

Changing patterns in drug trafficking and abuse in Asia and Pacific: Towards common working mechanisms and standard operating procedures

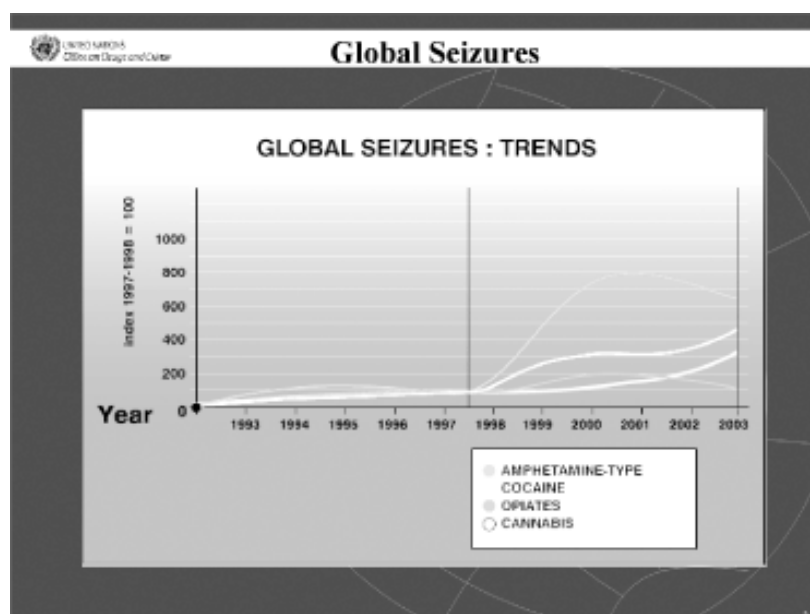
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This paper attempts to provide a brief account of the most recent developments and changes in patterns of illicit drug manufacture, trafficking and abuse particularly for East Asia and the Pacific, as well as countermeasures being taken regionally and internationally to enhance practical cooperation. In so doing, it will focus on opiates and amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), substances that pose most serious threats to the region today. By building common working mechanisms and standard operating procedures, competent national and international bodies will effectively address the new developments and changing patterns of drug abuse and trafficking.

Recent developments

Globally, ATS are the most often seized substances after cannabis. Especially since late 1990s ATS, abuse has shown most rapid growth as compared, for instance, to cocaine and heroin. Among them, MDMA and its analogues (ecstasy) trafficking worldwide has increased most rapidly over the last decade. Such a development also requires further reflection in formulating treatment and rehabilitation programmes.



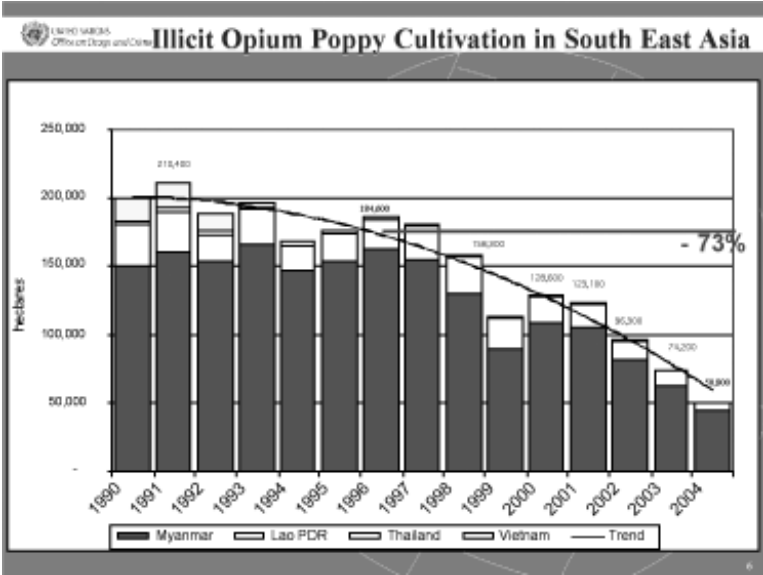


In East Asia and the Pacific, methamphetamine abuse is on the increase. According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific through 2003 and 2004 regional questionnaires, most of the countries in East Asia and Oceania that responded have reported increases in the abuse of methamphetamine. Heroin was also reported to have increased in most of those countries.

