Regional Office for Central Asia

Crossroads
Fighting Against Drugs and Organized Crime in Central Asia
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Regional Visit of Kofi Annan Highlights the Need for Cooperative Efforts to Stop Drugs Trafficking

What is a Precursor? (and why we should be concerned)

“Friendship Across Borders” Training Program: inter-agency collaboration at work

Drug Abuse in Central Asia: trends and responses

Meetings of the Foreign Anti-Narcotics Community and Mini-Dublin Group held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan planting a tree at the Drug Control Agency in Tajikistan
UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan made history with his recent trip to Central Asia. He is the first Secretary-General to visit the countries of the region since their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This event represented more than the ongoing cooperation between the United Nations and the Central Asian countries; it underscores the growing geopolitical significance of the region in the context of international stability and security.

More than a decade following their establishment as sovereign nations, the countries of Central Asia are faced with their own unique prospects and challenges. As in all transitional areas of the world, moving toward systems of democratic governance, deregulated economies and the guarantee of political and civil rights is a complex task. Adding to these complexities is the regional proximity to Afghanistan post-September 11, which has further thrust Central Asia into a pivotal role in the war on terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and transnational crime.

The need for a concerted and coordinated approach to these and other problems was the fundamental message that Mr. Annan emphasized during his visit. Calling on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to jointly manage ecological challenges such as the dwindling Aral Sea, on Turkmenistan to increase its role in restoring stability in neighboring Afghanistan and on all countries of the region to combine efforts to fight the burgeoning drug trade, the Secretary-General maintained that true progress would only be achieved through joint actions. This message was reiterated during meetings with UN staff, whom he encouraged to continue the interagency cooperation that has contributed to the many joint initiatives underway in the region.

While in Tajikistan visiting the Drug Control Agency (DCA), Mr. Annan heralded it as an example of the work that can be done when UN agencies and governments work together. The DCA, whose creation was supported through funding, training and technical assistance from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UN ODC), is widely acknowledged as a model for effectively combating the drug trade. Comprising over 300 officers and in its third full year of operation, the DCA has already become a major force in investigating and intercepting drug shipments. Perhaps more significantly, the DCA is playing a leading role in coordinating the efforts of various national agencies, civil society groups and international law enforcement counterparts in the war against drug trafficking and abuse.

This collaborative approach to a multifaceted problem reflects the type of strategy necessary to tackle global issues. As Kofi Annan noted during his...
visit to the DCA facilities in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, “Illegal drug trafficking, crime and trafficking in people are always going hand-in-hand; therefore, UN programmes, governments and all of the international community should unite with each other for fighting drug trafficking”.

The Secretary-General and Mrs Annan toured the DCA facilities. The forensic laboratory, where drugs are analyzed to determine purity and origin, was the first stop. They proceeded to inspect the storage vault where drugs are held awaiting destruction, or to be used as material evidence in pending court cases. Currently, approximately one ton of narcotics are stored in the facility.

A drug burning ceremony followed, during which 70 kilograms of heroin were destroyed in the DCA’s incinerator. Finally, to commemorate the event, Mr. and Mrs. Annan planted a tree in the garden of the Agency.

Before departing, the Secretary-General told the assembled people that the DCA was a model of the work that the UN Office on Drugs and Crime is doing throughout the world by working with governments and community groups alike to prevent trafficking and abuse of drugs. “We must be vigilant”, he said, “in order to protect our children”.

Mrs. Annan also had a very full itinerary during her time in Central Asia. Accompanied by UN ODC Resident Representative Antonella Deledda while in Uzbekistan, Mrs. Annan first visited a UNESCO-sponsored school. Kattalar va Bolalar, a local NGO that is supported by UN ODC, helped the students organize an interactive theatre performance designed to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. During her time at the school, Mrs. Annan also visited several classes and planted a tree in the front yard.

While in Tajikistan, Mrs. Annan visited a training and support centre for Afghan refugees in the capital, Dushanbe. The centre, with the support of the United National High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), provides educational assistance such as language and computer training, income generation projects, and legal assistance and trauma counselling.
I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to visit this agency. I think it proves what can be done if we cooperate across national borders and you have a vigilant government that is determined to stamp out drug trafficking.

