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**Brother Number Three**

**The hunt for Asia’s El Chapo**

The Asia-Pacific region is awash in crystal meth. A multinational task force is on the trail of a China-born Canadian national who, police tell Reuters, is the suspected kingpin of a vast drug network that is raking in up to $17 billion a year.

By Tom Allard  
Illustrations by Ben Bauchau

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He is Asia’s most-wanted man. He is protected by a guard of Thai kickboxers. He flies by private jet. And, police say, he once lost $66 million in a single night at a Macau casino.

Tse Chi Lop, a Canadian national born in China, is suspected of leading a vast multinational drug trafficking syndicate formed out of an alliance of five of Asia’s triad groups, according to law enforcement officials. Its members call it simply “The Company.” Police, in a nod to one of Tse’s nicknames, have dubbed it Sam Gor, Cantonese for “Brother Number Three.”

The syndicate, law enforcers believe, is funneling tonnes of methamphetamine, heroin and ketamine to at least a dozen countries from Japan in North Asia to New Zealand in the South Pacific. But meth – a highly addictive drug with devastating physical and mental effects on long-term users – is its main business, they say.

In what it calls a conservative estimate, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) puts the Sam Gor syndicate’s meth revenue in 2018 at $8 billion a year, but says it could be as high as $17.7 billion. The UN agency estimates that the cartel, which often conceals its drugs in packets of tea, has a 40% to 70% share of the wholesale regional meth market that has expanded at least fourfold in the past five years.

This unprecedented boom in meth production has triggered an unprecedented response, Reuters has learned. Tse, 55, is the prime target of Operation Kungur, a sprawling, previously unreported counter-narcotics investigation. Led by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), Operation Kungur involves about 20 agencies from Asia, North America and Europe. It is by far the biggest ever international effort to combat Asian drug trafficking syndicates, say law enforcement agents involved in the investigation. It encompasses authorities from Myanmar, China, Thailand, Japan, the United States and Canada. Taiwan, while not formally part of the operation, is assisting in the investigation.

A document containing AFP profiles of the operation’s top 19 syndicate targets, reviewed by Reuters, identifies Tse as the leader of the syndicate. According to the document, the organization has “been connected with or directly involved in at least 13 cases” of drug trafficking since January 2015. The document does not provide specific details of the cases.

A Taiwanese law enforcement flow chart identifies Tse as the “Multinational CEO” of the syndicate. A U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) intelligence document shared with regional government agencies says Tse is “believed to be” the leader of the Sam Gor syndicate.

Police have not publicly identified Tse as the suspected boss of the trafficking group.

Some investigators say that the scope of the syndicate’s operation puts Tse, as the suspected leader, on par with Latin America’s most legendary narco-traffickers. “Tse Chi Lop is in the league of El Chapo or maybe Pablo Escobar,” said Jeremy Douglas, Southeast Asia and Pacific representative for UNODC. “The word kingpin often gets thrown around, but there is no doubt it applies here.”

Reuters was unable to contact Tse Chi Lop. In response to questions from Reuters, the AFP, the DEA and Taiwan’s Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau said they would not comment on investigations.

During the past year, Reuters crisscrossed the Asia-Pacific to uncover the story of Tse and his Sam Gor network. This included interviews with more than two dozen law enforcement officials from eight countries, and reviews of intelligence reports from police and anti-narcotics agencies, court filings and other documents. Reuters spoke to militia leaders in Myanmar’s Shan State, the heart of Southeast Asia’s Golden Triangle, where the syndicate is suspected of mass producing drugs in so-called super-labs. Reuters reporters also visited the Thai compound of one of the syndicate’s alleged drug lords.

What emerges is a portrait of an organization that is truly transnational. Four of the 19 Sam Gor syndicate leaders on the AFP list are Canadian citizens, including Tse, whom police often refer to as “T1” - the top target. Others hail from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam and mainland China.

The syndicate is enormously wealthy, disciplined and sophisticated - in many ways more sophisticated than any Latin American cartel, say anti-narcotics officials. Sam Gor supplies a bigger, more dispersed drug market and collaborates with a more diverse range of local crime groups than the Latin cartels do, including Japan’s Yakuza, Australia's biker gangs and ethnic Chinese gangs across Southeast Asia.

The crime network is also less prone to uncontrolled outbreaks of internecine violence than the Latin cartels, police say. The money is so big that long-standing, blood-soaked rivalries among Asian crime groups have been set aside in a united pursuit of gargantuan profits.

