

# GEOPOLITICS OF DRUGS AND CROSS-BORDER RELATIONS: BURMA-THAILAND

Carl Grundy-Warr and Elaine Wong

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most notorious characters of the Shan states of Burma is Khun Sa, the half Chinese, half Shan drug warlord who dominated much of the drug trade in the “Golden Triangle” – a term coined for the infamous region where the borders of Burma, Thailand, and Laos meet, and also near the borders of China’s Yunnan Province. According to drug enforcement officials, the region has supplied as much as 70% of the world’s heroin (Reuters, 3/4/97). The situation in Shan state is highly fluid and complex with constant struggles between drug warlords, government officials and ethnic minority insurgents. In a region long associated with narcotics, political alliances of convenience can be forged and broken off quickly.

**...the cooperation between the drug dealers across borders has been even more efficient than the efforts of the respective state authorities to stem the trade.**

The drug crises facing both the central authorities of Burma and Thailand have been receiving a great deal of attention. The Burmese military regime does not seem to be able to control the drug manufacturing and trafficking problem as most of these remote highlands are still under the control of insurgency armies and local warlords. Historically, the central government of Burma has never been able to control the insurgency armies and exert its sovereign authority over the country’s extensive border regions (Smith, 1999; Grundy-Warr, 1997). On the Thai side, the drug problem has affected millions of people. The numerous publicised drug busts around the country have not noticeably stemmed the flow of narcotics.

Recently, Thailand and Burma have stepped up their drive to curb the drug problem with inter-governmental talks, strict penalties, anti-drug educational programmes and appeals to the international community for drug-eradication and crop-substitution funds. However, critics have pointed out that corruption, the lack of political will, and implicit involvement of top officials in aspects of the drug trade have meant that drug production is booming.

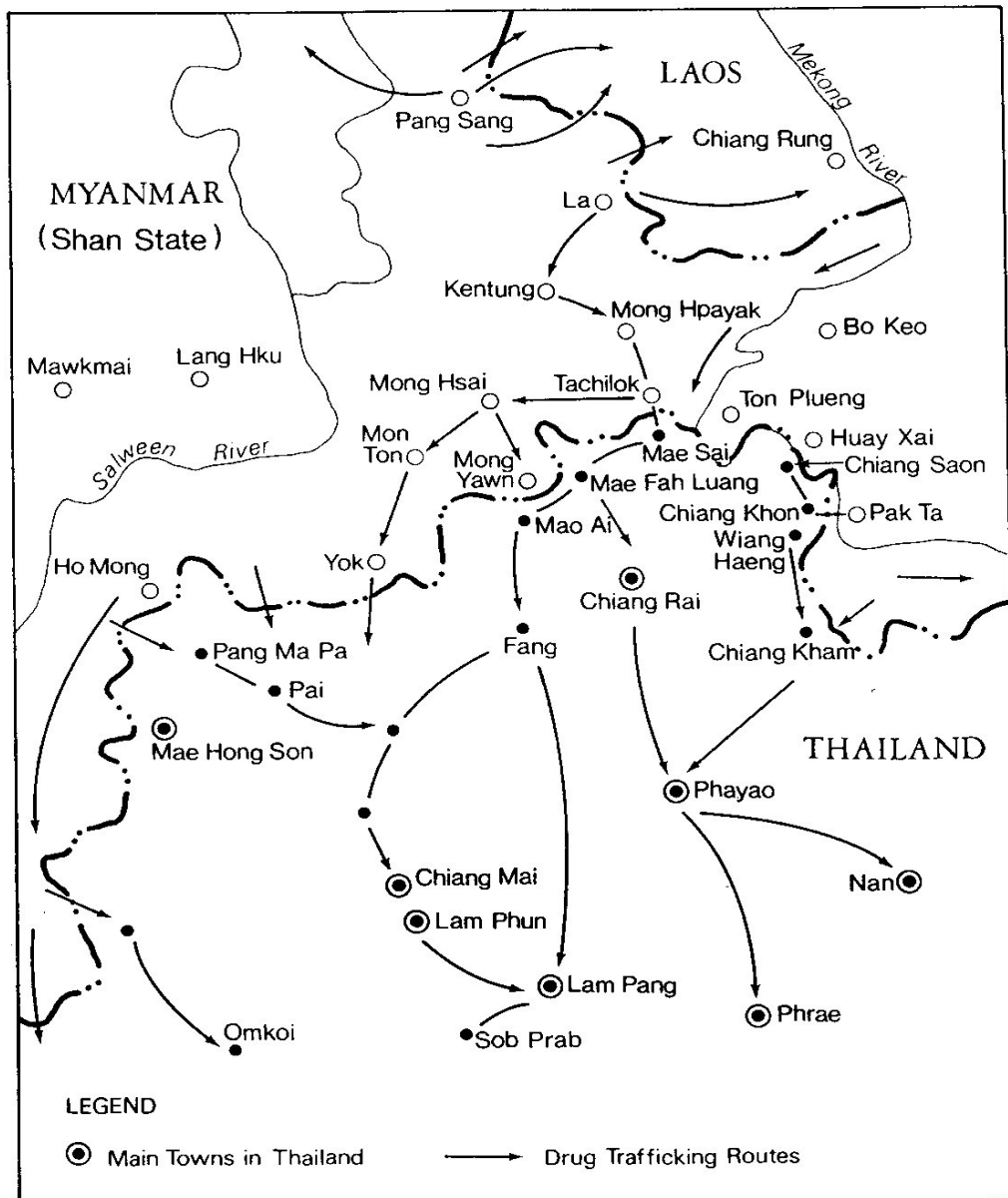
During a special session on drugs of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, Thailand and its five Mekong neighbours pledged to cooperate and fight drug abuse. However, the cooperation between the drug dealers across borders has been even more efficient than the efforts of the respective state authorities to stem the trade (IPS World News, 19/6/98). At a local level, it is also unrealistic to monitor and enforce the law along the highly porous borders of the region.

