

ARE MARTIAL ARTS CLUBS ADDING PUNCH TO THE JIHADIST CAUSE?

PARIS: Combat sports are booming around the world but in France increasingly draw the attention of intelligence services hunting potential jihadists. Long concentrated in poor suburbs and with no real organization watching over their activities, critics say the mixed martial arts, judo, kick boxing and other clubs are ideal for fomenting radicalization and jihadist training.

Ironically, many of the clubs get subsidies from French town halls. Mederic Chapitoux, who has written a book, "Sport, The Fault In State Security", about the phenomenon, believes France should not be alone in worrying. "We know this has a national dimension, European, worldwide," Chapitoux, a former gendarme and technical director for a contact sports federation said in an interview. Just before a group of suicide attackers killed 130 people across Paris on November 13 last year, a Central Territorial Intelligence Service (SCRT) note was leaked.

It warned of the radicalization in suburban, amateur sport-particularly the combat clubs. Sports Minister Patrick Kanner said later that France had completely "underestimated" the risks. His ministry launched a Citizens of Sport plan aiming to reinforce education for sports trainers to counter radicalization. Chapitoux said the "signals" of trouble were missed. Fighters increasingly covered their bodies, even for showers, prayer mats appeared before and after training, there was a growing rejection of mixing with women. "Trainers and social workers did not understand the growth of the phenomenon," said Chapitoux. "And if someone did try to impose rules, they were accused of racism."

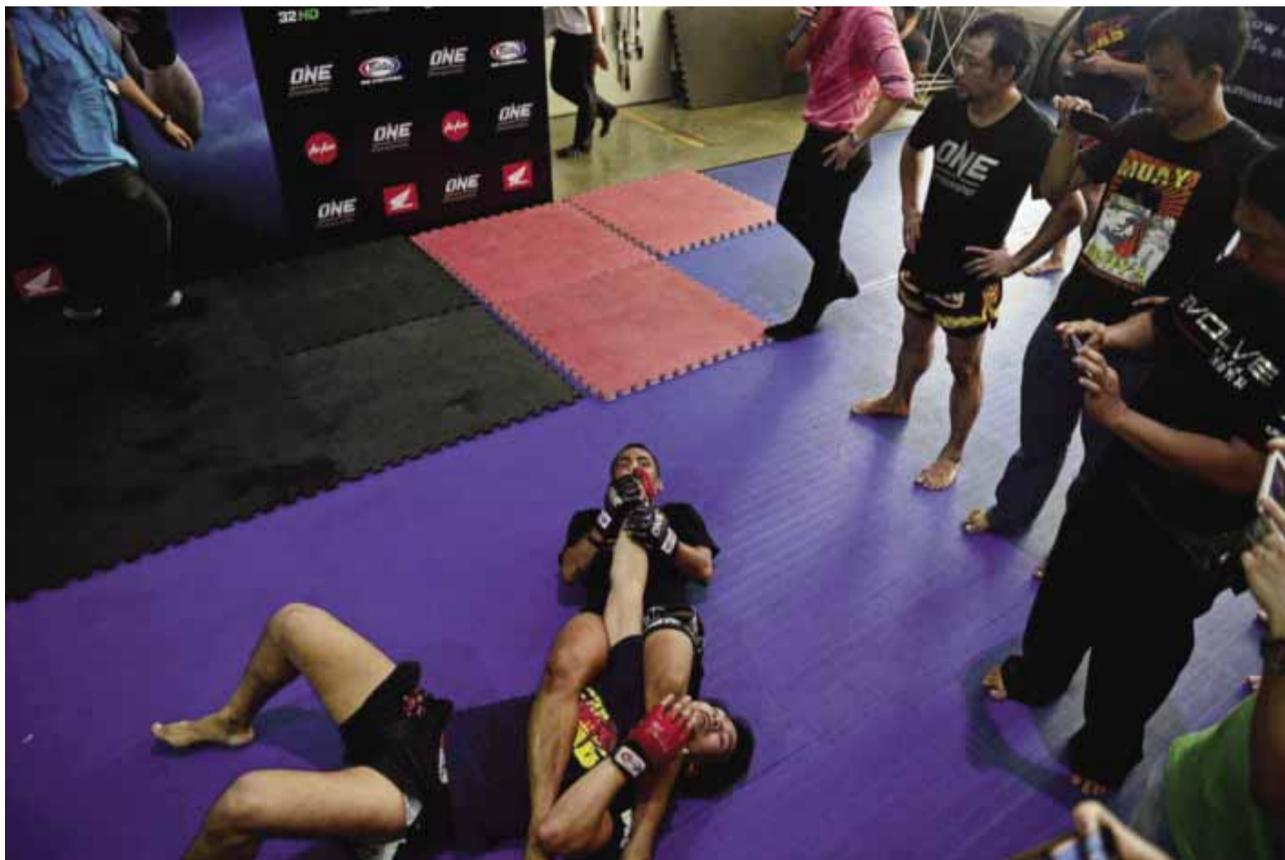
After November 13, French authorities took action. Less than two weeks after the Paris attacks, Said Itaev, a Chechen-origin international wrestling champion, was ordered to be kept under house arrest, reporting to the local police three times a day. The restriction was only lifted one month later so Itaev could take part in the French championships with his club in eastern France where he was employed as a trainer. Chapitoux said he believes trainers are often recruiters for radical groups. He said that qualifications are non-existent or difficult to check, but "the danger is immense because the trainer in sport influences the mind and body."

