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Khun Sa, Drug King, Dies at 73

By THOMAS FULLER

BANGKOK, Oct. 30 — Khun Sa, the publicity-loving Golden Triangle drug lord who thrived in the region's kill-or-be-killed cauldron of ethnic rivalries and heroin-financed private armies, has died at age 73 in Yangon, Myanmar, according to an officer in the militia he once led.

Kon Jern, a commander in the Shan State Army, a separatist group, said in a telephone interview that he learned of the death from one of Mr. Khun Sa's relatives. The cause of death was not known, but he was thought to suffer from high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

News agencies, quoting anonymous sources in Yangon, said he died Friday and was cremated early Tuesday. The country has been closed to outside journalists since Myanmar's ruling junta cracked down on recent anti-government protests.

For decades, Mr. Khun Sa symbolized the seeming impunity of heroin traffickers in the Golden Triangle, the area encompassing the northern reaches of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.

But his surrender to the Burmese authorities in 1996 led to dramatic declines in cultivation of opium poppies in the Golden Triangle and foreshadowed the region's eclipse. Although this year's opium harvest in Myanmar increased by about 30 percent over last year, the Golden Triangle produces only 5 percent of the world's opium, down from 70 percent three decades ago. Afghanistan is now the world's largest producer.

Mr. Khun Sa was a guerrilla leader in the separatist movement of the Shan, the ethnic group linguistically related to the Thais who inhabit northeast Myanmar. His drug empire traded opium for guns and used the weapons to consolidate his control over large swaths of the rugged, remote and impoverished Shan region.

At the height of his power, in the 1980s, he controlled an estimated 70 percent of the country's heroin business, which enabled him to finance an army of tens of thousands of soldiers and large-scale heroin laboratories.

Among his allies, Mr. Khun Sa is still admired for his support for the Shan.

"He had to deal drugs because he had no choice," said Mr. Kon Jern, the rebel commander. "He had to sell drugs to make money and use that money to fight for the Shan state's independence."

Historians portray Mr. Khun Sa as charming, Machiavellian and ruthless.

Khun Sa was born on Feb. 17, 1934, according to Bertil Lintner, a leading expert on Myanmar who interviewed him several times. His father was Chinese and his mother Shan; they lived in the northern Shan

state. He changed his name from Chang Chi-fu (also spelled Chufu or Shee-fu) to his nom de guerre, Khun Sa, in the 1970s.

A historian of Southeast Asia, the late Michael Leifer, described him as a “shiftless youth with a criminal disposition.”

His father died when he was young and his mother became the mistress of a local tax collector, according to Mr. Lintner. He received no formal education but had military training as a soldier with the Chinese Nationalists, who fled into Burma, which is now known as Myanmar, after the victory of [Mao Zedong's](#) Communists in 1949.

He entered the opium business in 1963, when the Burmese government authorized him and others to form militias allied with the central government as a way of outsourcing the job of fighting rebel groups. Within a year he broke his ties with the Burmese army and established an independent fief in the northernmost reaches of Burma, near the border with China.

His early career was marked by failure. He challenged the dominance of the Nationalists in the Golden Triangle drug trade, but lost in battle. He was captured by the Burmese central government and imprisoned from 1969 to 1974.

Soon after his release, he rejoined his supporters in the northeast and set up a base in Baan Hin Taek, along the mountainous border near the Thai city of Chiang Rai. His drug network grew and soon came to dominate the Burmese heroin trade.

In the 1980s and 1990s much of the drugs that passed through his network was shipped to the United States. In 1990, the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) calculated that 45 percent of all heroin that reached the United States came from the Golden Triangle.

Historians have differed on his power.

Mr. Lintner said he was illiterate and a front-man for an organization dominated by ethnic Chinese from Yunnan Province that still operates. “He was basically a country bumpkin,” Mr. Lintner said. “He was a peasant and never the brains behind the organization.”

But Alfred McCoy, who chronicled the rise of the Golden Triangle in “The Politics of Heroin,” described Mr. Khun Sa as “the only Shan warlord who ran a truly professional smuggling organization capable of transporting large quantities of opium,” and was “the first of the Golden Triangle warlords to be worthy of his media crown as ‘kingpin.’”

Khun Sa enjoyed cultivating that image. In an interview with the now-defunct Bangkok World newspaper, he called himself the “King of the Golden Triangle.”

Embarrassed and under strong pressure from the United States, Thai authorities sought to banish Mr. Khun Sa from Thailand.

In 1980, the Thai prime minister, Prem Tinsulanonda, ordered the air force to bomb his base but failed to

dislodge him. In 1982 the Thai army led by Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyut, who was later to become prime minister, launched a large-scale assault. Mr. Khun Sa lost 130 men in the ensuing battle and retreated into Myanmar, where he continued to run his heroin business.

Little is known about his life in Yangon after his surrender to the Myanmar authorities. Mr. Kon Jern, the Shan commander, said Khun Sa was held under house arrest. Other reports have said he lived comfortably if not lavishly. He had three daughters and five sons, according to Mr. Lintner, all of them educated abroad.

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