## A CROSS-BORDER PROBLEM

**Thai officials estimate that as many as one million Thais may be addicted...although independent observers say the numbers could be much higher.**

The drug menace has reached worrying proportions for Thailand, making it the number one security threat. One of the latest problems has been ‘mobile’ factories producing millions of methamphetamine tablets, such as the speed pill called *yaa ba* (literally “crazy drug” in Thai). Already Thai officials estimate that as many as one million Thais may be addicted to such pills although independent observers say the numbers could be much higher (IPS World News, 19/6/98). First, amphetamines were used by truck drivers and night workers who wish to keep awake. But these drugs have become very widespread in Thailand – in towns, villages, bars, discos and schools alike. *Yaa ba* is considered ‘trendy’ by many youths. Amphetamine use among the young has become so rampant that some schools have resorted to urine tests on their students (BBC News, Internet, 13/7/00).

Figure 1: Cross-Border Drug Routes



Whilst Thailand represents a big market for drugs, the major production plants are located in Burma and the drugs are then transported into Thailand at the border (Figure 1). The United Wa State Army (UWSA) has become the most powerful drug cartel inside Burma in recent years. However, other groups have also been involved, such as the Kokang Democracy United Army (KDUA) operating in Northern Shan state near the Chinese border. Being relatively isolated and beyond the administrative reach of the Burmese central authorities, opium production has thrived in the Kokang Hills for many years (Lintner, 1996 and 1998). In recent times, the Kokang forces have moved closer to the Thai border to protect their interests in amphetamine trafficking (*Bangkok Post*, 12/9/99). The other significant groups involved in the drug trade are some of the ex-Mong Tai Army (MTA) forces of Khun Sa and the former Communist Party of Burma (CPB) fighters.

There are also frequent reports of *Tatmadaw* (Burma Army) involvement in the drug trade. For instance, Professor Desmond Ball (1999), a long-time observer of the security situation along the Thai-Burma border, has observed that:

*In the Triangle Region (of the Tatmadaw), the most notorious battalions in the last few years have been the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (IB), 225<sup>th</sup> IB and 519<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) based in Mong Ton (Murngton) township, about 30km from the Thai border, northwest of Mae Ai; the 227<sup>th</sup> LIB, stationed at Pang Tawng, near Mong Ton; and the 331<sup>st</sup> LIB, 256<sup>th</sup> IB and 359<sup>th</sup> LIB in the area north of Mae Maw (across the border from Ban Hin Taek in Thailand). The 65<sup>th</sup> IB, which was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Hla Myint until the end of 1996, and since then by Lt.-Col. Myint Swe, maintains its own shares of the heroin and amphetamine refineries, provides guards for these refineries, gives loans to Shan and Lahu opium growers, and taxes other drug traffickers operating in the area. Tatmadaw troops stationed at Doi Tui, a border point opposite Thailand's Chiang Mai province, collect "taxes" on the opium moving from nearby villages into northwest Thailand. At Loi Khi Lek, one of the largest heroin factories in this region is guarded by Tatmadaw troops.*

This extract indicates the geopolitical complexity of the drug-producing region, but clearly implicates some elements of the *Tatmadaw* in the cross-border drug trade. When Burmese authorities raided the house of a well-known Shan in Ban Mong Mai (near to Ho Mong, former base of Khun Sa) and confiscated three pill-stamping machines and stores of amphetamine pills, the suspect was allegedly freed after a former senior officer of the Mong Tai Army told the Burmese officials that the suspect was a long-time adviser to the MTA, which had recently handed over weapons in a deal between Khun Sa and the military leaders (*Bangkok Post*, 23/3/97).

**Although...the military regime of Burma claims that it is trying to eradicate opium production by 2014...it continues to allow poppies to be grown in certain areas in order to extract taxes from these lucrative crops.**

Corruption charges against Burma's military regime are not new. It is said that the trial of drug baron Lo Hsing Han in 1973 was halted when his testimony began implicating high-ranking officials (Renard, 1996). Although the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military regime of Burma, claims that it is trying to eradicate opium production by 2014 (The Star Online, 1999), it continues to allow poppies to be grown in certain areas in order to extract taxes from these lucrative crops. The SPDC has also signed ceasefire agreements with armed groups such as the Wa, who continue to wield enormous power within the areas under their *de facto* control and it is debatable how much real influence the Burmese military authorities actually have. In reality, few independent observers really know many of the details of the drug-producing situation within the Golden Triangle, because it is extremely dangerous to do research there. Furthermore, the groups involved in the drug trade are well connected and powerful by virtue of well-developed drug trafficking networks established over many decades (see Lintner, 1998; Renard, 1996). After the Chinese Revolution in 1949, several Chinese nationalists and the Kuo Min Tang (KMT) fled into Burma's Shan state. By the 1950s, remnants of the KMT were well entrenched in Shan State. Their bases served several purposes: they were used to gather information on the situation in China for American and Taiwanese anti-communist activities and were convenient centres for opium and various black market trading activities. With their own fiefdoms and armies, these powerful ex-KMT warlords controlled about one third of Shan state. Not surprisingly, their bases were all located in opium-growing areas (Yawnghwe, 1987).

## THE EARLY EXPANSION OF THE DRUG TRADE

The Shan ethnic uprising in the late 1960s and the chaos which ensued after the military coup, actually strengthened the position of the drug lords. Fighting the Shan armies left the *Tatmadaw* (Burma Army) little time and resources to worry about the ex-KMT 'merchants' whose businesses were booming because the economic turmoil

in Burma, particularly under the old Burmese Way to Socialism regime of General Ne Win, fuelled a demand for black-market goods. The ex-KMT were also indirectly aided by the communist Chinese government as its successful launch against drug cultivation and trafficking redirected the drug trade towards Burma and Thailand (Renard, 1996).

As the ex-KMT warlords were too powerful a force to be reckoned with, many Shan rebel armies entered into a 'marriage of convenience' with them. The Shan groups protected the interests of the ex-KMT in exchange for arms, ammunition and money to continue their anti-Burma military regime campaign. During this period, the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) had already entered the complex geopolitical situation in Shan state. The BCP, which had carved out an autonomous region along the Shan-China border, began to spread its influence to other parts of the Shan state. Despite the communist ideological opposition to the drug trade, the BCP became embroiled in drug cultivation and trafficking to maintain a powerful hold over northern Shan state (Renard, 1996). In addition to the support they received from China, the BCP had additional funds from drugs to finance their activities in Burma. This enabled the BCP to establish a firm foothold in Shan state.