“The crime groups in Southeast Asia and the Far East operate with seamless efficiency,” says one veteran Western anti-drugs official. “They function like a global corporation.”

Like most of the law enforcement agents Reuters interviewed, the investigator spoke on condition of anonymity.

In addition to the contrasts between their drug operations, there’s another, more personal, difference between Tse Chi Lop and Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzman or Pablo Escobar. The jailed Mexican cartel boss and the deceased Colombian cocaine trafficker have been feted in song and on screen for their extravagant lifestyles and extreme violence. Precious little has been revealed about Tse’s life and career. Unlike the Latin drug lords, Tse is relatively discreet - and still free.

Tse Chi Lop (top row and bottom row, far right) is suspected by law enforcement agencies of running Asia’s biggest drug network, which distributes high-grade meth across the region that is often hidden in loose-leaf tea packaging. Police have raided some of the syndicate’s operations, but that hasn’t stemmed the overall flow of meth.A collage of several pictures of two people

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**A TRIP, A TRAP**

Tse Chi Lop was born in Guangdong Province, in southern China, and grew up during China’s Cultural Revolution. Amid the bloody purges, forced labor camps and mass starvation, a group of imprisoned members of Mao’s Red Guard in the southern city of Guangzhou formed a triad-like criminal enterprise called the Big Circle Gang. Tse later became a member of the group, say police, and like many of his Big Circle Gang brethren moved to Hong Kong, then further afield as they sought sanctuaries for their criminal activities. He arrived in Canada in 1988.

In the 1990s, Tse shuttled between North America, Hong Kong, Macau and Southeast Asia, said a senior AFP investigator based in Asia. He rose to become a mid-ranking member of a smuggling ring that sourced heroin from the Golden Triangle, the lawless opium-producing region where the borders of Myanmar, Thailand, China and Laos meet.

In 1998, according to court records, Tse was arraigned on drug-trafficking charges in the Eastern District Court of New York. He was found guilty of conspiracy to import heroin into America, the records show. A potential life sentence hung over his head.

Through a petition filed by his lawyer in 2000, Tse begged for leniency.

His ailing parents needed constant care, he explained. His 12-year-old son had a lung disorder. His wife was overwhelmed. If freed, vowed Tse, he would open a restaurant. He expressed “great sorrow” for his crime, court records show.

The entreaties appear to have worked: Tse was sentenced to nine years in prison, spent mostly at the federal correctional institution in Elkton, Ohio. But his remorse may have waned.

After he was freed in 2006, police say he returned to Canada, where he was supposed to be under supervised release for the next four years. It’s unclear when Tse returned to his old haunts in Asia. But corporate records show that Tse and his wife registered a business, the China Peace Investment Group Company Ltd, in Hong Kong in 2011.

Police suspect Tse quickly returned to the drug game. He “picked up where he left off,” said the senior AFP investigator. Tse tapped connections in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and the Golden Triangle, and adopted a business model that proved irresistible to his customers, say law enforcers. If one of his drug deliveries was intercepted by police, it was replaced at no extra cost, or deposits were returned to the buyers.

His policy of guaranteeing his drug deliveries was good for business, but it also put him on the radar of police. In 2011, AFP officers cracked a group in Melbourne importing heroin and meth. The amounts were not huge - dozens of kilos. So, rather than arrest the Australian drug dealers, police put them under surveillance, tapping their phones and observing them closely for more than a year. To the frustration of the Australian drug cell, their illicit product kept getting intercepted. They wanted the seized drugs replaced by the syndicate.

The syndicate bosses in Hong Kong were irate - their other drug rings in Australia were collecting their narcotics and selling them without incident. In 2013, as the patience of the syndicate leaders wore thin, they summoned the leader of the Melbourne cell to Hong Kong for talks. There, Hong Kong police watched the Australian meet two men.

One of the men was Tse Chi Lop. He had the center-parted hair and casual fashion sense of a typical middle-aged Chinese family man, said one AFP agent. However, further surveillance showed Tse was a big spender with a keen regard for his personal security. At home and abroad, he was protected by a guard of Thai kickboxers, said three AFP investigators. Up to eight worked for him at a time, and they were regularly rotated as part of his security protocol.

Tse would host lavish birthday parties each year at resorts and five-star hotels, flying in his family and entourage in private jets. On one occasion, he stayed at a resort in Thailand for a month, hosting visitors poolside in shorts and a T-shirt, according to a member of the task force investigating the syndicate.