To examine the latest development, this paper first examines the latest situation on illicit opium poppy cultivation and opium production, as well as clandestine heroin manufacture.

Illicit production and trafficking of opium and heroin

The so-called “Golden Triangle”, covering the main part of Shan State of Myanmar, the northern areas of Thailand and the western part of Lao PDR, has been the main source of illicit opium production for several decades. Clandestine heroin manufacture is concentrated in the area.



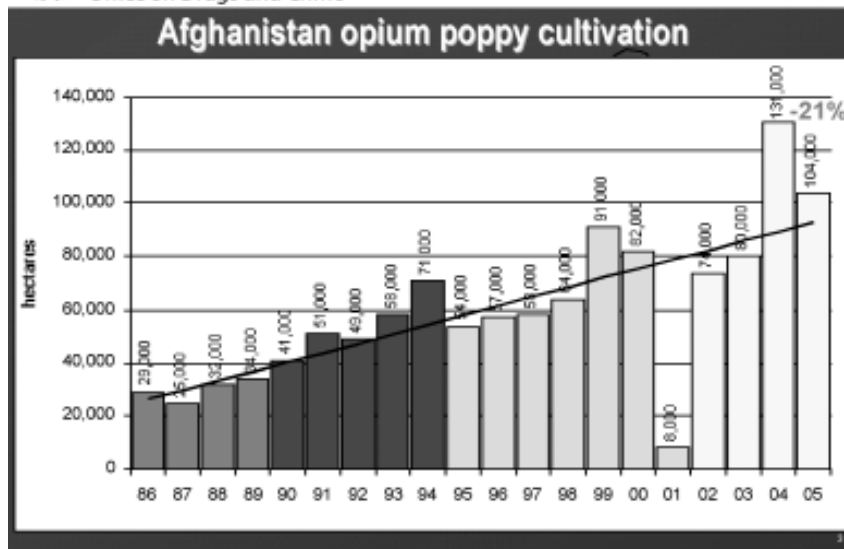
With continuing efforts of sustainable alternative development and eradication, South East Asia has experienced a steady decline in illicit opium poppy cultivation. While Myanmar and Lao PDR have been the second and third largest sources of illicit opium production in the world after Afghanistan (though far behind in terms of the actual area and production), there has been a major reduction in illicit opium poppy cultivation in this region, unprecedented and far-reaching. During the past decade, there was nearly a 3/4 decline in the area of opium poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle.

In Myanmar, the total area under illicit opium poppy cultivation in 2005 was estimated at 32,800 hectares with the production of 312 tonnes. This represented a decline of 80% since 1996, the peak year of opium poppy cultivation in the country, and a reduction of 26% as compared to 2004 (UNODC, November 2005). As a comparison, the illicit opium production in Afghanistan in 2005 stood at 4,100 tonnes, 13 times more than that of Myanmar. In Lao PDR, the area under illicit opium poppy cultivation also decreased drastically from 26,800 hectares in 1998, the peak year, to approximately 1,800 hectares at the beginning of 2005 with a production of 14 tonnes, representing a 73% decline in the area, and a 73% drop since 2004 (UNODC, June 2005).