This is a good example of the work that the UN Drug Programme is doing around the world, and I’m really happy to be able to visit it. Yesterday, the President and I discussed it, and to see it first hand and to see the kind of cooperation that exists between the UN, the Government of Tajikistan and other governments around the world, who are sharing information in order to ensure that we disrupt the work of these criminals, who are determined to get the drugs onto our streets.

Given the nature of the problem, it’s a huge problem, this is a small effort, and yet, if every country and every region attempted to tackle it the way we are trying to do it here, we will, together, be able to contain this scourge.

We all have to be vigilant to fight drug trafficking, to protect our children, because often people say, ”No, we don’t take it; our country is free of drugs; they only transit”.

But it doesn’t take very long for a transit country to become a consuming country. People are curious. They want to try it. They want to see what it feels like, and before you know it, there are drug addicts amongst us.

We must also remember, drugs and criminal activity – smuggling and human trafficking – go together.

So let’s join together to fight drug trafficking, as individuals, as societies, as community groups. Join the Government, join the UN Drug Programme. Let’s work together.

Let me finally thank the General [Rustam Nazarov, Director of the National Drug Control Agency] for the Agency and the way it is managed and run, also to thank my colleague [Antonella Deledda] from UN ODC, the regional Director, for the work they are doing in this region. This is an example of how we should work. Thank you very much.
FRIENDSHIP ACROSS BORDERS:

INTER-AGENCY COOPERATION AT ITS FINEST

The border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan was closed when the Taliban took power in Mazar-I-Sharif in 1997. Soon after the military campaign began in Afghanistan in 2001, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan made a request to the Government of Uzbekistan to use the Termez-Hayraton crossing for the delivery of humanitarian aid. The UN Resident Coordinator system played a key role in facilitating the relief effort.

On November 14th 2001, after the border had been closed for almost four years, the first shipment of humanitarian aid crossed the Amu Darya River from Termez. The first train to cross the “Friendship Bridge” to Hayraton followed less than one month later, on December 9th 2001. The bridge was officially opened to limited commercial transport from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan in February 2002, and the flow of humanitarian cargo and commercial goods has been increasing steadily since then.

Progress such as this does not occur without its own unique set of challenges. Nevertheless, it is a clear sign of the commitment from both countries to reestablish the links that have been severed for the past several years.

Border guards, who for years have been responsible to guarantee that nothing crossed the river, may soon be faced with the additional challenge of ensuring that nothing unwanted enters their country. As relations normalize between the two nations, the desire to resume regular trading will not be far behind. Reopening an effective and efficient border crossing point, capable of monitoring flows of goods and people, is the new challenge awaiting the men and women guarding the “Friendship Bridge”.

The Termez-Hayraton “Friendship Across Borders” initiative originated through a variety of parties interested in facilitating this transition. Primarily a professional training programme, its goal is to provide the staff of the border services with the skills necessary for their assignment. Involving UN agencies in Uzbekistan, the OSCE, TRACECA, the US and Great Britain, it is an entirely collaborative effort and a testament to renewed inter-agency cooperation in the spirit of promoting human security.

The programme consists of nine specialized training modules covering humanitarian aid, migration management, human rights and gender training and the smuggling of drugs, arms and items of cultural value. Border staff participate in workshops and presentations by staff of UN agencies, as well as by outside trainers brought in to share their specialized expertise.

1 UNICEF, UNHCR, UNJLC, OCHA, UNFPA, UNSECOORD, UNESCO, UNDP and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime
2 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
3 Transport Corridor Europe Central Asian, a European Commission project under the TACIS programme.
Recently, as part of the Friendship Across Borders initiative, representatives of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UK Customs Control presented a three-day training workshop covering drug control techniques such as vehicle profiling, personal searches, and the effective use of specialized equipment. A significant part of the training consisted of on-site practical work at the Termez–Hayraton border crossing.

The last of the nine initial modules was in the week of November 14th, exactly one year after the reopening of this border point. Additional training programmes are already being prepared to further develop the Friendship Across Borders initiative, including a possible expansion into Hayraton.

The project “Immediate assistance to Uzbekistan for the resumption of activities at the Termez - Hayraton checkpoint” is UN ODC’s response to the need of strengthening cooperation at the border to combat illicit drug traffic. The project intends to build the capacity of local law enforcement entities and provides assistance to the Government in the rehabilitation of critical border infrastructure. Having met with enthusiastic interest in the donor community, the project is expected to start by the end of the year and be coordinated with the efforts of other agencies.