'Not in the mainstream'

Combat sports, and martial arts in particular, are a particularly good way to prepare for Jihad. The pro-jihad website, Azzam.com, closed down after the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, produced a manual copied by other sites, which told how to prepare for action. "It is vital to join a martial arts club as part of the training for jihad," it said, vaunting the need for "self-discipline". "In some countries, there are martial arts run by Muslim instructors, but one can join other clubs if there are no Muslim clubs in his area."

Chapitoux writes in his book that militants have taken over the slogan of pioneer French physical education instructor, Georges Hebert: "Be strong to be useful." Critics of the clubs point to the case of Yassine Salhi, who belonged to a combat sport club in the eastern French city of Besancon. In June, 2015, Salhi decapitated Herve Cornara, owner of a company where he had worked near Lyon. Chapitoux's book also cites Pierre Choulet, a French teenager converted to Islam after meeting Frederic-Jean Salvi on a physical education course. Choulet was killed driving a truck packed with explosives in a suicide attack in Iraq in February, 2015.

Salvi became a radical during a prison term. He now teaches combat sports in the British city of Leicester. The radical fringe worries French club leaders. "A lot of vulnerable young people find a second family in these clubs," said one mixed martial arts club owner in the Paris district. "I have seen people try to recruit youngsters with this profile in my gym," the owner said. "I have protected youths from this situation." French Judo Federation president Jean-Luc Rouge said the main problem is with fringe combat sports. "They are not in the mainstream and the instructors are mainly volunteers." — AFP



BANGKOK: Thai mixed martial artist Dejdarnong Sor Amnuaysirichoke (center) demonstrating his groundwork skills at a ONE Championship promotion event in Bangkok. — AFP

MMA OFFERS GOLD, GLORY FOR THAILAND KICKBOXERS

BANGKOK: When he was just seven Dejdarnong earned a paltry \$2 for his impoverished family every time he got into the ring as a child Muay Thai boxer. Thirty years on, he pulls in a six figure salary as a mixed martial arts champion and is preparing a title defense in Thailand, a country with a proud kickboxing heritage that is wary of modern cage fighting. Thailand's famous Muay Thai has long provided a route out of poverty for some of the country's poorest kids, who are drilled for the brutal contact sport from a young age. Most never make it big. But for those who do, fame and comparative fortune await, even if the physical costs are often high.

