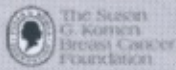




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Myanmar drugs fuel Thai gangs

By Bertil Lintner

CHIANG MAI, Thailand - She's affectionately known as Yai Elle or Yai Aew - or Grandmother Aew - among this city's rough and tumble, narcotics-peddling youth gangs. For more than a decade, Laddawan Chaininpun, 62, has worked to help rehabilitate Chiang Mai's gangs and in the process has won many of their trust.

She got involved with the gangs initially because her nephew had joined one of Chiang Mai's most vicious gangs: the Samurais. They earned that nickname because they were often seen



wielding long swords while riding motorcycles at high speed through the city at night.

Yai Aew estimates that that there are about 50 youth gangs in Chiang Mai, varying in size from a handful to several hundred. The total number of members would be around 3,500, or perhaps even more, she says. Of those, 26 gangs with a total membership of about 1,500 are taking part in her programs, which lately have won the support of the Swedish section of the teetotaler nongovernmental organization, the International Organization of Good Templars.

"I realize that I cannot change their behavior completely," Yai Aew says. "But by bringing the different gangs together, they can become friends and no one would want to fight someone who is a friend, would he? Then, there'll be less violence and even ordinary people will feel safer in the city."



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Violence and turf wars between rival gangs have been a social scourge in Chiang Mai for decades, running alongside a city plagued by prostitution, HIV/AIDS and drugs. Gang members are often both distributors and users. Both boys and girls, some barely in their teens, sell sexual services for as little as 300 baht (US\$8.50) to buy drugs, alcohol and glue.

The gangs operate in different parts of the city, and it is when their interests clash that fights often break out. The Samurai gang, which now has about 300 members aged between 13 and 20, was formed in 1996, and its actual name is Na Dara, which means "in front of Dara." The founders of the gang used to meet at a food stall in front of Dara Vidhyalai School near Chiang Mai's central bus station.

Another prominent gang is called Ya Kha, named after a thatched-roof motorcycle repair shed, while the Set Den got their name because they were "left over", or social outcasts. Among those formed more recently, the Bin Laden gang gained notoriety a few years ago when it was actually involved in the murder of members of rival gangs. The name Bin Laden was taken to evoke an image of violence and daring attacks.

In addition, Yai Aew says there are four all-girl gangs, of which the Vampires count around 180 members. "They like to sleep with as many boys as they can, and I can't prevent them from doing that, but, at the very least, and I can teach them about safe sex," says Yai Aew, who distributes condoms to the youngsters.

Blood brothers and sisters

It is difficult to say why young people join the gangs. Pu, an 18-year-old boy from Mae Taeng north of the city, hangs out at night around Tha Phae gate in downtown Chiang Mai, and simply says that "it's fun, I get many friends here". Daeng, a 16-year-old mixed French-Thai boy from San Kamphaeng - more famous among foreigners for its local silk and handicraft industry - says he has nothing else to do at night.

Being a member of a gang gives him, and presumably also Pu, a sense of belonging. Various gangs may clash, but there is a strong feeling of brotherhood - or, as in the case of the Vampires, sisterhood - among the members of the same group.

It is also no coincidence that Chiang Mai has a long history of youth gangs and juvenile delinquency. It is a frontier town that always has had a large transient population as many young people have migrated to or through Chiang Mai from the surrounding countryside and neighboring Myanmar, Laos and China. There is also a large hill-tribe population in the area, people who are still basically stateless. And Chiang Mai is close to the Golden Triangle, one of the world's oldest and biggest drug-producing areas.

Lieutenant Colonel Anu Nuernhad, an officer at Mae Rim police station just north of the city and a renowned local historian, recalls gang-fights as early as in the 1950s. In one of his 17 books about Chiang Mai history, Anu describes a melee in March 1958, involving a youth gang called Sri Ping - named after a cinema where they used to meet - and rivals from the outlying district of Sarapee.

They carried guns and came on bicycles. The smoking of opium was common in those days and in around 1963-64, the derivative heroin began to be produced in the Golden Triangle. The Sri Ping and others were soon selling it in the streets of Chiang Mai.

In many ways Chiang Mai's street gangs are on the lowest level in the drug hierarchy that begins with the warlords in the Golden Triangle. And today it is *yaa baa*, or methamphetamines, rather than heroin that is the drug of choice for the city's juvenile delinquents. *Yaa baa* now sells in the streets of Chiang Mai for 200-250 baht a pill, of which very little is actual profit for the young dealers.

And as street dealers they are also the most vulnerable in the distribution chain. During the "war on drugs", which was launched in 2003 during the former Thai government of Thaksin Shinawatra, several youth gang leaders in Chiang Mai simply disappeared, never to be heard of again.

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The CityKids Foundation

For unlike the druglords of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in Myanmar, they do not enjoy the protection of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, nor are they connected with seemingly untouchable "influential persons" on both sides of the frontier. Some of the youth gang members survive because they are doubling as police informers, and therefore left alone.

But their only real hope is Yai Aew, and in many ways she has done wonders. Gang members come to see her regularly and she has organized football tournaments and weekend leadership courses to get them off drugs, and to minimize their usually violent behavior. "In the beginning, the police were suspicious of me," she told Asia Times Online in Chiang Mai. "They thought I was some kind of 'Godmother' for the gangs, not a volunteer social worker."

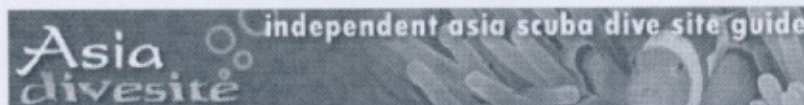
But, gradually, the police came to trust her too, as they could see the benefits of her work. The northern branch of the Office of Narcotics Control Board, a Thai government agency, even helped her finance her activities.

She is proud to point out that the Bin Laden gang now has some of the best footballers in the city. "And some of them have even joined the army," she says. Her greatest achievement is perhaps with the Samurai, or Na Dara, which is often abbreviated "NDR". But in Yai Aew's parlance NDR now stands for "No Drug Rulers" - and she assured Asia Times Online that drug use today is minimal among its members.

So can the gangs be tamed, and drug pushers and notorious killers, become footballers and soldiers? The level of street violence in Chiang Mai has no doubt subsided over the past few years in part due to Yai Aew's matronly influence. There are perhaps also somewhat fewer youngsters using drugs. But their behavior is still risky, and it would need many more dedicated volunteers like Yai Aew to eliminate the problem for good.

Bertil Lintner is a former correspondent with the Far Eastern Economic Review and is currently a writer with Asia-Pacific Media Services. Jantrapa Ganthawong in Chiang Mai contributed to this story.

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