The war against illicit drug trafficking is unquestionably an uphill battle. International drug cartels are well funded, well equipped and well armed. Heroin leaving Afghanistan is transported across rugged and unforgiving terrain, making detection and interception a challenging task. Organized crime networks benefit from the free movement of goods and people in an increasingly borderless world. The reality is that drug trafficking cannot be stopped without a high degree of cooperation between nations, international institutions and other involved actors.

This was the focus of two meetings held concurrently in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in October 2002. Members of the Foreign Anti-Narcotic Community of Central Asia (FANC) and the Mini-Dublin Group (MDG) came together for a conference aimed at strengthening the culture of cooperation in preventing drug trafficking and abuse. The progress made in coordinating activities in recent years is remarkable – there is a level of synergy between national drug
agencies, international bodies such as the United Nations and the EU, and the intelligence community that is without precedent. Fuelling this cooperation is the recognition that by pooling the combined resources of all concerned parties, the resulting force is much greater than the sum of its parts.

A key to effectively countering drug trafficking is access to timely and accurate information in order to chart trends and monitor patterns. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UN ODC), which organized and sponsored the conference, unveiled a new central database designed to track drug seizures, give access to targeted statistics and monitor the provision of international and bi-lateral assistance to the Central Asian countries to avoid duplication of services. All of the participants were given permanent access codes for the database.

As Roberto Arbitrio, programme coordinator for the UN ODC Regional Office for Central Asia, noted, “Having access to information and a functional way to share it with our partners is a vital step in defeating the trafficking networks. We feel that tools like this will be instrumental in further coordinating international efforts to tackle the drug trade”.

During separate sessions, both the MDG and FANC expressed concern about the persistence of drug trafficking in Tajikistan. The trend of drug smugglers becoming more aggressive – resorting to violence in many circumstances – was also discussed. However, both groups noted that the heightened cooperation between drug enforcement agencies, such as that between the Tajik Drug Control Agency (DCA) and the Russian Federal Border Service, was unquestionably contributing to improving drug seizure rates in the country. The UN ODC was thanked for its role in this and for its efforts to facilitate synergies between the FANC and the MDG. Some participants of the event remarked that “the best example of cooperation in the region was certainly with the Tajik DCA”.

Tajikistan was chosen as the location for the meetings because of its growing importance in the global narcotics trade – owing to its large shared border with Afghanistan – and the great success it has had in increasing drug seizures over the past several years. The Drug Control Agency, established and equipped with the support of the Office on Drugs and Crime, has received very positive reviews for its work, which includes conducting intelligence-led investigations to disrupt the supply of narcotics by making preemptive arrests. The DCA has also acted as a coordinating mechanism for national and international law enforcement bodies, as well as civil society groups involved in drug abuse prevention.

**FANC** is an informal and unofficial association of professionals consisting of members of designated embassies or missions who are dedicated to the suppression of illicit trafficking in narcotics and dangerous drugs. Regular meetings are held to exchange information of mutual interest regarding narcotic control, as well as law enforcement issues related to the field. Countries and organizations represented at the Dushanbe meeting were Canada, the EU (represented by the Drug Regional Office for Central Asia) France, Germany, Interpol, Italy, Norway, UK, USA and the UN ODC Regional Office for Central Asia.

The MDG is an association of officials representing countries that are active in combating illicit drug trafficking and abuse. The Dublin Group was set up as a forum for donor countries to coordinate drug-related activities and is based in Brussels. Currently, there are “Mini” Dublin Groups in countries around the world designed to be more effective at working ‘on the ground’. Countries and organizations represented at the Dushanbe meeting were the EU (represented by the Drug Regional Office for Central Asia), France, Germany, Italy, Russian Federation, Switzerland, UK, USA, UNTOP, the UN Resident Coordinator and the UN ODC Regional Office for Central Asia.
**Uzbekistan Interagency Health Fair**

The Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) hosted the Uzbekistan Interagency Health Fair on 18-19 November 2002 in Tashkent. The exhibition was aimed at enhancing the public’s knowledge of health-related programs and activities implemented by health professionals and international organizations in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity for the agencies to meet and discuss areas where future collaborative efforts would be viable.