## DEFENCE FORCES OR DRUG ARMIES?

***In essence the policy gave the go-ahead for groups of rebels to indulge in the drug trade and in contraband goods.***

In the late 1960s, the Burmese military government of General Ne Win initiated the new *ka-kwe-ye* (KKY) strategy to combat the insurgency problems in Shan state. Basically this policy permitted anyone to set up auxiliary local 'defence armies', which would be able to engage in trade to the Thai and Lao borders. Any rebel group which renounced its anti-government struggle and surrendered would be given KKY status. Since fighting the rebels did not seem to produce the desirable results, this strategy helped to undermine the armed anti-government resistance in the Shan state. In essence the policy gave the go-ahead for groups of rebels to indulge in the drug trade and in contraband goods. By doing this, the Burmese military government indirectly helped to launch the careers of several influential drug warlords in the region. The Burmese military leaders probably thought that the rebels would be too preoccupied with the booming cross-border trade to continue their resistance towards the Burmese military regime. Moreover, once their business empires were built up, there would be too much at stake to risk opposing the central government.

The KKY forces were also used to fight against the BCP forces. The Kokang KKY unit led by Lo Hsing-han, a local warlord, inflicted major damage on the BCP in a 45 day battle from November 1971 to January 1972. For his efforts, local Burmese officials aided Lo's business by protecting his opium consignments (Renard, 1996). The Burmese military regime's strategy to play one group against another effectively left the Shan state in turmoil and under the control of warlords trying to protect their business, often drug-related business, interests.

***...it is clear that the military rulers of Burma are also implicated in the development of the drug trade and various figures associated with it. Some of these eventually bit the hand that fed them.***

The KKY policy accelerated the booming black market and drug trade. One powerful KKY force was the Kokang KKY, an auxiliary force under Burmese military protection, which had extensive dealings in opium and gold at the Thai-Burma border (Yawnghwe, 1987). Another KKY beneficiary was Khun Sa who was initially the chief of the Loimaw KKY. Whilst the KKY policy was eventually abolished, it is clear that the military rulers of Burma are also implicated in the development of the drug trade and various figures associated with it. Some of these eventually bit the hand that fed them. For instance, Khun Sa soon allied himself with other anti-government Shan groups and with the Shan nationalist cause. He managed to build up an impressive *de facto* territorial base for his drug and political activities that spanned the Burma-Thai borderland. His final headquarters at Ho Mong was one of the most thriving towns in the whole of Burma, if not much of the Mekong region (Grundy-Warr, 1997). He eventually surrendered, or "retired", in 1996, which meant

that his Mong Tai Army (MTA) was split up, with some surrendering to the Burmese military regime and others disbanding to join other rebel groups in Shan state.

## **CEASEFIRES, FORCED RELOCATIONS AND DRUGS**

Over the years, the military rulers of Burma have tried various ‘carrot and stick’ strategies to entice ethnic minority armies back into the government fold. The *Tatmadaw* have unleashed a reign of terror among the villagers who live in areas of the Shan state where Shan nationalist insurgencies exist. Since the military crackdown on the Burmese pro-democracy movement in 1988, which almost coincided with the collapse of the communist insurgency and the once-powerful BCP in the northeastern borderlands of Burma, the military regime has adopted a strategy of signing ceasefire agreements with different ethnic political parties and armies. One of those ceasefire parties was the United Wa State Army (UWSA) which has now become one of the most powerful ethnic armies and drug trade controllers in the Golden Triangle (Lintner, 2000).

The political geography of ceasefire arrangements is very complex in the vast borderlands of Burma. In some areas, ceasefires have allowed the *Tatmadaw* to gain greater access to particular territories once controlled by ethnic insurgent groups, and to get greater shares of the natural resource wealth. In other areas, ethnic armies still wield most power, which seems to be the case over large parts of the zone controlled by the UWSA. Elsewhere there are hotly contested territories, and the military regime’s main strategy still seems to be to employ the “*Four Cuts*” (*pya-ley-pya*) counter-insurgency strategy of trying to cut off food, funds, intelligence and recruits to insurgent armies mostly through a strategy of forcefully relocating villages.

This has had enormous social consequences for tens of thousands of civilians in central Shan state. Following the January 1996 surrender of Khun Sa, many MTA soldiers moved into zones controlled by other Shan resistance groups, including the Shan State Army (SSA). Some of the ex-MTA regrouped to form the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA), which later formed SSA (South), led by Major Yawd Serk (Shan Human Rights Foundation, 1998). The success of the Shan resistance armies in central and more southerly parts of Shan state led to an angry response from the military authorities of Burma. Beginning in March 1996, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, later named the State Peace and Development Council, SPDC) of the military junta ordered many villages in eight townships of Shan state to be relocated.

**...probably as many  
as 1,400 villages  
were forcibly  
relocated involving  
over 300,000 people  
in just two years.**