Tse was a frequent visitor to Asia’s casinos and fond of betting on horses, especially on English races. “We believe he lost 60 million euros (about $66 million) in one night on the tables in Macau,” said the senior Asia-based AFP investigator.

As the investigation into Tse deepened, police suspected that the Canadian was the major trafficker supplying Australia with meth and heroin, with a lucrative sideline in MDMA, commonly known as ecstasy. But the true scale and breadth of the Sam Gor syndicate only became apparent in late 2016, police say, when a young Taiwanese man entered Yangon airport with a bag of white powder strapped to each of his thighs.

**‘ALADDIN’S CAVE OF INTEL’**

Cai Jeng Ze was heading home to Taiwan, walking through the airport with a Jimmy Choo leather bag and two mobile phones. It was the morning of November 15, 2016, and Cai seemed nervous, picking at his blistered hands. This tic aroused suspicion, said a former Myanmar police commander who oversaw the investigation. “His hands were bad because he had been handling the drugs,” the commander told Reuters. “Methamphetamine is very toxic.”

Cai was stopped and searched. Taped to each of his thighs was a small bag containing 80 grams of ketamine, a powerful tranquilizer that doubles as a party drug. “We were very fortunate to arrest him. Actually, it was an accident,” the commander said. Myanmar police, tipped off by the DEA, had been monitoring Cai. But they had lost track of him. Airport police had no idea who he was.

Cai told airport police the bag on his thigh contained a “pesticide or vitamin for flowers and plants,” according to Myanmar court records from his trial for ketamine trafficking. A friend, said Cai, had given it to him to pass on to his father. Cai’s flight was about to leave and there was no drug test for ketamine at the airport, the commander said.

Unimpressed with the explanation, police held him overnight. The next day, anti-narcotic officers turned up at the airport. One recognized him from surveillance work he’d been conducting.

Still, Cai refused to talk. Police say that videos they later found on one of his phones might have explained his silence. The videos showed a crying and bound man, and at least three assailants taking turns burning his feet with a blowtorch and electrocuting him with a cattle prod. In the videos, said one investigator, a sign can be seen with Chinese calligraphy saying “Loyalty to the Heavens.” The banner was a “triad-related sign,” he added.

The tortured man, according to two AFP officers who viewed the video, claimed to have thrown 300 kg of meth from a boat because he mistakenly believed a fast-approaching vessel was a law enforcement boat. The torturers were testing the veracity of the victim’s claims. By filming and sharing the videos, triad members were sending a message about the price of disloyalty, the officers said. Reuters has not seen the video.

The torture videos were just one of the items allegedly found in Cai’s two iPhones. The alleged Taiwanese trafficker was a diligent chronicler of the drug syndicate’s activities, but sloppy when it came to information security. Inside the phones, police say, was a huge photo and video gallery, social media conversations, and logs of thousands of calls and text messages.

They were “an Aladdin’s Cave of intel,” said one AFP commander based in North Asia.

For at least two months prior to his arrest, Cai allegedly travelled around Myanmar cobbling together a huge meth deal for the syndicate, according to a PowerPoint presentation by the Drug Enforcement Division of the Myanmar police outlining its investigation. One telling discovery: a screenshot of a slip from an international courier company recording the delivery of two consignments of packaging, manufactured to hold loose-leaf Chinese tea, to a Yangon address. Since at least 2012, tea packets, often containing one kilo of crystal meth each, had been cropping up in drug busts across the Asia-Pacific region.

Two days after Cai’s arrest, Myanmar police raided a Yangon address, where they seized 622 kilograms of ketamine. That evening, they captured 1.1 tonnes of crystal meth at a Yangon jetty. The interception of the drugs was a coup. Even so, Myanmar police were frustrated. Nine people were arrested, but other than Cai they were lower-level members of the syndicate, including couriers and a driver. And Cai still wasn't talking.

Then came a major breakthrough. Swiping through the gallery of photos and videos on Cai’s phones, an AFP investigator based in Yangon noticed a familiar face from an intelligence briefing he had attended on Asian drug traffickers about a year earlier. “This one stuck out because it was Canadian,” he recalled. “I said: ‘Fuck, I know who you are!'”

It was Tse Chi Lop.

The Myanmar police invited the AFP to send a team of intelligence analysts to Yangon in early 2017. They went to work on Cai’s phones.