The 2002 Uzbekistan Interagency Health Fair was co-sponsored by the World Health Organization, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, other international organizations, local government departments, and NGOs working in the health sector. All participating agencies set up displays highlighting their health-related activities.

UN ODC presented a photo exhibit focused on the drug abuse and drug trafficking problem in the region. The exhibit also featured video spots that ODC has produced on drug prevention and HIV/AIDS, and displayed and distributed more than 600 posters and 1000 pamphlets.

**Drug Demand Reduction – Fighting the Deadly ‘Spillage’**

Trafficking routes for Afghan opium have shifted northward in the past decade with serious consequences for Central Asia. The level of available drugs has increased in the region, and heroin, the most potent and addictive of all opiates, dominates regional consumption. However, very little of the enormous profits involved in this lucrative trade stay within Central Asia. All that is left behind is a trail of addiction, disease and irreparable damage to communities and individuals.

The Central Asian countries are now cooperating to find a strong strategy for fighting this ‘spillage’ effect. The milestone Tashkent Conference on Regional Security in 2000 laid the groundwork for these efforts when delegates decided that a thorough situational assessment was needed to effectively tackle the problem. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UN ODC) was commissioned to conduct this assessment.

The results were presented at the first conference dedicated exclusively to drug demand reduction in Central Asia held in June 2002 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The estimates on drug addiction rates are cause for concern:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Estimated number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>165,000-186,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>80,000-100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>65,000-91,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Due to different reporting standards, figures for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan may be overestimated, while figures for Uzbekistan may be underestimated.

Even though the region is not as negatively affected as Russia or Iran, drug abuse in Central Asia is more prevalent than in Europe or South-east Asia on a per capita basis. Drug abuse rates in Europe range from 0.2-0.6 per cent of the population, while...
Central Asian numbers vary from 0.3-1.25 per cent. The upward trend over the past decade highlights the necessity of a rapid and comprehensive response.

The most alarming facts, however, do not show in the bare numbers. The reality is that many of those affected are young people. The age of first use continues to go down (below 20-years-old for heroin), and heroin has become the most commonly abused drug in the area. While in South-east Asia and the West heroin is an expensive luxury, it’s a cheap fix in Central Asia. Tajikistan has the lowest street price worldwide at approximately US $1 per dose – the same price as a bottle of beer.

Most heroin is taken intravenously with little care for hygienic precautions, syringes and needles are shared, and drug addicts are increasingly exposed to the deadly threat of HIV infection. Long-term drug addiction creates a schism between abuser and society that makes treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration difficult.

The Central Asian countries are now firmly committed to facing the problem of drug abuse head on. The 2002 Regional Conference on Drug Abuse in Tashkent set clear priorities for the future:

- **Prevention**
  
  Public awareness of the dangers of drug abuse is essential in prevention efforts. Players from the mass media to grass-roots organizations must work together. Vulnerable groups, such as street children, prisoners or unemployed young people, need special attention and care

- **Treatment and rehabilitation**
  
  More access to affordable treatment is needed in Central Asia. In addition to medical care, counselling can help addicts regain their equilibrium and reintegrate into society. Many drug users are afraid of seeking help because they fear that the police will be informed. Therefore, anonymous treatment options encourage people to seek professional help.

- **Reduction of Negative Consequences**
  
  Drug users need help in avoiding the most immediate threats from drug abuse: HIV and hepatitis infection, criminal activities and domestic violence. Needle and syringe exchange programmes, awareness-rising campaigns and counselling help prevent these crises and reduce the social costs.

- **Data collection**
  
  The fight against drug addiction can only be successful if it targets the right problems. Accordingly, monitoring of the drug abuse situation must continue through the relevant institutions.

A set of concrete actions have been taken to ensure the realization of these objectives. Currently, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime supports several regional and national projects that are helping to reduce the level of drug abuse in Central Asia. These include educational campaigns to raise awareness about the risks associated with drugs, measures to slow the growth of HIV/AIDS in the region and partnerships with mass media to improve the success of outreach efforts. (See next page)
The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UN ODC) has been promoting understanding of drug abuse issues through an ongoing project, “Training of Central Asian mass media practitioners and raising public awareness on drug related issues”. To date, 150 journalists and 30 NGO representatives have received training in advocacy and outreach techniques through this initiative.

