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Kachin News Group

Authorities feed on heroin epidemic in Hpakant

The jade mines of Hpakant in Burma's northern Kachin State have long been notorious for high rates of drug addiction and HIV infection. What is less known, thanks to the military regime's strict control of information from this remote area, is the collusion by the authorities in the narcotics trade.



The jade mining industry

The mountainous mining area sprawls for miles around the town of Hpakant, which lies on the Uru River. Countless shanty communities are dotted through the denuded, scarred landscape, homes to hundreds of thousands of fortune seekers from all over Burma.

The ravaged terrain and squalid settlements give the impression that the mining remains an unregulated free-for-all. This is far from the case. To secure benefits from the hugely profitable jade industry the Burmese military regime has consolidated control over the mines since the mid-1990s.

Hundreds of small independent companies used to operate in Hpakant but now only about 30 companies are licensed to carry out joint mining ventures with the regime. Today only those working for authorized companies can dig for jade and armed guards ensure that no intruders trespass on the concession areas.



As small independent companies are squeezed out and mechanization has increased, the situation of day laborers becomes more precarious. The vast majority of manual jade diggers are now self-employed “yemase,” or stone foragers, who sift through the truckloads of rubble discarded by the companies in the hope of finding hidden lumps of jade. Harsh working conditions for these yemase cause many to turn to drugs.

Drug use in Hpakant

Drug use permeates every level of the mining industry in Hpakant. According to one manager of a jade company: “Drugs are a way of life here. All the companies are involved in drugs in one way or another. Everyone is involved, with the exception of pastors and religious leaders. When the laopan (Chinese company bosses) invite you to their houses, they treat you with opium. All of the jade brokers get addicted.”

While opium is the drug of choice for the upper echelons of the mining community, it is usually too expensive for day laborers, whose daily wage averages 1,000 kyat (US\$1.00) per day. A pipe of opium costs at least 3,000-4,000 kyat (approx US\$3.00-4.00). Methamphetamines, also a drug for the better-off, can cost up to 6,500 kyat (US\$6.50) for a single pill. One injection of heroin, however, can be as cheap as 1,000 kyat.

Opium dens, where clients come to smoke opium or methamphetamines are scattered throughout the mining communities, but heroin sales are usually carried out in “camps” a short walk away from the settlements. There are an estimated fifty such camps in the entire Hpakant area.

Typical “drug camps” are clusters of makeshift bamboo huts or plastic tents where heroin is sold for injection or inhalation. Those inhaling sit at low wooden tables, heating the heroin in foil over candle flames. The injecting



Addicts line up for a fix at a drug camp where heroin is openly sold

drug users simply shoot up while squatting or standing outside the huts. Although the cheapest fix is only 1,000 kyat, addicts find themselves having to spend more and more on heroin to achieve the desired effect.

“I need to inject four times a day, but even then it’s not enough.”

The majority of the injecting heroin users are the yemase stone foragers who live a hand-to-mouth existence toiling day and night amongst steep mountains of rubble. As explained by one addict: “When you take drugs, you feel so much stronger, more manly, and the high piles of earth don’t look so high any more. You can also find more jade.”

The most popular method of heroin injection is simply to put heroin powder directly into a syringe without dissolving it in water, as it is believed to have stronger effect. The addicts inject themselves, draw blood into the syringe, let the blood mix directly with the heroin, and then inject it back into their veins. They repeat this several times, to ensure that all the heroin is dissolved into the bloodstream.

To ensure their daily fix, some addicts end up working in the drug camps, sitting at tables and preparing the foil and candles for heroin smokers. The customers share tiny amounts of heroin with them as payment, which they store up and use themselves.



I’ve injected so much in my arms that now I can’t inject there any more, and I have to inject in my legs. (Yemase stone forager, male, aged 29)

The camps are constantly crowded with addicts. “Thousands come to take drugs here,” said one seller at a drug camp. “They come throughout the day and night, but it’s most crowded between 7 and 8 in the evening. Both men and women come.”

One housewife complained about a camp at the edge of her village of Sut Ngai Yang, near the school and church: “The place is like a festival, with people lining up the whole time. Hundreds of people go there, and three buckets of used syringes are collected each day. Children going to the school and church see the drug camp every day, so it has become like a normal thing for them.”

A 16-year-old heroin addict attested to the fact that drug addiction has spread among the general community: “I’ve been addicted for two years, since I was at school. At first I just went along with friends who took drugs, and then I got addicted too. I have often stolen from my family to pay for drugs. It’s easy to get heroin in Hpakant, and anybody can take it. Most students are addicted.”