Now the growing international clout of MMA is offering an even greater lure to Muay Thai fighters—and that has ruffled the feathers of traditionalists in Thailand who fear the all-action sport may one day eclipse the kingdom's venerated boxing style. "I haven't fought in Thailand for years," Dejdarnong, who is now based in Singapore and whose full name is Dejdarnong Sor Amnuaysirichoke, told AFP during a recent visit to a Bangkok gym. "But I'm still a Muay Thai fighter at heart so I'm delighted to be doing it here." In recent decades MMA has gone from a niche sideshow to a multi-billion dollar industry and one of the world's fastest growing sports, with Asia no exception.

Many cage fighters are trained in Muay Thai, a technique that uses fists, elbows, knees and kicks and offers versatility to an MMA fighter's arsenal. But the international MMA fight circuit noticeably missed Thailand, primarily because the country's sports authorities and Muay Thai leagues had been loathe to allow a competitor in. Now that is set to change. On May 27, ONE Championship, by far Asia's largest MMA organizer, will put on a fight night at a 10,000-seat arena in Bangkok, the first

time a major promoter has been allowed to hold such an event in Thailand.

Bigger stage

For Dejdarnong, a three-times Muay Thai champion who switched to MMA late in his career notching up six wins and no losses, it is a homecoming. At the fight, he will be defending his strawweight title against Japan's Yoshitaka Naito, a 32-year-old Shooto trained fighter who is also undefeated with 10 victories to his name. "It's an opportunity to show Thailand that mixed martial arts fighting is a sport. And it's also a way to show Muay Thai on a bigger international stage," he said. MMA, with its far larger global audience and sponsors, offers even greater riches. As a ONE insider put it: "The top guys like Dejdarnong, they easily pull in six figures in US dollars" annually. By contrast, the average Muay Thai pugilist can expect little more than \$100 for a fight, with the headline bouts perhaps upwards of \$5,000.

Both sports offer rewards far in excess of the \$5 a day offered for menial jobs or farm work—the traditional route for many poor young men in Thailand making them an attractive alternative to the disenfranchised. Born into a poor family in southern Trang province, Dejdarnong began training in secret because his mother was so opposed to him taking up Muay Thai. But he excelled and moved to Bangkok as a teenager, eventually competing in more than 300 fights. He recently visited his old master Prawit Teryou, who has trained generations of young fighters, usually from poor backgrounds, from his house in a non-descript residential suburb that boasts a boxing ring in the front garden.

"About 20 of us used to sleep here," Dejdarnong said, pointing to a small room at the back of Prawit's compound. "It was a boxer's life, a big family's life." "Muay Thai is defi-

nately still a way for them to help their family," explained Prawit, a wizened and mustachioed trainer with a Buddhist amulet hanging from his neck. But Dejdarnong's sporting and financial success has piqued local interest in MMA. "There's certainly a lot of interest in mixed martial arts from kids in the gym now," he said, adding he doesn't understand traditionalist opposition. "In the end MMA is a sport, like Muay Thai is."

So cruel

The Sports Authority of Thailand wants cage fighting banned in the kingdom, saying it threatens Thai culture and is overly violent—something which has raised wry smiles among fight promoters who say Muay Thai is hardly for the faint-hearted. "To have such a sport event staged in the country should be declared illegal," Sakol Wannapong, SAT's governor, told local media recently. "It is not a sport. It is so cruel." But Thailand's sports and tourism ministry has allowed the fight night to go ahead. Kamol "Sukie" Sukosol Clapp, ONE Championship president Thailand, dismisses the concerns of traditionalists, saying MMA will boost Muay Thai's popularity.

A colourful scion of a wealthy Thai business dynasty, Sukie first made a name for himself in Thailand's pop music industry, where he said he faced similar opposition. "In Thailand we had Thai country music which is huge. We did pop. But we didn't ruin country music, it went parallel. I feel it will be the same thing with MMA and Muay Thai," he said. Prawit, meanwhile, says the average Muay Thai fan is not bogged down in the dispute. They just want to see Dejdarnong win. He said: "It's a hugely important fight. He's defending his belt in his home country and Thai people will be behind him." — AFP