Taking into account that negative attitudes towards drug addiction exist in Central Asian countries, a series of events were undertaken with the aim of raising public awareness. Some of these initiatives included theatre performances, a music contest, photo and poster exhibitions, several roundtables for journalists, TV and radio programmes broadcast through national TV and radio channels, and sporting events.

Working closely with NGOs active in the field of drug abuse prevention has brought many concrete results. During a study tour for NGOs in Vienna that was facilitated by UN ODC, a network was created among organizations working with youth in Uzbekistan that will help to coordinate their activities. Two of the best NGO projects in the field of drug abuse prevention and raising public awareness were financially supported through the Drug Abuse Prevention Centre (DAPC) grant scheme.

Many educational campaigns concerning drug prevention have been initiated or supported through this project. Posters and brochures targeting school children of various ages have been published and disseminated among young people in Uzbekistan. Similarly, a CD with the best songs from a contest among young composers in Kazakhstan has been circulated among schools and universities. Billboards with strong anti-drug messages have been printed and placed in different regions of Kazakhstan.

The UN ODC plans to continue working closely with governmental and non-governmental organizations, other UN and international agencies and mass media in the field of drug abuse prevention. Any future endeavours will incorporate feedback from the regional seminar for mass media and NGO representatives held in October 2002 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.
**WHAT IS A PRECURSOR?**
**(AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE?)**

*Precursor: a substance, cell or cellular component from which another substance, cell or cellular component is formed*

When people talk about heroin, amphetamines or cocaine, images of refined white powder or little tablets come to mind. Yet most narcotics are derived from natural sources like the poppy or coca plant. Transforming plant products like opium into a more lethal form, such as heroin, requires the introduction of a substance that will change the chemical composition of the opium. The chemical substance needed to convert the raw material into a finished product is known as a ‘precursor’.

The problem faced by drug control professionals is that they cannot simply ban the movement of precursors, as they do with illegal drugs like heroin or cocaine. The reason for this is that many common precursors, such as *acetic anhydride*, have legitimate uses in the textile and pharmaceutical industries. The precursors that are used in the production of heroin, for instance, are the same that allow us to manufacture headache medication such as aspirin.

While this means that the production and transport of precursors cannot be stopped, they must be monitored to ensure that they are being used for their intended purposes and not diverted to the illegal drug trade. Controlling precursors means controlling drug trafficking; without precursors, narcotics such as heroin, cocaine and amphetamines cannot be produced.

The Regional Office for Central Asia of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UN ODC) proactively works with governments and other institutions to supervise the movement of precursors. While regulations on the production, import and export of these substances exist, more stringent controls on their transport are necessary. Precursors are often transited through multiple countries, providing opportunity for the diversion of sufficient amounts to be used for illicit purposes.

In response, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has helped launch three initiatives since 1999: ‘Operation Purple’, ‘Operation Topaz’ and ‘Project Prism Task Force’. Each focuses on the control of one precursor that is necessary to produce hard drugs. Operation Topaz, for instance, is the international community’s efforts to stem the flow of acetic anhydride, which is essential for manufacturing of heroin.

The UN ODC Regional Office for Central Asia (ROCA), under the project ‘Precursors control in Central Asia’, has been aiding countries in meeting the goals outlined under this strategy. The project’s objectives are being achieved through the improvement of legislation and regulations concerning import, export and transit of chemicals; assisting in the strengthening of chemical import/export control; and the provision of equipment, expertise and training.

The UN ODC assists in the meetings of the Operation Topaz Steering Committee, including one held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 14-15 October 2002. The discussion at that meeting focused on improving the capacity to track chemicals from production site to final recipient and the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute traffickers. The meeting was followed by roundtable consultations between the Central Asian countries, Russia, Afghanistan, UN ODC ROCA and steering committee members.

The fight against drug trafficking cannot be successful without a concerted effort to monitor the flow of precursors. The legitimate uses of these chemicals make their control that much more complicated. *Acetic anhydride*, while perhaps unknown to the average person, is as important to the heroin trade as opium. And that is a reason to care.