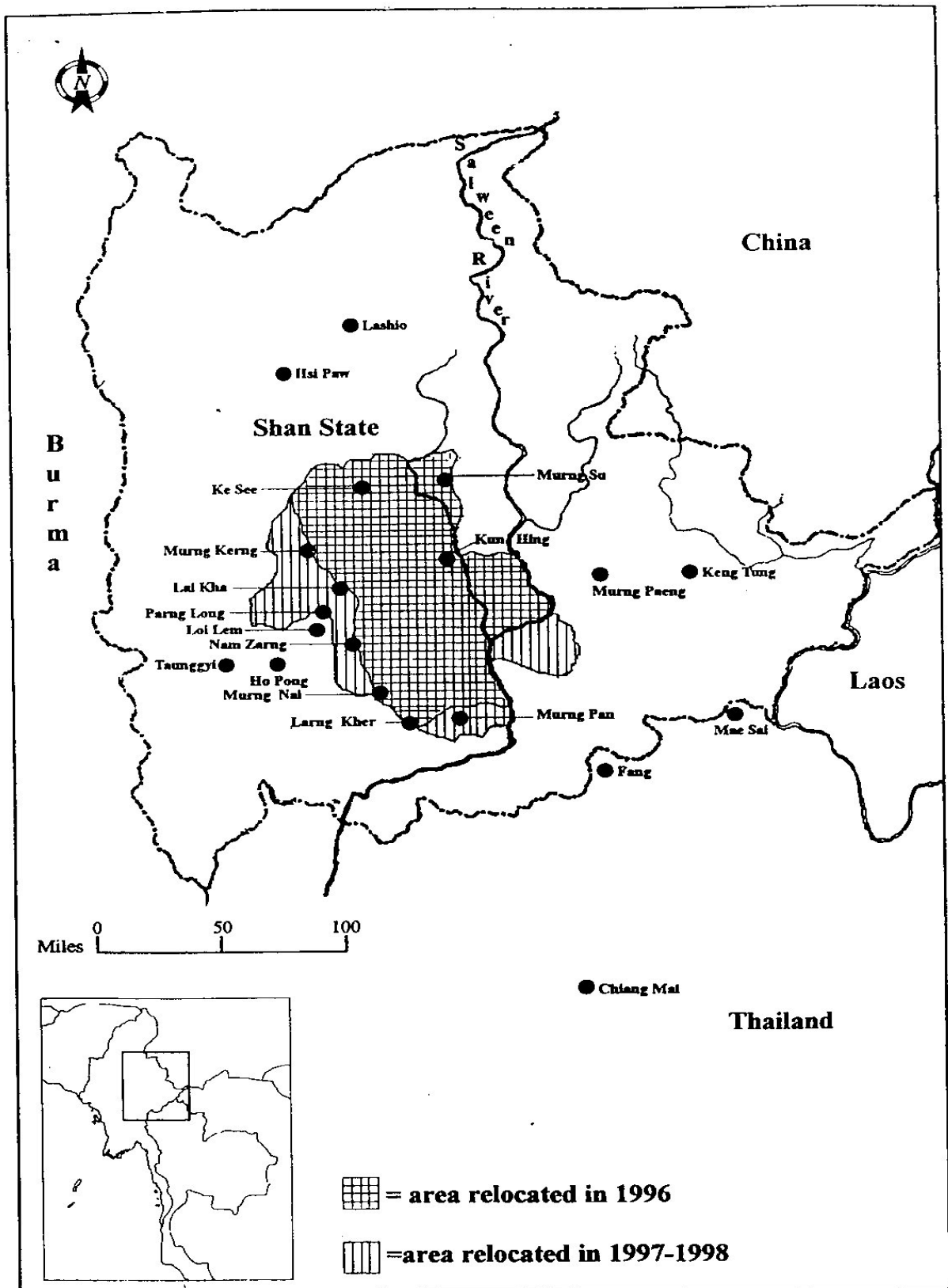
A SHRF publication in April 1998 revealed that probably as many as 1,400 villages were forcibly relocated, involving over 300,000 people in just two years (Figure 2). Many of these people moved into relocation centres under tight military surveillance, others became internally displaced in other parts of Shan state, and others fled across the borders into Thailand (Wong, 2001).

## **UWSA AND SSA: A ‘PROXY WAR’?**

In recent years, there has been a concentration of the ethnic Wa people along the Burma-Thai border. There are reported to have been mass relocations of an estimated 200,000 people from Wa territories closer to the China border to the more southerly zones nearer to Thailand. The mass relocation is apparently supported by the SPDC, which claims that the movement of people is part of their crop-substitution plans to eradicate poppy cultivation, although precise details are hard to come by.

There are reports that the Wa are developing massive infrastructure projects at their stronghold between Mong Ysat and Mong Yawn, which is just opposite the Chiang Mai district of Mae Ai. Investments have been made to build roads, housing, community buildings, a reservoir, and bring in electricity, water and telephone lines. Mong Yawn is apparently prospering in a way that resembles the old headquarters town of Ho Mong once controlled by Khun Sa. Yet again, ambitious

Figure 2: Areas in Shan State Affected by Forced Relocation



Source: Shan Human Rights Foundation (1998)

development projects are supported by profits from the drug trade. The UWSA has put in infrastructure estimated at one billion Thai Baht (c.US\$23m) for their people in Mong Yawn. An estimated six thousand Thai workers have also benefited from construction-related jobs across the border in Burma (*Bangkok Post*, 9/4/99). This is a reverse flow of migrant labour compared to the hundreds of thousands of undocumented Burmese migrants who work within Thailand.

**Thailand has become extremely wary of the activities of the UWSA and other drug producers on the Burma side of the border.**

When Khun Sa had his headquarters in Shan state close to Mae Hong Son Province's Pang Ma Pa district, he seemed to have developed an 'understanding' with Thai border authorities on the other side. The presence of Khun Sa's MTA close to Thai soil was tolerated, perhaps partly because heroin was primarily for export (Thailand was generally only used as a transshipment point) and partly because Khun Sa's well-equipped army provided a useful geo-strategic 'buffer' against the *Tatmadaw* and the former CPB. However, the Thai authorities have not been so cordial towards the United Wa State Army, which has established a lively trade in metamphetamines, much of which finds a user market within Thailand (*Bangkok Post*, 9/4/99). Moreover, the need for an ethnic buffer no longer seems to be so urgent after the CPB collapse in 1988. Thailand has become extremely wary of the activities of the UWSA and other drug producers on the Burma side of the border.

Reports on the situation have speculated that the relocation of the ethnic Wa people by the UWSA, which has some ethnic Chinese leaders, also fits in with the Burma military regime's desire to use the UWSA in a proxy war against the Shan insurgent groups, which have refused to sign ceasefire agreements with the SPDC. Furthermore, the development of new roads in Shan state not only facilitate the trade in drugs and contraband, but also help the *Tatmadaw* gain access to remoter hill areas where ethnic insurgents operate.