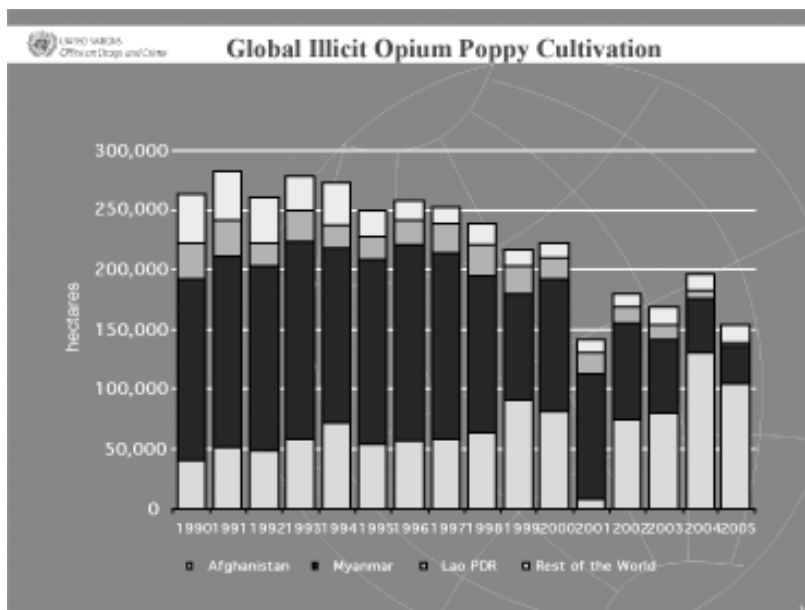
When one examines the situation of the farmers growing opium poppy in the Golden Triangle, the average annual income of a poppy growing family is much lower than that of a non poppy growing family. In Myanmar, opium producing households continue to earn 20% less than those households that do not produce opium. The average annual income in non opium producing household in 2005 was US\$364, with per capita income of US\$73, while that of the opium producing household was US\$292, of which US\$152, or 52%, was from opium sale, with per capita income of US\$58 (UNODC, November 2005). In Lao PDR, the average annual cash income of households not cultivating opium poppy was US\$231 in 2005, while that of opium poppy growing households was US\$139. It is a clear reflection of the marginal economic circumstances in which the opium poppy growing families live. This makes them very vulnerable to food shortages, since most of the opium or the opium cash provided serves to overcome chronic food deficits.

To eliminate illicit opium production in the Golden Triangle, further efforts are required to enable the majority of the families to have access to sustainable alternative livelihood programmes. To make reduction in opium poppy cultivation sustainable, farmers must be given alternative means of income. With the loss of opium income, those poor farmers and their families not only lose their coping mechanism to deal with endemic poverty and a chronic food shortage, they are vulnerable to exploitation and misery.

The international community cannot afford to eradicate illicit opium poppy cultivation at the expense of eradicating communities and displacing families. Assistance must also be structured with assistance agencies of international, governmental and non-governmental bodies, knowing who is doing what, how, where, and when. It is essential that the international community supports sustainable alternative development initiatives, with UNODC serving as a hub in so doing.



In contrast, while South East Asia has experienced a reduction in illicit opium poppy cultivation, annual opium production in Afghanistan has jumped after the opium ban in 2001. Opium poppy cultivation has increased in Afghanistan from 80,000 hectares in 2003 to 131,000 hectares in 2004 and the total production has increased from 3,600 tonnes to 4,200 tonnes. A more recent survey shows that the area of poppy cultivation has decreased by 21%, to 104,000 hectares in 2005 (UNODC, November 2005). Production of Afghan opium in 2005, however, stood at 4,100 tonnes, only slightly less compared with 2004. In 2005, favourable climatic conditions also led to increased agricultural yields, from 32kg/hectare in 2004 to 39kg/hectare in 2005. As a result, Afghanistan remains the largest supplier of illicit opium to the world, accounting for 87% of the world supplies.



The total farm-gate income from opium production in Afghanistan is much higher. Per capita income from opium is US\$260 as compared to US\$207 of GDP per capita. When alternative development is still missing in many parts of the country, it is a major challenge to stop farmers from cultivating opium poppy. While illicit opium production in the Golden Triangle is declining, there is a concern about possible trafficking in Afghan heroin to East Asia in addition to Europe and the rest of the world. Though small in quantity and limited in number, the seizures of Afghan heroin effected by the law enforcement authorities of China in 2005 indicated that such attempts have already begun.