The majority of heroin in Hpakant is smuggled in from Shan State via Mandalay.



I come from Rangoon, and have been in Kachin State for ten years. Before becoming a yemase stone forager, I was a jade digger in a company. I've been addicted since the time a penicillin vial lid of heroin was just 200 kyats (US\$0.20). I started by smoking heroin and for about four or five years I have been injecting it. Now I am HIV positive and I can't work much because my knees are all swollen. It is hard to work and earn even 1,000 kyats, when I need 4,000 kyats to get high. (Yemase stone forager, male, aged 29)

I look for customers at the "Taung Cho" drug camp. When I get a customer, I call them to the room I rent. If they are seriously addicted, I only charge 1,500-2,000 kyat (US\$1.50-2.00) per time. I myself am addicted to heroin. I spend at least 10,000 kyat (US\$10.00) injecting heroin per day. There is no need for me to be afraid of the police. Right now there are five of us sex workers working around the same drug camp. They are all addicted like me. (Female sex worker, aged 20)



Entrenched corruption

While drug camps operate in the open and addiction rates soar, authorities not only turn a blind eye but enrich themselves on the profits.

One local pastor described his frustration: “There are so many drug dealers, sellers and addicts in the village. It is all done quite openly and it has led to so much stealing and other social problems. But when we try and send criminals to the police, they just get released with no charges. The law-enforcement process is useless.”

With police receiving an average monthly salary of only 30,000 kyat (US\$30) per month, there is no incentive for law enforcers to do their job. On the other hand there is huge incentive to profit from the drug trade. Interviews with numerous drug sellers and addicts verify this and reveal a systematic process of bribery at every level of the drug trade.

At the retail level, large amounts of bribes exchange hands every day, as described by one seller at a drug camp. “We sell 2 million kyat (US\$2,000) worth of drugs every day. And every day, police, narcotics police and members of the fire brigade come in plain clothes to demand bribes. We have to give them each at least 5,000 to 10,000 kyat (US\$5-10) per time. Just today we paid a total of 500,000 kyat (US\$500) in bribes.”

Bribes are even greater at the wholesale end of the market. Drug dealers pay huge sums to the police and military authorities to ensure a monopoly on drug distribution throughout the jade mining area. For example, all opium sold in Hpakant is distributed by only two Chinese companies who are also involved in mining and are able to smuggle drugs into Hpakant using their mining vehicles. Each company pays bribes of 700 million kyat (US\$700,000) per year to the authorities.

To safeguard their monopoly, these companies distribute opium cut into small pellets with only two distinctive shapes: the “mouse dropping” and the triangular “samosa.” Possession of opium in any other shape leads to immediate arrest by the police. In this way, drug dealers operate with complete impunity.

Ironically, only when dealers stop selling drugs, and no longer pay bribes, are they liable to be arrested. As explained by one drug seller. “The police and narcotics police won’t arrest me so long as I am selling heroin, only if I stop selling it.”

Authorities occasionally order the drug selling centres to close when there are visits from high-ranking officials or foreign dignitaries. Extra “fees” are then collected from the drug sellers, as well as local brothels and massage parlours, to pay the expenses of hosting the visitors.

However, drug use is so entrenched that it is difficult even for the police to enforce the closure of the drug camps during such visits. Last year, during one closure, a group of angry addicts in the Sezinn mining area began threatening to burn down the village if they were not given drugs. The police ended up having to issue heroin directly to them.

The only concession the authorities have made to the public health threat posed by the drug epidemic is to allow some international NGOs to run needle exchange programs and provide anti-retroviral drugs to some of the addicts. “In Taung Cho drug camp, AZG (Doctors without Borders Netherlands) provide two to three buckets of syringes a day. The needle cleaners are paid 2,000 to 3,000 kyat per bucket,” said one addict.



“Mouse-dropping” pellets of opium

Community efforts thwarted

Concerned community members have tried to campaign to close down the drug camps but have failed due to lack of action from the authorities. In several instances, they have taken the law into their own hands and destroyed and have even burned down drug camps. This has usually simply led to the camps moving to another location, or even punishment for those destroying the premises.

One local resident who ransacked an opium den next to his house when his complaints to the authorities fell on deaf ears, ended up being tied up and beaten by the village chairperson, at the request of the den owner.

Failure to address the many levels of official complicity in the drug trade has led community members to comment privately that radical political change is the only way to address the drug problem in Burma.

“Now drug dealers and addicts are completely free to do what they want,” commented one Hpakant miner. “It’s as if they are operating legally, with the backing of the government. In my opinion, as long as this government stays in power, there is no way to get rid of the drugs in this area.”



