



- [home](#)
- [latest news](#)
- [headlines](#)
- [national](#)
- [politics](#)
- [business](#)
- [finance](#)
- [technology](#)
- [sport](#)
- [opinion](#)
- [features](#)
- [entertainment](#)
- [letters](#)
- [what's on](#)
- [cartoon](#)
- [byteline](#)
- [weekend](#)
- [femme](#)
- [travel & tourism](#)
- [learn english](#)
- [learn thai](#)
- [PDA format](#)



Get your free e-mail @thailand.com
and win 20,000 baht cash daily [click here!](#)

[OPINION]

[Print this page](#) |
 [Comments](#) |
 [Send to friends](#)

Customise &
WIN prize
CATHAY PACIFIC PlayMyPrize
[register now](#)

Username
 Password
[register now](#)

Chasing the Burmese dragon

The Thaksin government is poised to launch a major anti-drug offensive against the Burma-based Wa army. It stands a real risk of failure, Don Pathan reports.

Two years ago when the bodies of nine Thai villagers, beaten to death with their hands tied behind their backs, were found scattered along the northern border, all fingers pointed to the Wa army which is based just on the other side of the border.

It was a drug deal gone bad, and members of the United Wa State Army did it, Thai officials said. Though no one has proven exactly who carried out the brutal act, nevertheless the blame was conveniently placed on the Wa. After all, this 20,000-strong outfit has been dubbed the world's largest armed drug-trafficking group, and a number of its leaders have already been indicted by a US federal court on drug charges.

Thai security agencies found themselves in a situation where they had to act and act fast. The army was brought into the picture, border crossings leading to the UWSA areas were ordered shut, and over 1,000 Thai workers building everything from roads and hydroelectric dams to schools and hospitals in nearby Wa-controlled areas were told to come home. For the Thai troops along the border overlooking Doi Sam Sao opposite Thailand's Mae Ai district, this meant that their daily volleyball games with the Wa soldiers had to end.

The Thai public and the media went along for the ride, and the Thaksin government, as well as the previous Chuan administration, couldn't resist jumping on the bandwagon in spite of its racist connotations. "Wa" immediately became a household name. And just like that, an entire ethnic group became demonised.

nation search

Search

web search

Alta Vista

Search

mailing list

Receive regular news
and info about this site !

- Subscribe
- Unsubscribe

e-mail

Go!

To show that he meant business Thaksin, shortly after taking over as premier, launched a high-profile drug seminar in Chiang Mai. Photographs showed Burma's security chief, Lt-General Khin Nyunt, shaking hands with Wa leaders in Mong Yawn, a newly built town adjacent to Chiang Mai's Mae Ai district. Thai officials said Mong Yawn was the source of millions of methamphetamine pills heading for the streets of Bangkok and other major cities in the country. At the end of the two-day seminar, Thaksin boldly told the public that he would take the matter straight to Rangoon. China, said Thaksin, will also be brought into the picture to help with the counter-narcotics efforts.

Thailand's latest move is to form a 400-strong anti-drug task force made up of staff from the Army Special Forces, infantry and Border Police units. They will be trained by a team of about 20 soldiers from the US Special Forces, starting this October under the supervision of the Third Army. But while the public ate up the anti-narcotic rhetoric, little discussion was given to the implications and the possible fallout with Rangoon and Beijing, two sovereign governments whose priorities happen to be other than the Thai people's bad habits.

A Bangkok-based foreign diplomat overseeing drug issues called Thailand's declaring war on the Wa a "knee-jerk" reaction without real understanding of the situation on the ground. For any anti-narcotic policy to be successful, according to Burma experts, it must include a meaningful political solution for all insurgent groups in the ethnically diverse country. Drug trafficking and insurgency, they say, are two sides of the same coin.

In a recent interview with The Nation, the UN Drug Control Programme's regional representative Sandro Calvani said a strong foundation for regional countries to cooperate in their anti-narcotic efforts "exists in joint agreements, but real united action requires significant improvements".

"Finger-pointing to drug-producers or drug-users helps no one. History in other parts of the world has shown that isolating a group does more harm than help," said Calvani, suggesting that regional UN coordinated action on the Wa and Burma might be more effective than fragmented moves by Thailand, Malaysia, China, India and other countries concerned.

As for the country's anti-drug policy, an alliance that unites the government, the UN and the

entire civil society must be created, while the private and public sectors, as well as government agencies and the community, must be included in this endeavour, he said.

For years Rangoon has consistently come under attack by Western governments for allowing drug armies and opium warlords to operate with little hindrance. They point to the presence of the Wa army along Burma's northern border with Thailand and China, as well as the Kokang Chinese, also known as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.

But the reality on the ground, say Thai and foreign drug officials, is that the Burmese government has little control over the Wa's activities. For one thing, Burmese troops must have permission before entering areas occupied by UWSA troops.

Wa fighters were the foot-soldiers of the now defunct Communist Party of Burma. In 1989 the CPB fractured along ethnic lines, and the group formed the United Wa State Army, before working out an attractive cease-fire agreement orchestrated by security chief Lt-General Khin Nyunt.

For Rangoon the truce neutralised a 20,000-strong insurgent group that had enough weapons to last them for another decade. For the Wa it was a green light to expand their heroin empire southwards from the Chinese border to areas adjacent to Thailand's northern border. Along the way they clashed with former drug kingpin Khun Sa, hastening his surrender in January 1996. Today, besides filling a vacuum left by Khun Sa, the presence of the Wa army along the Thai border is deemed a security threat to Thailand. The group is also perceived to be a significant factor in the tit-for-tat relations between Thailand and Burma.

[COMMENTS]

Post your comment to this story [here](#)

No comments in this story



Get your free e-mail [@thailand.com](mailto:thailand.com)
and **win 20,000 baht** cash daily

[click here!](#)

© 2000 Nation Multimedia Group
44 Moo 10 Bang Na-Trat KM 4.5, Bang Na district, Bangkok 10260 Thailand
Tel 66-2-325-5555, 66-2-317-0420 and 66-2-316-5900 ; Fax 66-2-317-2071
Contact us: bangna@nationgroup.com