## **GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS BETWEEN BURMA AND THAILAND**

Tensions have greatly increased along the borders of Burma and Thailand in recent months. However, before talking about the most recent sparks to fly across the border, it is useful to put the geopolitical situation in a slightly broader historical and political perspective. First, since the late 1980s there has been much greater contact at higher levels between Thailand and Burma, which is partly related to the end of communist insurgencies and partly to the more 'open door' economic strategies the Burma military have adopted following the failure of the Burmese Way to Socialism. On the Thai side, there has long been an interest in securing access to some of Burma's vast natural resource wealth, including timber, fisheries, water, and gemstones. As Ronald Renard (1996: 108) has put it:

*Thailand reassessed its policies in 1988 when then Prime Minister General Chatichai Choonhaven declared his aim to change the area from sanam rop (battlefields) to sanam kankha (marketplaces). The Thai saw that, rather than profiting from the troubles of others as it had done during the Vietnam War and insurgency in Burma, it might well become mainland Southeast Asia's leading merchant state.*

Various resource deals were then agreed between the generals of Burma and various Thai businesses. Early cross-border business deals were facilitated by General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who was then the Thai Commander-in-Chief. Chavalit was recently made the new Defence Minister in the current administration of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and he is an advocate of 'personal ties' over institutional orthodoxy in cross-border relations. Burma's formal incorporation into the 'ASEAN family' has also helped in the expansion of economic links between Burma and her regional neighbours.

**...the 1990s have witnessed a growing presence of *Tatmadaw* forces within border zones previously controlled by ethnic armies.**

Second, the 1990s have witnessed a growing presence of *Tatmadaw* forces within border zones previously controlled by ethnic armies. This has happened in ceasefire zones and contested zones, where the Burma Army have won decisive victories against various ethnic opponents, including the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Karen National Union (KNU); the Karenni Army and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP); and the former Mong Tai Army (MTA) led by the once feared warlord, Khun Sa; and numerous other groups. Thus, the issue of close proximity between the *Tatmadaw* and Royal Thai Army (RTA) is much greater now than at any other time since Burma's independence in 1948. Cross-border relations are further complicated by the fact that ethnic armies that refuse to sign ceasefires with Rangoon have not died away. Rather, several groups are engaged in fierce guerrilla warfare tactics even though they have lost much of their territorial control inside Burma.

**...there have been numerous violations of Thailand's sovereignty and territorial integrity in recent years by the *Tatmadaw* and by different proxy armies collaborating with the military regime.**

Third, there have been numerous violations of Thailand's sovereignty and territorial integrity in recent years by the *Tatmadaw* and by different proxy armies collaborating with the military regime. For instance, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which broke away from the Karen National Liberation Army in the mid-1990s and helped the *Tatmadaw* to capture strategic border bases, has long adopted a terror campaign targeting refugee camps along the border in Thai territory. Between February 1995 and April 1998 the DKBA was responsible for over 150 violent incursions into Thailand. Sometimes the DKBA attacks involved upwards of 100 soldiers, but mostly these were small-scale attacks, which resulted in 80 deaths of refugees and Thai citizens.

Such violations of Thai sovereignty represent a very serious security predicament for Thailand, and they usually provoke strong words from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thailand and official letters of protest to Rangoon, many of which go unanswered. Thai officials have often refrained from openly blaming the Burma military regime for these cross-border incursions, often characterising the DKBA attacks as strictly "*Karen versus Karen problems*" (Images Asia and Borderline Video, 1998).

Nevertheless, Rangoon's views of the refugee camps as a hotbed for insurgents and Thailand's border zone as a base for insurgent activities against Burma are well known. It is also known that the *Tatmadaw* provides armies such as the DKBA with funds, intelligence, weapons, and often assist in attacking rebel armies on the Burma side of the border. Furthermore, actual *Tatmadaw* violations of Thai sovereignty have occurred. For example, in October 2000, a group of about 50 *Tatmadaw* troops crossed into Umphang district of Tak Province and killed one Thai soldier and wounded two others (Ball, 2000).

Fourth, Thailand is extremely concerned about the very large numbers of refugees and undocumented migrants on Thai soil. In the temporary camps along Thailand's border there are at least 116,000 registered refugees receiving relief assistance from a plethora of NGOs and humanitarian agencies (Burmese Border Consortium, 2000). In addition, there are an unknown number of undocumented migrants from Burma working inside Thailand. Estimates vary widely from about half a million to nearly one million. Whatever the actual statistics are, it is clear that Thailand has a huge cross-border displacement issue to deal with. Many of the refugees living in the camps have fled from forced relocation and forced labour measures within their home areas (Grundy-Warr, Wong and Chapman, forthcoming). Their presence inside Thailand is considered a national security threat, and the Thai National Security Council together with many senior politicians believe that early repatriation is a solution. Unfortunately, conditions are far from being 'safe' for many of these refugees to return to. Furthermore, the fact that the border zones are highly



**Burma is second only to Afghanistan as a leading world producer of heroin.**

militarised and there is still significant insurgent activity means that these refugees are becoming long-term ‘temporary’ residents along the border.

Last but certainly not least, there is the massive cross-border drug problem. Burma is second only to Afghanistan as a leading world producer of heroin. A major international heroin route is from Shan state into Yunnan Province of China, then onto Hong Kong, for shipment to many places including Taiwan, USA, and Australia. For a long time Thailand has been another transit country, although the key heroin routes are now understood to be through China. However, a new drug menace in the form of millions of methamphetamine type stimulants has become the key drug issue confronting Thailand. In 1999, the flow of methamphetamines averaged about 50 million tablets a month. According to Des Ball (2000: 7):

*The Burmese government and the Tatmadaw are intimately involved in the drug trade. The leading drug traffickers in Burma, such as Lin Min-shing (Lin Mingxian), commander of the Eastern Shan State Army, and Pau Yu-chang and Wei Hsueh-kang, commanders of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), enjoy good relations with both SPDC generals in Rangoon (especially Khin Nyunt) and Tatmadaw officers stationed in border areas. In October (2000), two Tatmadaw battalions were engaged in joint exercises with the UWSA. In the major drug production areas, located in the Tatmadaw’s North East Command (HQ at Lashio), the Triangle Regional Command (HQ at Kentung) and the Eastern Command (HQ at Taunggyi), there are few Tatmadaw units which are not involved in narcotics activities.*

Recently, senior Thai officials have been openly stating that they are aware of drug connections between the *Tatmadaw* and UWSA. For instance, Thailand’s Third Army Commander, Lt-Gen. Wattanachai Chaimuanwong, has been particularly critical of Burma’s narco-links. He is reported as saying:

*Everybody knows who’s involved in Burma’s burgeoning narcotics industry. We don’t have hard evidence [that Burmese regional commanders are involved in the drug business], but [we believe] they are (The Irrawaddy, 22/3/01).*

In a dramatic headline story on the front page of the English language *Bangkok Post* (13/2/01) entitled *Junta in Cahoots with Rebels*, Lt-Gen. Wattanachai is reported as saying:

*Burma is using the United Wa State Army to wage a proxy war with Thailand and all of the Burmese officers along the border are getting kickbacks from drug traffickers.*

Needless to say, these allegations by a senior Royal Thai Army officer are vociferously refuted by the generals in Rangoon. Several articles in the state-run *New Light of Myanmar* have argued that the SPDC is trying hard to fight the drug trade, and that it is Thailand that is supporting the “drug-trafficking insurgents”, such as the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) [now part of the Shan State Army] led by “opium smuggler Ywet Sit” (Yawd Serk).

