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## Interview: Gen. Chavalit Yodmani

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# Narco-terrorism in Thailand is 'precisely what we fear the most'

*Police General Chavalit Yodmani is secretary-general of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) of the government of Thailand. He was interviewed by Pakdee and Sophie Tanapura of EIR's Bangkok bureau.*

**EIR:** Does the Thai government have any plans to trace the enormous amount of funds generated by the drug traffic in the Southeast Asian region?

**Chavalit:** I think that it is very difficult to trace the financial laundering networks in the Southeast Asian region. This is mainly because drug traffickers use what is known in Chinese as the "poey kuan" system, a system based on mutual trust. It is doubly difficult to trace these laundering routes because Asians, and especially the Chinese, deal with each other in the strictest confidence among family or clan members who have been trading with one another over a long period of time. Therefore, drug trafficking for them is a sure and profitable business which then allows them to reinvest in other businesses such as contraband trade, prostitution rings, and other such activities, making it very hard for the authorities to trace the laundered money. For instance, drug traffickers in Bangkok export drugs to Hong Kong dealers who re-export contraband goods back to the Bangkok drug traffickers. With this system, no drug money is transferred through the official banking system.

**EIR:** According to our information, the northeastern provinces have been transformed into a significant marijuana-growing area. Can you confirm this?

**Chavalit:** There have been marijuana crops in the northeastern region for a long time. It's only recently that they have grown in importance, especially during the Vietnam War. As you know, during that period, there were many American GIs traveling back and forth, in and out of Thailand, and many were stationed in the northeastern region. You have to remember that that region has mountains covered with dense forests. It is in these areas that you find marijuana grown in isolated patches on the ridges along the Mekong River.

**EIR:** Where specifically is marijuana grown in that area?

**Chavalit:** You find it in the Sakon Nakorn, Mukdaharn, and Nakorn Phanom near the Thai-Lao border. If they feel that

the Thai authorities are harassing them too much, they simply move over the border to the Laotian side to grow marijuana which is then transported back. The work of border and provincial police patrols consists of destroying the marijuana plants, burning them, and transporting them out of the area.

**EIR:** According to reports, it seems that during the past two years, the Lao government has made it public that opium and marijuana trade would henceforth be legal. Does this not increase drug traffic across the Thai-Lao border?

**Chavalit:** Yes, we are closely surveying the area. As to whether the Lao government is encouraging opium-growing, this must be seen from two standpoints: 1) If it is grown legally, this means that the government is the sole buyer of the harvest, which is then used for production of medicine. In this case, the heroin does not become a social menace; 2) in encouraging the growing of opium crops, some of the crop ends up in the black market where the market price is much higher than the official price. This situation necessarily leads to the existence of drug mafias. In this case, the Thai government would have to make sure that the opium or heroin is not smuggled across the Thai-Lao border. . . . As far as I know, the International Narcotics Control Board is planning to check out the details of the legalized drug production in Laos. As for marijuana, to my knowledge, there is no medicinal use for it.

**EIR:** International terrorists are almost always synonymous with drug traffickers because drugs provide them with the necessary cash flow. For example, various terrorist groups in the Middle East, M-19 in Colombia, the Shining Path in Peru, and the NPA in the Philippines. Perhaps the communist party or other groups such as secessionists may also be involved. Do you have anything to corroborate this?

**Chavalit:** This is precisely what we fear the most if we are unable to control the drug traffic. Drug money will lead to mafias, corruption of officials, gun running, and contraband activities, all of which are much more profitable than any legitimate business. This becomes a socio-economic problem, worse still, a national security problem. In Thailand, minority ethnic groups such as the "Big Thai" secessionists are deeply involved in drug production and trafficking, which provide their movements with substantial financial support.

**EIR:** Do you mean secessionists in general? What role do they play?

**Chavalit:** In Burma, drug money is a principal source of income for these movements to continue their anti-government activities. In the eyes of the Burmese government, these groups are considered to be rebels. And because they have a source of income, they are able to continue their terrorism against the state.

In Thailand, the situation is not yet that bad. This is because government authorities are able to reach even the most remote areas of the country. For this reason, we have not had such violent terrorist acts from secessionists. And since the government has expressed the desire to allow politics to take the lead instead of the military, such as been in the 66/23 law which granted amnesty to Communist Party members who were willing to give themselves up to authorities.

Before, we used to have red areas around Chiang Rai, Petchaboon, and Naan which were considered off-limits. Now tourists can visit these beautiful areas because by the end of 1982, government officials were able to move in to develop the area economically. This is one of the reasons for the general decline in opium production in the past years.