Chemical control

To address the issue of illicit opium and heroin production, it is also necessary to address precursor chemical issues. It is important to note that, to make heroin, traffickers must have, in addition to opium, some chemicals to convert the morphine contained in opium into heroin. In particular, they must acquire a critical chemical, acetic anhydride, which is also widely used in industry for various legitimate purposes. Such chemicals are controlled under the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988. Article 12 of the 1988 Convention provides for control measures for precursor chemicals. While the measures applicable to international trade, though general, are mandatory, those applicable to manufacture and domestic distribution are voluntary; it is the discretion of Governments to adopt specific controls. Since controls provided for under the Convention for such substances are general in nature, as compared with those applied to narcotic drugs and to psychotropic substances controlled respectively under the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, as amended by the 1972 Protocol, and the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, Governments have, especially since the beginning of the 1990s, collectively taken measures in implementing the relevant treaty provisions, often with the assistance of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). An independent treaty body created by the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, INCB is charged with monitoring the implementation by Governments of the provisions of the international drug control Conventions. In exercising its functions under the 1988 Convention, the Board launched a number of international operations, Operation Purple, Operation Topaz, and Project Prism, to prevent diversion of precursor chemicals from licit channels into illicit traffic. In particular, initially specific measures were necessary to prevent diversion of controlled chemicals from licit international trade into illicit traffic. To that end, three international operations were launched. The first international operation of this kind was Operation Purple, launched in 1999, which aimed at preventing diversion of potassium permanganate, an



important chemical in illicit cocaine manufacture. Subsequently, Operation Topaz, for acetic anhydride in heroin manufacture, was launched in 2001, and Project Prism in 2002 for precursors of amphetamine-type stimulants.

One of the three ongoing international operations, Operation Topaz, launched by INCB with concerned countries, aimed at preventing diversion of acetic anhydride from licit international trade and from domestic distribution channels, and at “backtracking” law enforcement operations to find the sources of the chemical seized. At the end of 2005, Operation Topaz was merged with another international operation launched earlier, Operation Purple, which aimed at preventing diversion of, potassium permanganate, an important chemical in illicit cocaine manufacture. The merged operation is now referred to as Project Cohesion. Relevant information exchange between different authorities is essential in tracking licit shipments of the chemical from the manufacturing countries through various transshipment points to the final destinations. In addition, as acetic anhydride is often smuggled into the final destinations where illicit heroin manufacture takes place, it is also essential to “track back” those substances from the point of seizure or interceptions to the original sources where it was originally diverted from licit channels in order to prevent traffickers from turning to the same sources. As very often investigations stop when clandestine laboratories have been dismantled, without further tracking back chemicals seized beyond national boundaries, Operation Topaz particularly had an emphasis on such backtracking law enforcement operations.

Only when both reduction in opium poppy cultivation and prevention of diversion of necessary chemicals needed in clandestine heroin manufacture are successful, could effects on opiates trafficking be meaningful. In those respects, the current different situations in the Golden Triangle and in Afghanistan pose different types of issues to be addressed, as referred to earlier.

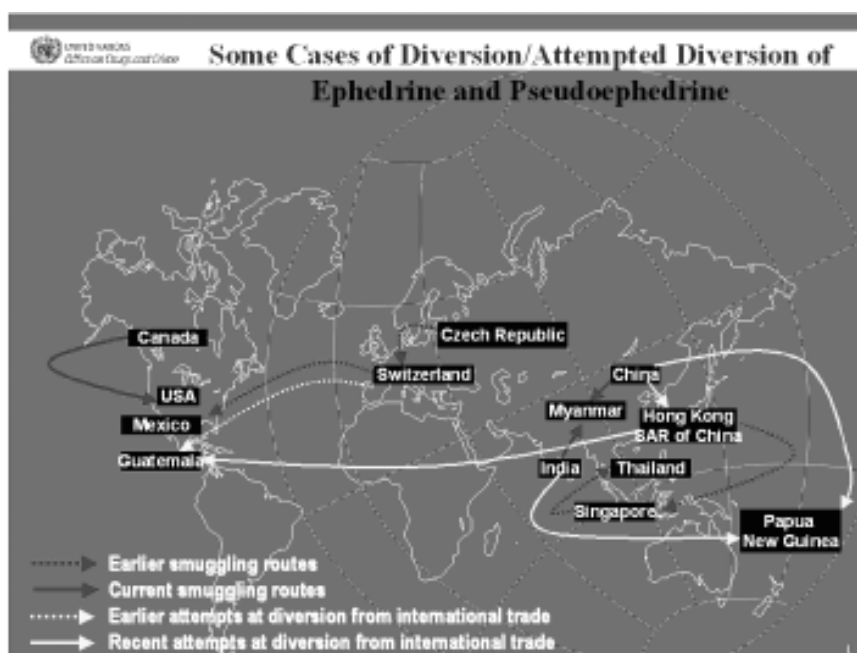
Amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS)