Australia had been a profitable drug market for Asian crime gangs since the end of the Vietnam War. For at least a decade, the AFP had fed all its historic files on drug cases, large and small, into a database. A senior Chinese counter-narcotics agent described the database, which includes a trove of names, chemical signatures of seized drugs, phone metadata and surveillance intel, as the most impressive cache of intelligence on Asian drug trafficking groups in the region.

The AFP analysts cross-referenced the contents of Cai’s phones with the database. They discovered photos related to three big consignments of crystal meth that were intercepted in China, Japan and New Zealand in 2016, according to investigators and Myanmar police documents. Later, a team of Chinese anti-narcotics officials connected photos, telephone numbers and addresses in Cai’s phones to other meth busts in China.

For regional counter-narcotics police, the revelations upended their assumption that the drugs were being trafficked by different crime groups. It became clear the shipments were the work of just one organization. A senior Chinese anti-narcotics agent said they believed Cai was “one of the members of a mega-syndicate,” which had been involved in multiple “drugs cases, smuggling and manufacturing, within this region.”

Cai was found not guilty in the ketamine case, but is still in jail in Yangon, where he is on trial for drug trafficking charges related to the meth seizures. Reuters was unable to contact Cai’s lawyer.

The tracking and arrest of Cai Jeng Ze (top row) in Yangon airport with ketamine strapped to his body led to the seizure of tonnes of drugs as well as weapons. Despite the arrest, police say the cartel continues to distribute meth and heroin. The starting point for the drug operation is Myanmar’s Shan State, where the drugs are produced in sprawling facilities.A collage of various items

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**METH PARADISE**

During his time in Myanmar, Cai is suspected of traversing the country, testing drug samples, organizing couriers and obtaining a fishing boat to transport the illicit cargo to a bigger vessel in international waters, according to police and the Myanmar PowerPoint document. His phones contained pictures of the vehicles to be used to transport the meth, the spot where the meth was to be dropped off, and the fishing boat.

The police reconstruction of Cai’s dealings in Myanmar led to another major revelation: The epicenter of meth production had shifted from China’s southern provinces to Shan State in Myanmar’s northeastern borderlands. Operating in China had provided the Sam Gor syndicate with easy access to precursor ingredients, such as ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, that were smuggled out of pharmaceutical, chemical and paint factories in the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone. Shan gave Sam Gor the freedom to operate largely unimpeded by law enforcement.

Armed rebel groups in semi-autonomous regions like Shan State have long controlled large tracts of territory and used drug revenues to finance their frequent battles with the military. A series of detentes brokered by the Myanmar government with rebel groups over the years has brought relative calm to the region - and allowed illicit drug activities to flourish.

“Production facilities can be hidden from law enforcement and other prying eyes but insulated from disruptive violence,” analyst Richard Horsey wrote in a paper this year for the International Crisis Group. “Drug production and profits are now so vast that they dwarf the formal sector of Shan state.”

The Myanmar government and police did not respond to questions from Reuters.

Along the road to the village of Loikan in Shan State, there is evidence of drug-fueled prosperity. The two-lane road skirts a deep ravine known as the “Valley of Death,” where ethnic Kachin rebels from the Kaung Kha paramilitary group clashed for decades with Myanmar’s army. Now, high-end SUVs thunder past trucks carrying building materials and workers.

The Kaung Kha militia’s immaculate and expansive new headquarters sits on a plateau nestled between the steep green hills of the jagged Loi Sam Sip range. About six kilometers away, near Loikan village, was a sprawling drug facility carved out of thick forest. Police and locals say the complex churned out vast quantities of crystal meth, heroin, ketamine and yaba tablets - a cheaper form of meth that is mixed with caffeine. When it was raided in early 2018, security forces seized more than 200,000 liters of precursor chemicals, as well as 10,000 kg of caffeine and 73,550 kg of sodium hydroxide - all substances used in drug production.

The Loikan facility was “very likely” to have been the source of much of the Sam Gor syndicate’s meth, said the Yangon-based AFP officer.

“Some militia were involved in the lab,” said Oi Khun, a communications officer for the 3,000-strong Kaung Kha militia, in an interview. He paused, then added: “But not with the knowledge of senior members” of the militia.

One person in Loikan described how workers from the lab would come down from the hills. The men, like most of the villagers, were ethnic Chinese. But they dressed better than the locals, had foreign accents, and had a foul smell about them.

