mediate a Gulf feud involving Qatar-as well as meetings between US officials and Saudi Arabia's powerful Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, The Intercept said. — AFP

3 jihadists, 9 kids expelled

PARIS: Three French jihadists and their nine children returned to France yesterday after being expelled by Turkey, legal sources said, a day after France took back 12 children of French jihadists from camps in northern Syria. The returns mark an acceleration in the repatriation of children of French nationals who travelled to Iraq or Syria to join extremist groups, amid growing pressure on Western countries to take back their combatants. The three adults—a 35-year-old man and the two mothers of his children—were taken into custody and the children were placed under the protection of the state. The French foreign ministry stressed that the trio's return was unrelated to the repatriations of children from French jihadist families stranded in Syria. — AFP

Sri Lanka MPs defy president

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's parliament yesterday defied President Maithripala Sirisena and resumed an investigation into security lapses surrounding the Easter suicide bombings that killed 258 people, officials said. The Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) began hearing testimony from Muslim leaders who claimed they repeatedly alerted the authorities to dangerous radicalization, a parliamentary official said. President Sirisena last week asked his coalition cabinet to halt the hearings, which have already revealed senior police and security officials directly under him had ignored repeated intelligence warnings. Sirisena sacked his intelligence chief over the weekend after he told the hearing that the April 21 attacks could have been avoided if police had been allowed to arrest the ringleader as early as last year. — AFP

NZ quashes China extradition

WELLINGTON: A New Zealand court yesterday stopped a murder suspect from being extradited to China, saying it could not send him to a country where torture was "widespread" and "systemic". The Court of Appeal quashed a ministerial decision to extradite Kyung Kim to China, saying to do so when there was a risk he would be tortured breached New Zealand's international obligations. The 99-page judgment, which included a damning assessment of Beijing's justice system, comes amid huge protests by Hong Kong residents against a proposed law to allow extraditions to mainland China. Kim's lawyer Tony Ellis said the decision was a precedent-setting human rights victory. "It is a judgment that has profound human rights importance which will resonate throughout the Common Law world, it is not just important in New Zealand," he said in a statement. — AFP