Expanding synthetic drugs market inhibiting development in East and South-East Asia and Oceania

Record methamphetamine seizures and rising use in the region highlight the need for international efforts for an integrated response

Bangkok (Thailand) 26 May 2015 – The demand for synthetic drugs in East and South-East Asia and Oceania continues to rise, while rapid economic integration is creating new opportunities for transnational criminal groups to expand the illicit drug trade, warns the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in a new report released today by the Global Synthetics Monitoring: Analyses, Reporting and Trends (SMART) Programme.

The report “The Challenge of Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia and Oceania: Trends and Patterns of Amphetamine-type Stimulants and New Psychoactive Substances 2015” analyses recent trends and developments of the synthetic drugs market in the region, comprising both amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and new psychoactive substances (NPS), which are designed to mimic the effects of substances under international control. The report also highlights the harmful impact of the illicit trade in synthetic drugs on development and the evolving challenges for governments in their efforts to respond to the threat.

East and South-East Asia and Oceania has the world’s largest ATS market which is dominated by methamphetamine in crystalline (“ice”) and tablet (“yaba” or “yama”) forms. The illegal ATS trade is expanding and diversifying with the increasing availability of NPS, substances not under international control. Moreover, the high availability of ATS precursor chemicals for legitimate industrial use in the region could increase the risk of their diversion for methamphetamine and ecstasy manufacture.

Information on seizures and use indicate that the market for both forms of methamphetamine is expanding, say government experts. Methamphetamine seizures in East and South-East Asia and Oceania have almost quadrupled from about 11 tons in 2008 to almost 42 tons in 2013. Over this period, crystalline methamphetamine seizures in the region almost doubled, to about 14 tons in 2013, while methamphetamine tablet seizures have risen at a more rapid rate resulting in an eight-fold increase, from about 30 million tablets seized in 2008 to more than 250 million tablets seized in 2013.
Several countries in the region reported historically high methamphetamine seizures in 2013. Crystalline methamphetamine seizures in China almost doubled from about 4.5 tons in 2009 to 8 tons in 2013, while seizures in Thailand have also annually increased from 0.2 tons in 2009 to 1.7 tons in 2013. In Malaysia, a record 1.7 tons of crystalline methamphetamine was seized in 2013. Meanwhile, the amounts of methamphetamine tablets seized in 2013 in China (115 million tablets) and Thailand (113 million) are the highest totals ever reported from those countries.

This significant increase of seizures might partly be the result of effective law enforcement measures, but also points to expanding manufacture and an increase of trafficking to and through the region, as the synthetic drugs market is becoming increasingly interconnected with other regions.

In 2013, illicit methamphetamine manufacture was detected in most countries in East and South-East Asia and Oceania. Whereas the manufacture of methamphetamine tablets is largely confined to the countries of the Mekong sub-region, crystalline methamphetamine continues to be manufactured in the region on a large scale. This lucrative and growing ATS market has attracted the increasing activity of complex international drug trafficking networks, with crystalline methamphetamine in the region now also originating from Western Africa, Western Asia, North America, and, more recently, South Asia.

“Increased cross-border trade, regional integration and reduced border restrictions in Southeast Asia have also created opportunity for increasing the cross-border trafficking of drugs and the precursors needed to make them”, said Mr. Jeremy Douglas, Regional Representative of UNODC in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. “it is undeniable that many positive economic opportunities and benefits are being seen, but the activity of transnational criminal groups involved in the region’s synthetic drug trade is also increasing, posing a challenge for governments and regional organisations like the ASEAN Secretariat to develop an effective response.”

Moreover, the expansion of licit trade flows and rapid economic growth in the region has also helped to fuel the rising demand for methamphetamine and other synthetic drugs in most countries, say government experts. In 2013, an increase in the use of crystalline methamphetamine was reported in seven countries, namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Viet Nam. Experts also perceived an increased use of methamphetamine tablets in the six countries of the Mekong sub-region, which includes Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. A large share of people receiving drug treatment in several countries continues to be methamphetamine users, and in 2013, China, Myanmar and the Philippines reported an increase of people who received treatment for methamphetamine use.
The report also notes a growing presence of “ecstasy” in East and South-East Asia, with the region possibly becoming an emerging driver of the global market for “ecstasy”, as both a consumer market and a transit location. In the last few years there have been significant seizures of ecstasy precursor chemicals in the region. The “ecstasy” market has diversified in recent years with the presence of NPS adulterants in “ecstasy” tablets – especially piperazines, synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids. In 2013, such reports were made to UNODC by Brunei Darussalam, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Macau (China), Malaysia and Thailand. Illicit “ecstasy” manufacture has been reported by Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia and Malaysia over the last few years.

Until recently, the NPS market in the region has been dominated by the presence of ketamine, as well as the plant-based substances kratom and, more recently, khat. However, the number of NPS reported in East and South-East Asia and Oceania has increased significantly, from 34 substances in 2009 to 137 as of November 2014, with major increases within the synthetic cannabinoid group and the synthetic cathinone group, which mimics the effects of ATS. On the whole, the largest number of NPS in the region between 2008 and 2014 was reported by Australia (73 substances), followed by New Zealand (49 substances), Singapore (37 substances), Japan (31 substances) and Indonesia (29 substances). Ketamine seizures increased significantly to almost 10 tons in 2013, which marks an 85 per cent increase from the amount seized in 2012. Ketamine seizure information also indicates extensive inter-regional and intra-regional trafficking with ketamine from the East and South-East Asian region being mostly trafficked to Western Europe and North America.

Given the growing complexity and interconnectedness of the illicit ATS and NPS trade in East and South-East Asia and Oceania, this report is an important contribution to the better understanding of the threat and impact of region’s synthetic drugs problem within a global context. The report also highlights the need for enhanced information exchange and cooperation on national, regional and international levels to establish an integrated effective response to the growing synthetic drugs problem.

Background - the Global SMART Programme

The UNODC report, *The Challenge of Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia and Oceania: Trends and Patterns of Amphetamine-Type Stimulants and New Psychoactive Substances 2015* was produced by the UNODC Global Synthetics Monitoring: Analyses, Reporting and Trends (SMART) Programme.

UNODC launched the Global SMART Programme in September 2008. The objective of the Programme is to enhance the capacity of Member States and relevant authorities to generate, manage, analyze, report and use synthetic drug information, in order to design effective, scientifically-sound and evidence based policies and programmes. The
UNODC Global SMART Programme receives financial support from the Governments of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States.