Bertil Lintner and Rodney Tasker in a recent *Far Eastern Economic Review* article called *Border Bravado* (8/3/01) suggested that:

*Foreign military analysts in Bangkok [say that] the Thais are covertly using Shan guerrilla units to hit UWSA methamphetamine refineries and other targets across the border.*

Certainly there are plenty of reports that suggest that the Shan State Army (SSA) led by Jao Yawd Serk, a once trusted aide of Khun Sa, has become involved in attacks on drug refineries along the border. The *Bangkok Post* (11/2/01) ran a story entitled “*Rebels committed to drug war*” in which Jao Yawd Serk claims that the SSA is an anti-drug trade organisation. Major Kham Daeng, who heads the SSA’s “*drug suppression unit*” claimed that: “*During our raids on drug plants inside Burma, on many occasions we have had to fight Burmese soldiers deployed for the protection of drug plants.*” Apparently this happened during a raid on Muser Abi, opposite Ban Pasang Na-ngern in Chiang Rai’s Mae Fah Luang district, which was used as a store by the UWSA for methamphetamine pills before shifting them across the border into Thailand.

**Thailand continues to regard the drug threat as the number one issue of national security.**

Whilst the Thai border forces do not openly admit to supporting the SSA, there is certainly more sympathy for the Shan forces than for the UWSA, which is widely regarded to have created a “*drug-manufacturing city*” at Mong Yawn, just 30km (19 miles) north of Chiang Mai Province (Yahoo! Asia News, 11/3/01). Indeed, Lt-Gen. Wattanachai has commended the SSA for its drug fight (*Bangkok Post*, 11/2/01). Thailand continues to regard the drug threat as the number one issue of national security (Ball, 2000). Thus, the Thai Army has upgraded its presence in key sectors along the border; increased helicopter surveillance flights along the border; and sought considerable support from the US to fight the drug trade (*Ibid.*).

The US Department of State has stated that it considers the UWSA as being “*heavily involved*” in drug trafficking and “*largely immune from government action*” (*The Nation*, 13/3/01). At a recent drug seminar in Chiang Rai, Mr Pipop Chamniwikaipong, Chief of the Thai Narcotics Control Board’s satellite survey unit, said that satellite pictures showed many roads built from Mong Yawn, the UWSA drug-centre, to the Thai border areas (*Bangkok Post*, 11/3/01). Thailand is now seeking to increase its satellite surveillance of border areas known to be drug trafficking zones. There are an estimated 50 speed (*yaa ba*) laboratories scattered along the Shan state border with Northern Thailand, with another 37 in the township of Mong Yawn (*Bangkok Post*, 12/3/01).

## MILITARY CLASHES

**...fighting broke out at the nearby border crossing between Mae Sai and Tachilek, two busy border towns, claiming several lives and provoking a very tense military standoff... The seriousness of the incident, affecting a busy Thai border town frequented by many tourists, was emphasised in the Thai media for weeks afterwards.**

In February and March 2001, the tensions between Burma and Thailand became much more sharply focused as a result of incidents along the Thailand’s northern border. In February, the *Tatmadaw* launched a major dry season offensive against the Shan State Army (SSA), supported by the United Wa State Army (UWSA). A month earlier, General Maung Aye, the *Tatmadaw*’s Commander in Chief, had visited Tachilek and Kengtung in southern Shan state and met with regional commanders for almost one week (*The Irrawaddy*, 22/3/01). Shortly afterwards the *Tatmadaw* troops began mobilising.

On 8 February a clash with the SSA spilled over into Thai territory, as over 100 *Tatmadaw* troops seized a Thai Army Rangers’ Base Number 9631, near Ban Pang Noon, in Chiang Rai’s Mae Pah Luang district, detaining 20 Thai paramilitary troops. The base was considered to be strategically important to fire “*from behind*” on nearby SSA positions (*Bangkok Post*, 11/2/01). Fighting caused many local hilltribe people on the Thai side to evacuate their homes (*Bangkok Post*, 10/2/01; *The Nation*, 12/3/01). Subsequently, the Royal Thai Army regained Ban Pang Noon, but a much more serious incident followed. The next day, fighting broke out at the nearby border crossing between Mae Sai and Tachilek, two busy border towns, claiming several lives and provoking a very tense military standoff (*The Irrawaddy*, February 2001, Internet edition).

According to the Thai media, Burmese shells and stray bullets hit the Thai town of Mae Sai, killing two people and injuring several soldiers and civilians (*Bangkok*

**The Thai government accused Burma of “blatant acts of violation of Thailand’s sovereignty and integrity.”**

*Post*, 12/2/01). Thai troops retaliated on the Burmese Army positions believed to be the source of the shells fired on Mae Sai. The seriousness of the incident, affecting a busy Thai border town frequented by many tourists, was emphasised in the Thai media for weeks afterwards. A few days later, Thai troops in Mae Sai were given Valentine’s Day garlands and flowers by well-wishers. The *Bangkok Post* editorial of 13 February angrily stated: “*Thais are dying, and their homes and businesses are threatened and attacked. In recent years, Burmese policy has never succeeded in securing the dangerous frontier.*”

The Thai government accused Burma of “*blatant acts of violation of Thailand’s sovereignty and integrity*” and of disregarding the lives of “*innocent civilians*” (*Bangkok Post*, 13/2/01). Several Thai Army leaders made it clear that Thailand was prepared to fight in order to protect her territorial sovereignty. Thai Army spokesman, Col. Somkhuan Saengpattaranate, stated: “*Burma is aggressive. We have never been aggressive. We just want to protect the people and Thai sovereignty*” (*Bangkok Post*, 7/3/01). Another indication of Thai sentiments has been in the cinemas where the very popular film *Ban Rajan*, which portrays the stoic and brave resistance of 18<sup>th</sup> century Thai frontier villagers against a superior and brutal invading Burmese force, has stirred up anti-Burmese feelings. Interestingly, *Ban Rajan* was apparently shown in the Thai Royal Army’s conference hall “*to encourage patriotism amid border tensions*” (*Bangkok Post*, 21/2/01).