I also think that the hill tribes finally are understanding that if they want to live on Thai territory, they have to abide by Thai laws. They are beginning to understand that growing opium is an illegal activity. At the beginning of this year, the Third Army Region (North) sent in officials to educate the hill tribes of Meo, Yao, Seesaw, Karens, Mouser, and Egor in alternative economic activities. Once they are relatively well-off, we move in and use repressive measures because some of them think they can sneak by us and still grow opium. Last year, we know that there was about 25,000 rai of opium production. Out of that, we were able to destroy about 11,000 rai. Therefore, last year's opium production dropped to only 14 tons or 14,000 rai. One rai produces about one kilogram of opium. You could say that the level of production is not enough to even satisfy the addictive needs of the hill tribes themselves. But then again, we don't really want Thai people to be drug addicts forever, do we? Some hill tribe members have checked into cure centers. . . .

**EIR:** Is the Communist Party of Thailand involved in drug trafficking?

**Chavalit:** I don't think so yet. In the South, we have heard that the Chinese-controlled communists collect a "political tax" on the contraband goods. The authorities have been cracking down quite systematically on this practice and are on the verge of wiping it out, whether it be by the Communist Party, terrorists, or Chinese bandits.

However, the problem lies elsewhere. We have been informed that besides the drug trafficking route originating in Burma and passing through Thailand, another significant one is developing across Bangladesh and India. We also know that efforts are being made by traffickers to change

drug traffic routes. This is because in the past three to four years, authorities have been increasingly efficient in waging the war on drugs. Last year alone, the traffickers lost 1,200 kilograms or more than a ton of heroin through drug seizure by the authorities. The year before we were able to seize 1,100 kilograms and the year before that, 800 kilograms. In addition, their middlemen were arrested, making it more difficult to find people they can trust to do the job. The anti-narcotics officials quite successfully set up checkpoints. International sources of information have also been very forthcoming, making it possible for us to trace the drug traffic from its production to its final destination in Europe or the United States.

**EIR:** Wasn't Thailand the first to use military help in the

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war on drugs when troops were sent in to attack the base of the infamous drug kingpin, Khun Sa, in 1982-83?

**Chavalit:** Because civilians cannot handle such a huge task, we had to resort to either the border police, the provincial police, or the army. Otherwise, the operation would have been a failure from the beginning.

**EIR:** How is cooperation between the Thai and Burmese authorities in waging war on drugs on the border?

**Chavalit:** Relations between the two governments on this matter are very close. During the last official visit to Burma, Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda and Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila met with President Newin, Foreign Minister U Wieng Thong, and Interior Minister U Minh Thong, who is overseeing the narcotics question. We informed the Burmese of our operations on the border and we even extended an invitation to them to visit the area. However, we are still very far from cooperating with each other operationally on the ground. For the Burmese, access to the border area is almost impossible. For us, access to the production area is relatively easy on the Thai side, easier for us than for the Burmese from their own capital, Rangoon. We do what we can from our side to prevent these minority groups on the border from using Thai territory for opium production, for other illegal activities, or as a sanctuary from Burmese law. Of course, if they are seriously wounded or have lost an arm or a leg, for humanitarian reasons, we would help medically but would

not accept sheltering these people.

**EIR:** It's been reported in the press that the government wants to be able to seize all assets of arrested drug-runners. Can you confirm this?

**Chavalit:** I have been wanting to do this for a long time, but we have not yet promulgated the necessary laws. Drafts have been written and discussed off and on, but our Parliament has not yet passed such a law. And even when such a law is passed, it is still going to be difficult to prove that the origin of this or that sum of money is from drug trafficking, for reasons which I have already discussed earlier in the interview.

**EIR:** How is Thai cooperation with neighboring Malaysia in the anti-narcotics war?

**Chavalit:** We work very closely together and are in constant contact. The southern regional office of the ONCB works very closely with the Malaysian authorities. In addition, the anti-narcotics officials of the ASEAN nations meet once a year to exchange information and coordinate policy. As for Malaysia, we are working so closely that we don't think of our telephone calls as long distance any more. Our close collaboration has made it possible for the Malaysian authorities to increase the number of drug arrests on their side. And the fact that they did stick to implementing the death penalty for the two arrested Australian drug traffickers shows that they are serious in waging the war on drugs. The death penalty represents one of many repressive measures used in suppressing the spread of narcotics in their country.

**EIR:** What do you think of President Reagan's war on drugs and do you have any suggestions?

**Chavalit:** The United States has launched a major war on drugs because many Americans are drug addicts. Drug trade as a profitable business has to be eliminated. I think that most of the drug traffickers are Americans. Therefore, three things must be done: 1) Reduce the demand for drugs, i.e., increase the number of cure and rehabilitation centers for drug addicts. 2) As for preventive measures, which is a campaign already launched by the First Lady, efforts must be made so that Americans do not experiment with drugs or become even more addicted to drugs than they are right now. 3) Major drug traffickers are Americans. In Bolivia or Colombia, it is not really the local guys running the show. The big mafia behind the scenes is American. For these reasons, we are very happy to see the United States take the lead in the war on drugs on a world scale.

We don't want Thai people to become drug addicts either. We don't want Thailand to be run by drug mafias. The anti-narcotics measures we have taken are those prescribed by the United Nations: prevention, cure, rehabilitation, and economic development. Narcotics control and repression is a continuous program, because if we ever let up, the phenomenon will spread again.

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