Asia biggest source and market for precursor chemicals used to make illicit drugs

Governments urged to reconsider drug control priorities: Every dollar spent on prevention saves up to 10 dollars

Bangkok (Thailand), 4 March 2014 – Only one in six problem drug users worldwide – some 4.5 million people – receives the treatment he or she needs, at a global cost of about US$35 billion per year, says the Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its Annual Report 2013, launched today in London.

Heroin, cannabis and cocaine are the drugs most frequently used by people entering treatment worldwide.

“Investing in prevention and treatment is a wise choice as it can lead to significant savings in health-care and crime-related costs and alleviate the suffering of drug-dependent persons and their families. Every dollar spent on prevention can save Governments up to ten dollars in later costs,” said Mr. Raymond Yans, the President of the INCB. “The Board encourages Governments in the region to continue to expand treatment services provision, including the introduction and development of voluntary treatment alternatives, such as community-based treatment, and to facilitate access to treatment and drug prevention services for all drug users.”

The manufacture and demand for heroin in East and Southeast Asia continues to be of major concern to the INCB Board: "East and South-East Asia reported high levels of injecting drug abuse, accounting for 27 per cent of all injecting drug users worldwide injecting heroin, amphetamine-type stimulants, tranquillizers and sedatives. China alone reported having nearly 1.3 million registered opioid abusers in 2012 -- an increase from 1.2 million in 2011. This increase in demand in China may be driving the increased demand for heroin produced elsewhere in the region.”

In Bangkok, UN officials expressed concern that economic integration could accelerate the drug trade in Southeast Asia.

“Rapid regional integration provides ample incentives for international drug trafficking syndicates,” said Mr. Jeremy Douglas, UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Regional Representative, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. “The UN is concerned that sufficient thought has not been given to the implications of greater regional integration –and how it makes the connecting of chemicals, drugs and markets easier and more efficient than ever before.

“Governments should consider that one of the unintended consequences of economic integration and looser national controls on chemical exports is that criminal organizations may gain access to the legitimate supply chains of the chemicals needed to manufacture illicit drugs and then more easily export these ‘precursor’ chemicals to drug-making markets abroad.”

Southeast Asia is the second largest producer of opium in the world. It is also a growing market for amphetamine-type stimulants, especially methamphetamine, the top illicit drug threat in East and Southeast Asia, where seizures of methamphetamine in both pill and crystalline forms reached record highs in 2012, according to the UN.

Heroin or methamphetamine, however, can only be produced using precursor chemicals – which
often are not made where the drugs are, but are smuggled in from nearby countries. While Asia is the biggest source and market for precursor chemicals used to make illicit drugs, neither Afghanistan nor Myanmar, the world’s no. 1 and no. 2 heroin producers, produce acetic anhydride, the chemical necessary to produce heroin from raw opium, Mr. Douglas pointed out.

“We need to act quickly. The Golden Triangle is the geographic centre of the Greater Mekong Sub-region, and plans are well underway to expand transport and infrastructure and lower trade barriers and border controls across the region. The organized criminal networks that benefit from Southeast Asia’s illicit drug trade are well positioned to take advantage of regional integration,” Mr. Douglas said.

“No country is immune from the challenges caused by illicit drugs to rule of law, governance and public health. International cooperation is essential. While controls over international trade in precursors have been tightened, challenges remain – particularly in regions like Asia.”


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