Fear of the camera

The recent near arrest of our reporter in Hpakant shows how the greatest crime for the authorities is exposure of information.

I went to take photos secretly at one of the drug camps in Hpakant. I went with a friend on a motorbike. At first, we couldn't find the camp, so we asked a local woman, and she told us that her son had just died of an overdose at the camp the week before.

When we reached the camp, which was up a hillside, we parked our bike and then I went up the hill and began taking photos from behind a bush. Unfortunately, one of the addicts saw me. I tried to walk away, and began deleting the photos on my camera, but the addict called his friends to catch me. I was taken to the camp owner, a woman, and the local SPDC official who was stationed at the drug camp. The woman was very angry. She shook me by the shoulders and accused me of being a journalist or spy. The official handcuffed me.

I was terrified, but suddenly I remembered the woman whose son had just died at the camp. I told them that she had asked me to take photos for her of the place her son died. Luckily I could remember the boy's name, and the camp owner knew the boy, and believed me. By the grace of God, I was allowed to go free.

Center of learning now a heroin haven

Once prided as the academic centre of northern Burma's Kachin State, Myitkyina University has now become notorious for soaring levels of drug addiction among its students, a source of shame and bitterness for the local community.

"The heart of Kachin State is Myitkyina, and the heart of Myitkyina is the university. The students are our most precious resource. That is why it is so hurtful to see how many students are becoming addicted now," lamented one of the university staff.

Estimates by Kachin church groups indicate that the majority of the Kachin students are addicted to drugs, mainly heroin (or "no.4" as it is known). There are about 3,000 full-time students at the university; an additional 3,000 distance education students attend the university for one month per year. Approximately half of the students are ethnic Kachin.

Evidence of intravenous drug use is apparent throughout the campus. Discarded bloody syringes, needles, and syringe packets are littered in latrines, under stairwells and bushes, and even scattered on the football field.

"Students are fearless about taking drugs," said one university employee. "They just shoot up in the classrooms and in the toilet openly."

Male and female students are both becoming addicted. Female addicts prefer to inject the drug in their legs behind their knee joints, to avoid unsightly needle marks in more visible places.



Students can be seen openly purchasing drugs in shops, cafes, billiards centres and houses near the university. A 2nd year female student described sales beginning as early as 8 am at a house near her home: "University students

crowd around and buy heroin in the morning. I know some of them. I saw one second-year student putting heroin in a syringe and then injecting himself beside the road, using only a book to hide what he was doing. It's clear that people don't regard injecting no. 4 as a dangerous thing. It seems to be a fashion."

The "fashion" of heroin has only taken hold at the university in the last few years. Until 2003, addiction was rare among the students. Addicts would smoke or take opium orally, in a cocktail known as "formula," mixing the drug with cough syrup or energy drinks.

In 2004 heroin started becoming readily available in Myitkyina at a cheaper price than opium, making it popular among the students. Illicit drug produc-

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tion and trade had recently surged as the regime increased controls of cross-border trade in timber and gems.

Availability of heroin has coincided with increasing disillusionment with the university education system. Classes lack basic equipment, and lecturers commonly neglect regular classes, focusing instead on special tuition classes where they can earn extra money. Students wishing to pass exams therefore must pay for tuition classes with their lecturers.

Without classes to go to during regular lecture hours, students turn easily to drugs that are readily available. “After I had been at the university for a few months, I felt so bored,” said a 1st year physics student. “Almost all the teaching hours were free, and I had so much leisure time. It was always tempting to go out with my friends, who were drug users.”

Drug dealers deliberately target youth, and offer first-time users free samples in an effort to get them hooked. Heroin is commonly sold in tiny penicillin vial lids at a price of about 1,500 kyats (US\$1.50) per cap.

Having become addicted, students typically become dealers and distributors of the drug themselves to earn money to feed their habit. Some even sell openly in the university hostels.

University rules prohibit drug use, but significantly, no students have yet been apprehended or punished for taking or dealing drugs on campus.

“The authorities know very well what is going on, but they do nothing,” complained a university staff member. “If they don’t take action, then we staff cannot take any action either.”

Local people are convinced this lack of enforcement is a deliberate policy to encourage drug addiction among the student population. Myitkyina University has always been well-known for anti-government activism, especially during the 1988 uprising. Today when anti-government posters are put up in the university, the posters are pulled down immediately and students are interrogated yet shooting up heroin openly on campus leads to no repercussions.

“Myitkyina University has been producing Kachin leaders for decades. But now most of our recent Kachin graduates are heroin junkies. What better way to undermine the Kachin political opposition?” said one leading Kachin activist.



Waste bin especially for used syringes in university toilet