“I asked them once. ‘Why don’t you bathe?’” the person said. “They said they did, but there was nothing they could do about the smell.”

The rank chemicals used to cook the meth had seeped into the skin of the men, who seemed unperturbed that the signature stench might reveal their illicit activities. “We all knew,” the person said. “We just didn’t talk about it. That just brings you danger.”

Meth lab managers and chemists are mostly Taiwan nationals, say Thai police. So, too, are many of the crime network’s couriers and boat crews who transport the drugs across the Asia-Pacific.

Shan’s super-labs produce the purest crystal meth in the world, the senior Chinese counter-narcotics official told Reuters. “They can take it slow and spread (the meth) out on the ground and let it dry.”

The UNODC estimates the Asia-Pacific retail market for meth is worth between $30.3 and $61.4 billion annually. The business model for meth is “very different” to heroin, said the UNODC’s Douglas. “Inputs are relatively cheap, a large workforce is not needed, the price per kilo is higher, and profits are therefore far, far higher."

The wholesale price of a kilo of crystal meth produced in northeastern Myanmar is as little as $1,800, according to a UNODC report citing the China National Narcotics Control Commission. Average retail prices for crystal meth, according to the UN agency, are equivalent to $70,500 per kilo in Thailand, $298,000 per kilo in Australia and $588,000 in Japan. For the Japanese market, that’s more than a three-hundred-fold mark-up.

The money the syndicate is making “means that if they lose ten tonnes and one goes through, they still make a big profit,” said the Chinese counter-narcotics official. “They can afford failure. It doesn’t matter.”

**‘MONEY, MONEY’**

The analysis of Cai’s phones was continuing to provide leads. On them, police say they found the GPS coordinates of the pick-up point in the Andaman Sea where fishing boats laden with Myanmar meth were meeting drug motherships capable of being at sea for weeks.

One of the motherships was a Taiwanese trawler called the Shun de Man 66, according to the Taiwanese law enforcement document reviewed by Reuters. The vessel was already at sea when, in early July 2017, Joshua Joseph Smith walked into a marine broker in the Western Australian capital of Perth and paid $A350,000 (about $265,000 at the time) for the MV Valkoista, a fishing charter boat. Smith, who was in his mid-40s and hailed from the east coast of Australia, inquired about sea sickness tablets. According to local media, he didn’t have a fishing license at the time.

After buying the boat on July 7, Smith set the Valkoista on a course straight from the marina to meet the Shun De Man 66 in the Indian Ocean, an AFP police commander said. After the rendezvous, the Valkoista then sailed to the remote Western Australian port city of Geraldton on July 11, where its crew was seen “unloading a lot of packages” into a van, the commander said.

“We knew we had an importation. We know the methodology of organized crime networks. We know if a ship leaves empty and comes back with some gear on it, that it hasn’t just dropped from the sky in the middle of the ocean.”

Investigators checked CCTV footage and hotel, plane and car hire records. The phones of some of the Australian drug traffickers were tapped. It soon became apparent, police say, that some of Smith’s alleged co-conspirators were members of an ethnic Lebanese underworld gang, as well as the Hells Angels and Comanchero motorcycle gangs, known as “bikies” in Australia.

As they put together their deal to import 1.2 tonnes of crystal meth into Australia, Smith's associates met with Sam Gor syndicate members in Bangkok in August 2017, according to a copy of an AFP document reviewed by Reuters. The Australians reconvened in Perth a month later.

Bikers may have a reputation for wild clubhouse parties and a self-styled mythology as outsiders, but these Australians had refined tastes. They flew business class, stayed in five-star hotels and dined at the finest restaurants, according to police investigators and local media reports. One of those restaurants, said the AFP commander, was the Rockpool Bar & Grill in Perth. The restaurant offered a 104-page wine list and a menu that included caviar with toast at about $185 per serving.

On November 27, 2017, the Shun De Man 66 set sail again, this time from Singapore. The vessel headed north into the Andaman Sea to rendezvous with a smaller boat bringing the meth from Myanmar. The Shun De Man then sailed along the west coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra and dropped down to the Indian Ocean.

The Indonesian navy watched and the AFP listened.

When the Shun De Man finally met again with the Valkoista in international waters off the West Australian coast on December 19, an Asian voice could be heard shouting “money, money,” according to the commander and local media reports. The Shun De Man’s crew had one half of a torn Hong Kong dollar bill. Smith and his crew had the other half. The Australian buyers proved their identity by matching their portion to the fragment held by the crew of the Shun De Man, who then handed over the meth.