For its part, the Burmese military leadership has sought to deny any wrongdoing. The *New Light of Myanmar* on 13 February ran a story which claimed that the *Tatmadaw* never had “*any intention of trespassing on Thai territory*” and that the Triangle Region Command were merely seeking to capture positions of the “*SURA opium smugglers.*” On 14 February, the *New Light of Myanmar* commented on the “*Aide-Memoire on the border incident handed to the Thai Ambassador.*” On 12 February, shortly after the Mae Sai incident, the Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister, U Khin Maung Win handed an Aide Memoire to the Thai Ambassador, Mr Oum Maolanon, which stated that:

*Thai troops are found to be inter-mingling with SURA drug-trafficking insurgents; that some bases of the SURA are situated in Thai territory; that Myanmar has no intention to transgress Thai territory ...*

It also called on the Thai side:

*...to compensate for the loss of lives and injuries caused to innocent civilians and for properties damaged during the attack on Tachilek.*

**Other reports... suggested that the attack near Ban Pang Noon was not inside Thai territory, but was actually a disputed section of the border.**

Other reports in the *New Light of Myanmar* suggested that the attack near Ban Pang Noon was not inside Thai territory, but was actually a disputed section of the border. “*The hillocks of enemies were contiguous to the border demarcation line, and opium smuggler SURA insurgents attacked the Tatmadaw columns from the hillocks*” (13/2/01). They disputed Thai claims of intrusion into Thai territory by stating that “*E-7 is a disputed hillock between the two nations, Thai military units, putting SURA to the front and giving them covering fire from the rear, launched the attacks*” (*The New Light of Myanmar*, 13/2/01). An issue of *The Irrawaddy* (22/3/01) has argued that it seems that the SPDC may have been asking a simple, blunt question of the Thais: “*Do you want to deal with us or with the SSA?*” Rather than admit that by helping the UWSA the *Tatmadaw* is directly facilitating the drug trade, the SPDC have been making statements to the effect that Thai military units are actually supporting and helping “*narco-insurgents*” to attack Burmese troops and installations (*Bangkok Post*, 6/3/01).

On both sides of the border there has been a build up of military forces. For instance, there are 10,000 Burmese troops near the border of Chiang Rai, backed by about 2,500 troops from the UWSA. They face fewer but better equipped and more mobile Thai Border Police units and Royal Thai Army troops, equipped with Scorpion and Stingray tanks (Lintner and Tasker, 2001). At the time of writing, tensions are still in evidence because the Mae Sai-Tachilek border crossing is 'open' on the Thai side, but remains 'closed' on the Myanmar side as of 1 April 2001. In the streets of Mae Sai there are plenty of Thai soldiers and monks in evidence, but relatively few visitors. The normally bustling market has been quiet ever since the cross-border firing, and monks still speak on loud hailers telling the residents to remain calm because the border police and soldiers are there to protect them. After 5pm, the streets, shops, cafes, and karaoke bars are either closed or virtually empty. Certainly, the recent cross-border tensions have hit local businesses hard. The only signs of things returning to normal are the young children from either side of the border swimming and mingling in the border river, either oblivious to, or ignoring the fact that this section of the border is nearby a hotly disputed zone and that to all traders and tourists the boundary gates are shut.

Perhaps there will be some thawing of tensions as the new Thai Government takes hold. Certainly Defence Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, in charge of a military reshuffle, may wish to see 'personal diplomacy' iron out what he calls the recent "*misunderstanding*" between the two countries. Foreign Minister, Surakiart Sathirathai, also favours a policy of "*engagement, re-establishing personal ties with Rangoon, and promoting democracy the Asian way*" (*The Irrawaddy*, 22/3/01).

Nevertheless, as Lintner and Tasker (2001) noted, there are significant differences in opinion between senior members of the Thai establishment on what kind of policy to pursue with their difficult military neighbour. For instance, Lt-General Wattanachai declined Chavalit's suggestion in February for a meeting with Burma to settle differences in the bilateral regional border committee. Two sessions of the lower-level Township Border Commission have failed to ease tensions so far. It remains to be seen whether or not a Regional Border Committee (RBC) meeting to be held in Burma's Kengtung on 2-4 April, 2001, will come up with any solutions to lessen military tensions along the troubled border. The RBC is jointly chaired by the regional army commanders from both sides. Among the topics to be discussed are the boundary disputes, ethnic armies, and cross-border drug-trafficking (*The Nation*, 2/4/01).

The Thai side has suggested bilateral military withdrawals from Phuteng Nayong area in Mae Sai district of Chiang Rai and Doi Lang mountain in Mae Ai district of Chiang Mai, pending negotiations on boundary demarcation. The Thai side wishes to create areas of 'no-man's-land' and to demilitarise disputed areas along parts of their northern border (*Bangkok Post*, 20/3/01). In addition to the demilitarised zones, the Thai side are requesting greater joint activities to suppress drug production bases along the border; that Rangoon takes back Burmese refugees from recent border fighting; and issues of fishery concessions (*Bangkok Post*, 02/4/01). It is likely that one immediate outcome of the BRC deliberations will be the reopening of the Tachilek-Mae Sai border crossing.

## CONCLUSIONS

Whatever the outcome of border negotiations, the issue of the massive cross-border drug trade seems unlikely to go away for a long time yet. The fact is that the SPDC seems to be much more preoccupied with destroying all non-compliant (non-ceasefire) insurgents than it does in seriously removing the narcotics business from Burma. Furthermore, as long as *de facto* control over significant armies, territory and drug-production remains in the hands of groups such as the UWSA, there seems to be little hope of removing the big problems created by armed groups funded by drug

profits, low-level warfare between different insurgent groups and the *Tatmadaw*, human displacement across borders, and of further nasty cross-border incidents. The fight against drugs is far from over because for those who wield power, the returns on the drug trade are just too much to forfeit.