This section examines the latest developments and changing patterns in the illicit manufacture of, and trafficking in, amphetamine-type stimulants, particularly in South East Asia. As a result of concerted law enforcement actions in those countries, there are indications that traffickers are being forced to relocate their clandestine laboratory sites.

To make ATS, traffickers must obtain “precursors”, of which such chemicals are controlled under

the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, or starting materials, and other chemicals, which are diverted from licit channels and subsequently often smuggled to the final destinations. Those cases were effectively uncovered because of regulatory and law enforcement actions of the countries and regions shown in the map below. For ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, precursors for methamphetamine, for which large scale international diversions were first detected, we have seen the traffickers' attempt to obtain the substances by different methods.

Once traffickers could no longer use one route they quickly targeted other countries in different regions as shown on the map, with cross-border smuggling then taking place. The point is that, while the clandestine manufacture of methamphetamine, or ecstasy may be regionalised, diversions of the required precursors can take place from any country around the world. Another international operation launched by INCB, known as Project Prism, targets the major ATS precursors.



There have been recent developments in Asia and the Pacific; patterns of illicit ATS manufacture and trafficking are changing. While methamphetamine continues to be illicitly manufactured in China and Myanmar, the law enforcement authorities of the Philippines have dismantled in recent years a large number of laboratories in the country. A total of 11 clandestine laboratories were dismantled in the country in each of the years 2003 and 2004, while previously only a few were uncovered. In 2005, a similar trend continued. In a joint operation between China and Malaysia in



April 2004, a large clandestine methamphetamine laboratory was dismantled outside Kuala Lumpur. Another large clandestine methamphetamine laboratory was seized in Fiji in June 2004. The laboratory was reportedly operated by an Asian crime syndicate which was illicitly manufacturing the drug for the overseas market. In June 2005, the Indonesian authorities effectively uncovered a large clandestine laboratory making MDMA (ecstasy) outside Jakarta. In November 2005, as a result of joint investigations of law enforcement authorities of several countries, a large clandestine laboratory, making both methamphetamine and MDMA, was dismantled outside Jakarta. Ketamine, diverted from licit sources elsewhere, was also found at the laboratory site. While not yet under international control, many countries in Asia have reported abuse of ketamine in recent years. Original sources of the precursors are yet to be determined.

As noted above, as a result of tightened law enforcement actions, traffickers appear to have been forced to relocate their clandestine lab sites. This implies that trafficking routes, and their methods, involving both the final productions and their precursors may be diversified.

Psychotropic substances and cyber trafficking




One also recalls that it is not only those drugs clandestinely manufactured but also pharmaceutical preparations, particularly psychotropic substances, are diverted from licit channel into illicit traffic and abused. The methods of diversion now involve cyber trafficking.

There is an increase in cyber trafficking of pharmaceutical products containing narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. In some recently seized Internet pharmacies in one country, nearly 90% of the orders were for internationally controlled substances, including hydrocodone, diazepam and alprazolam. They are substances for which increasing number of drug abuse emergency room admissions are reported. Psychotropic substances offered for sale through the Internet have been also shipped from Asian countries to Europe and the United States. For instance, a number of Governments in the region reported such trafficking, having intercepted significant quantities in mail centres, citing benzodiazepines as the substances most frequently seized.