The Valkoista arrived in the Australian port city of Geraldton following a two-day return journey in rough seas. The men unloaded the drugs in the pre-dawn dark. Masked members of the AFP and Western Australian police moved in with assault weapons and seized the drugs and the men. Smith pleaded guilty to importing a commercial quantity of an illegal drug. Some of his alleged associates are still on trial.

Taiwan’s Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau said it had “worked together with our counterparts on the investigation” of the Shun De Man 66 and that this had led to the “substantial seizure of illicit narcotics” by the Australian authorities in December 2017. The bureau said it was “aware that Taiwanese syndicates have participated in maritime drug trafficking in (the) Asia-Pacific region,” and was working “collaboratively and closely with our counterparts to disrupt these syndicates and cross-border drug trafficking.”

The police have had some wins, like the 2017 busts in Shan State and the remote Western Australian city of Geraldton where they seized 1.2 tonnes of meth and arrested alleged traffickers. They had less luck when they raided the compound of suspected senior syndicate member Sue Songkittikul (bottom row, wearing cap) in Thailand in December. He wasn’t there.A collage of several people standing on a bridge

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**NIMBLE, ELUSIVE, UNFAZED**

As the investigation into the syndicate deepened, police concluded that crime groups from across the region had undergone a kind of mega-merger to form Sam Gor. The members include the three biggest Hong Kong and Macau triads, who spent much of the 1990s in open warfare: 14K, Wo Shing Wo and Sun Yee On. The other two are the Big Circle Gang, Tse’s original triad, and the Bamboo Union, based in Taiwan. In the words of one investigator, the syndicate’s supply chain is so complex and expertly run that it “must rival Apple’s.”

“The syndicate has a lot of money and there is a vast market to tap,” said Jay Li Chien-chih, a Taiwanese police senior colonel who has been stationed in Southeast Asia for a decade. “The power this network possesses is unimaginable.”

Investigators have had wins. In February last year, police busted the Loikan super-lab in Myanmar, where they found enough tea-branded packaging for 10 tonnes of meth. The Shun De Man 66 was intercepted that month by the Indonesian navy with more than one tonne of meth aboard. In March 2018, a key Sam Gor lieutenant was arrested in Cambodia and extradited to Myanmar. In December, the compound of Sue Songkittikul, a suspected syndicate operations chief, was raided in Thailand.

Located near the border with Myanmar, the moat-ringed compound had a small meth lab, which police suspected was used to experiment with new recipes; a powerful radio tower with a 100-km range; and an underground tunnel from the main house to the back of the property.

Sue wasn’t there, but property and money from 38 bank accounts linked to him and totaling some $9 million were seized during the investigation. Sue is still at large.

But the flow of drugs leaving the Golden Triangle for the wider Asia-Pacific seems to have increased. Seizures of crystal meth and yaba rose about 50% last year to 126 tonnes in East and Southeast Asia. At the same time, prices for the drugs fell in most countries. This pattern of falling prices and rising seizures, the UNODC said in a report released in March 2019, “suggested the supply of the drug had expanded.”

In the Sam Gor syndicate, police face a nimble and elusive adversary. When authorities had success stopping the drug motherships, police said, Sam Gor switched to hiding its product in shipping containers. When Thailand stopped much of the meth coming directly across the border from Myanmar by truck, the syndicate re-routed deliveries through Laos and Vietnam. This included deploying hordes of Laotians with backpacks, each containing about 30 kilos of meth, to carry it into Thailand on narrow jungle paths.

Over the years, police have had little success in taking down Asia’s drug lords. Some of the suspected syndicate leaders have been involved in drug trafficking for decades, according to the AFP target list. The last time a top-level Asian narcotics kingpin was successfully prosecuted and imprisoned for more than a short period was in the mid-1970s. That’s when Ng Sik-ho, a wily Hong Kong drug trafficker known as Limpy Ho, was sentenced to 30 years in prison for smuggling more than 20 tonnes of opium and morphine, according to court records.

So far, Tse has avoided Limpy Ho’s fate. He is being tracked, and all the signs are he knows it, say counter-narcotics agents. Despite the heat, some police say they believe he is continuing his drug operations, unfazed.

A group of people standing in front of a pile of papers

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