Burma's generals need seriously to remove the military's involvement in the trade. The ethnic political troubles relating to the Shan state are unlikely to be reduced without some attempt on the part of the ruling military leaders to engage in genuine political dialogue with ceasefire groups, such as the UWSA, as well as with non-ceasefire groups like the SSA. At an inter-state level, it seems that Thailand must do its part to ensure that drug-connections on its side of the border are reduced, particularly in terms of stamping down on drug-related corruption. At the intra-regional and multi-lateral level more can be done to bolster information-sharing, monitoring, and enforcement activities to tackle those groups profiting from the drugs trade.

Our main conclusion is that the drug trade along the Burma-Thailand border is inextricably linked to the so-called "*nationalities*" question inside Burma, and to the complex and shifting geopolitics of territorial and resource control within the border regions of Burma. These issues go well beyond the actual boundary line disputes and periodic border crossing closures. Unless there is some attempt to create a lasting peace in the border zones, and to move beyond the current patchwork of ceasefire areas interspersed with contested territories, it seems likely that *de facto* geopolitical conditions will still favour the drug-producers and the more powerful armed groups holding strategic zones. Whilst Thailand and Burma may come up with some quick fixes to lessen cross-border tensions in the next Border Regional Committee (BRC) meeting, it seems likely that the longer-term issues of political uncertainty, cross-border refugees, power based on guns and the drug trade are here to stay for some time yet.

**Carl Grundy-Warr is a political geographer at the National University of Singapore (NUS).**

**Elaine Wong is a former research student at NUS who researched on Shan migrants in Northern Thailand.**

## References

- Ball, D. (1999) *Burma and Drugs. The Regime's Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, SDSC Working Paper, 336, July 1999.
- Ball, D. (2000) 'Confrontation on the Thai-Burma border', *Strategic Comments*, The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), London, November 2000.
- Burmese Border Consortium (2000) *Programme Report for the Period July to December 1999*, BBC, Bangkok, Thailand, February 2000.
- Grundy-Warr, C. (1997) 'Turning the political map inside-out: A view from mainland Southeast Asia', in Victor R. Savage, Lily Kong, and Warwick Neville (eds.) *The Naga Awakens: Growth and Change in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 29-86.
- Grundy-Warr, C., Wong, E., and Chapman, D. (forthcoming) 'Geographies of displacement: The Shan and the Karenni', submission to *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*.
- Images Asia and Borderline Video (1998) *A Question of Security*, Chiang Mai: Images Asia, May 1998.
- Lintner, B. (1996) *Land of Jade: A Journey Through Insurgent Burma*, Bangkok
- Lintner, B. (1998) *Burma in Revolt. Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books.
- Lintner, B. (2000) 'Drugs and economic growth in Burma today', in M.B. Pedersen, E. Rudland, and R.J. May (eds.) *Burma, Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State?* Adelaide: Crawford House, 164-94.
- Lintner, B. and Tasker, R. (2001) 'Border Bravado', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8/3/01, Internet edition.

- Renard, R.D. (1996) *The Burmese Connection. Illegal Drugs and the Making of the Golden Triangle*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Shan Human Rights Foundation (1998) *Dispossessed. Forced Relocations and Extra-Judicial Killings in Shan State*, Chiang Mai: SHRF, April 1998.
- Smith, M. (1999) *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, London: Zed Books.
- Wong, Siew Yin, E. (2001) *The Political Geography of Displacement in Mainland Southeast Asia: The Case of the Shans*, Masters Thesis submitted to the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, January 2001, unpublished.
- Yawnghwe, Chao Tzang (1987) *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

## FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

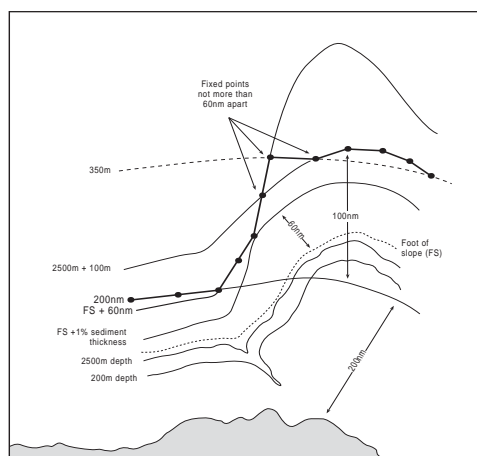
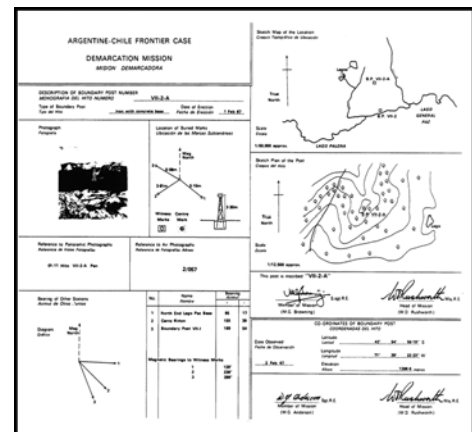
IBRU is pleased to announce the publication of two important technical studies, one in the *Boundary and Territory Briefing* series and one in the *Maritime Briefing* series.

These *Briefings* provide overviews of techniques and processes, particularly state-of-the-art electronic tools in support of boundary delimitation, determination and, in the case of land boundaries, demarcation. Equally importantly, they provide guidelines for the role of the technical expert in these processes

### Geographical Information in Delineation, Demarcation and Management of International Land Boundaries

Ron Adler

Reviews positioning and mapping techniques, particularly Global Positioning Systems (GPS), Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and the role of the Boundary Engineer.



### Developments in the Technical Determination of Maritime Space

Chris Carleton and Clive Schofield

Provides an overview of the technical considerations that have to be addressed in the determination of maritime space: charts, projections, datums, generation of maritime zones, the delimitation of maritime boundaries and the role of the technical expert.

Details at [www-ibru.ac.uk](http://www-ibru.ac.uk)

or contact us at

**International Boundaries Research Unit**

**University of Durham, Mountjoy Research Centre Suite 3P**

**Durham DH1 3UR, UK**

**Tel: + 44 (0)191 374 7701 Fax: + 44 (0)191 374 7702**