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Diversion from Illicit Channels into Illicit Trafficking

Increasingly important source of illicit supply

<p>⌘ Stimulants: (1971 Convention)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - amfepramone - methylphenidate - phentermine - pemoline 	
<p>⌘ Sedatives: (1971 Convention)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - chlordiazepoxide - diazepam - flunitrazepam - nitrazepam - temazepam - other benzodiazepines 	
<p>⌘ Analgesics:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - buprenorphine (1971 Convention) - codeine (1961 Convention) - hydrocodone (1961 Convention) - oxycodone (1961 Convention) 	

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Maritime drug law enforcement cooperation

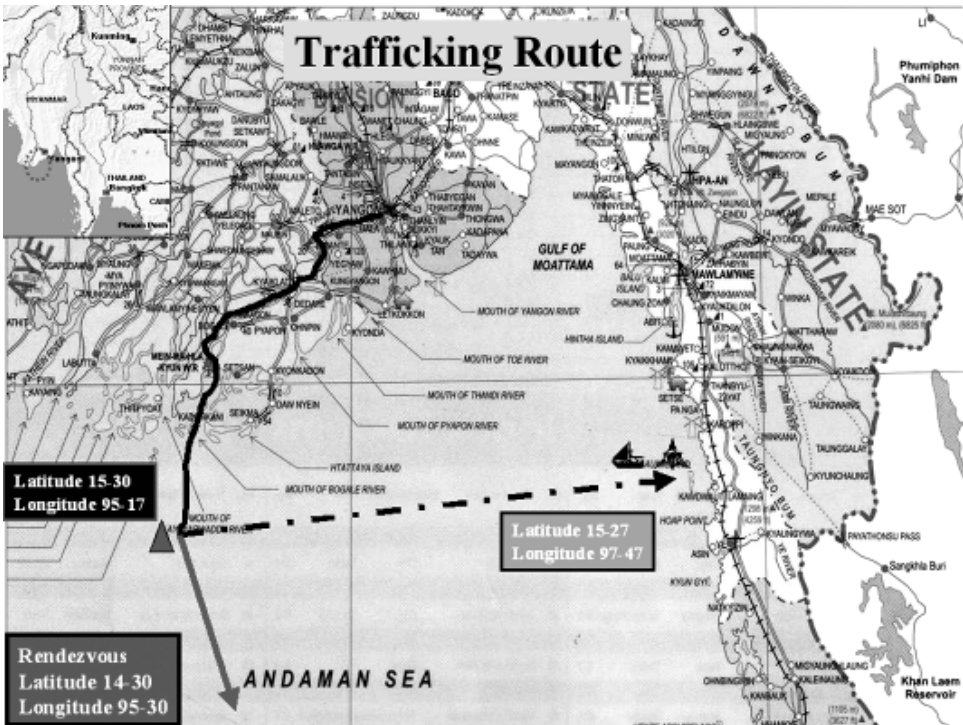
A further development is increasing drug trafficking by sea, requiring further networking among different types of authorities. It is evident that they are difficult and require highly technical coordination. In addition, as in the case of any drug law enforcement activities, information and intelligence exchange, and mechanisms and procedures to that end, are essential.

As, for instance, customs authorities will not be able to inspect every single cargo and should, therefore, conduct intelligence-driven investigations, the same applies to maritime law enforcement operations. Relevant drug law enforcement and, for that matter, also regulatory, authorities must be able to share relevant information and intelligence with maritime law enforcement authorities. Likewise, any findings of the maritime authorities should be fed back to the drug control authorities in order to track back the seizures, or otherwise interceptions, to the original sources to find the traffickers and to prevent them from using the same sources.

As an example, a major drug case that involves an international drug syndicate was uncovered in July 2004 in collaboration between the Myanmar and the Thai authorities. Altogether 847 blocs of heroin weighing nearly 600 kg were seized in the southern part of Myanmar from a fishing trawler.



The boat departed Yangon seaport in May, carrying the drugs concealed in ice containers, but there was a mutiny on board over an argument about salary increment of the crew, who knew the boat was carrying contraband goods which they thought were gold bars or gem stones. They killed the captain and two others who were trafficking the drug. The crew abandoned the rendezvous, changed course and discovered that the ice containers held drugs. Altogether 35 suspects were arrested in Myanmar and an international investigation has been launched with the authorities of Thailand, the United States and the Hong Kong SAR to uncover international connections.



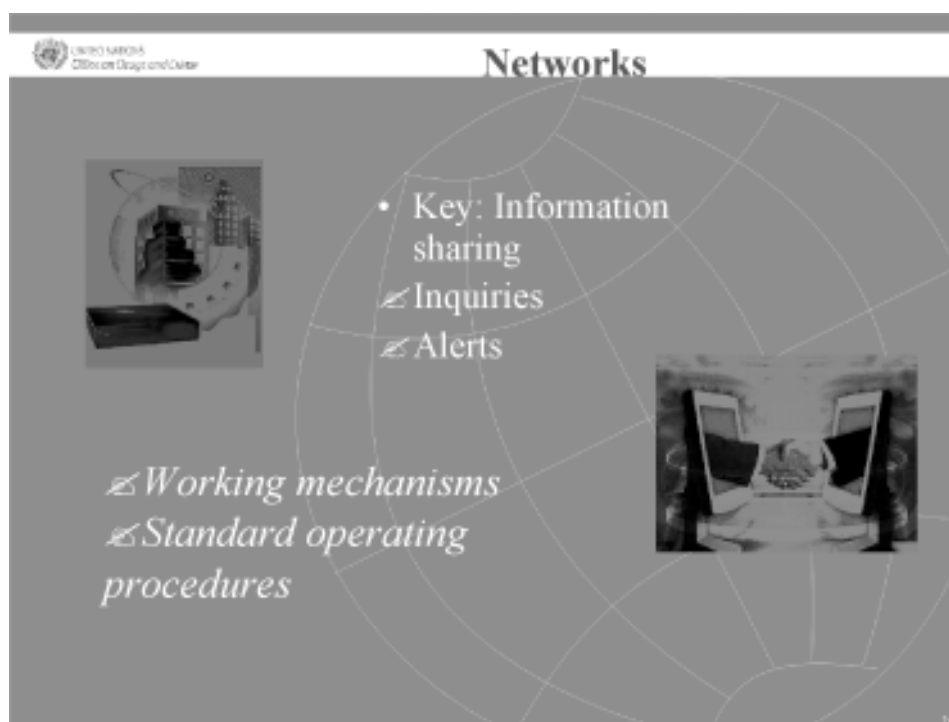
Map courtesy of CCDAC, Myanmar

The relocations of clandestine laboratory sites making ATS, as described earlier, suggest that maritime trafficking is increasingly used involving both precursors and the final products. Operational information exchange between different competent authorities beyond boundaries is becoming increasingly essential.

Information exchange mechanisms

Those successful cases resulted from real time information exchange between different authorities of a country, and also between the countries concerned. Networking is essential for real time information exchange for both law enforcement and regulatory authorities within, and between,

Governments, and with competent international bodies. All those issues briefly highlighted above are inter-related. Relevant information exchange beyond each other's own jurisdiction is imperative. This includes information exchange between supply reduction efforts and demand reduction efforts.



As patterns of illicit drug manufacture and trafficking change, abuse follows. Information exchange beyond boundaries, particularly on new developments, becomes increasingly essential not only between countries among the same types of authorities, e.g., police to police, or customs to customs, but also between different authorities of different countries, e.g., police and prosecution, or prosecution and coast guards. The authorities that need to be associated include, for instance, drug control, law enforcement, maritime, laboratories, correctional, prosecution, and judiciary.

UNODC has been focusing, and will continue to focus, on further establishing such necessary networks for information exchange. The key to success in each of the areas briefly described in the present paper is the real time information sharing, by sending and responding to, for instance, inquiries and alerts. To that end, it is essential to establish necessary working mechanisms and standard operating procedures between competent national authorities and also with competent regional and international bodies. UNODC continues to make every effort to assist Governments in so doing.



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