

Malaysia, Thailand vow to combat drug trafficking

JOHOR BARU, June 15. — Malaysia and Thailand will strengthen co-operation in combating trans-boundary drug trafficking with special attention placed on two southern provinces in Thailand — Satun and Narathiwat — known as the “distribution hub”. The understanding was reached during the 25th Malaysia-Thailand bilateral narcotics enforcement meeting held recently. The narcotics department director-general said both countries were sharing intelligence on cross-border drugs trade and helping each other to pin down traffickers. “...We need to step up joint enforcement as the amount of ganja seized this year has already exceeded the total seizure of last year.” — **The Star/ANN**

Alert over narcotics smuggling

FROM OUR
CORRESPONDENT

Drug Traffickers
G-9 1979
Afghan ban on poppy may lead
to spurt in region's illegal trade

Silchar, April 16: The Narcotics Control Bureau has warned of a spurt in cross-border smuggling of heroin and other synthetic drugs from Myanmar to the Northeast following a ban by Afghan authorities on cultivation, processing and trafficking of opiates in the war-ravaged country.

Officials in the bureau said the ban, imposed on January 16, has put the focus back on Myanmar's druglords for the supply of contraband to the western world where most of the drugs are used. Sources said the bureau has put its stations in the North-

east along the porous Indo-Myanmar border on alert in view of a possible spurt in the passage of consignments of narcotics. An authoritative source in the bureau said the Assam Rifles, which patrols the Indo-Myanmar border, has also been asked to step up vigil against the narcotics smugglers.

A senior official of the bureau in Shillong said the crack-down on poppy farming in Afghanistan has come as a shot in the arm for the druglords in

Myanmar, which, in spite of the periodic defoliation by the military junta, still boasts about 2,90,000 acres of poppy fields.

Myanmar's drug cartel is mainly controlled by formidable gangs of narco-terrorists like the United Wa State Army, Mon Tai Revolutionary Army led by the legendary Khun Sa — a 69-year-old half-Chinese, half-Shan drug baron — and the Eastern Shan State Army.

Authorities said Myanmar's narcotics cartels active in the

Shan, Kachin and Chin states are now all set to reap a record 25,000 tonnes of opium crop to enhance the heroin output in a bid to capture the global drug market.

The narcotics bureau has identified more than 10 corridors in Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur through which heroin and other addictive drugs are ferried to exit points in the country to reach their overseas destinations. It has also been pointed out that there is Myanmar-bound traffic from the Northeast comprising acetic anhydride and ephedrine hydrochloride, the essential chemicals used for the manufacture of heroin and "Ecstasy".

Feeding a habit

FROM THE nondescript colonies of Ghaziabad and Faridabad, they fan out to every nook and corner of the Capital through an intricate network of peddlers, students, autorickshaw drivers and local goons. Their customers range from the ragpicker next door to international drug couriers. And with a drop in the supply of Afghan heroin, the market is ripe for them.

This fast-changing profile of the Indian heroin producer has the police worried as Delhi is not only being used as a transit place, but is also emerging as a big consumption centre for domestically produced heroin.

The city now attracts heroin producers from the neighbouring States of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. In the recent past, a large number of illicit heroin production plants have mushroomed in Bhiwani Mandi and Jhalawar in Rajasthan; and Bareilly, Badayun, Shahjahanpur and Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh. Besides, consignments also come in from Mandasaur in Madhya Pradesh, as revealed with the

Crime Prevention Cell of the Delhi Police arrested 17 persons. In February, a key manufacturer and supplier of heroin, Berum, was arrested from Jhalawar in Rajasthan. A kingpin of sorts, Berum has been active in this trade for the past four years. At his instance, officials next door to international drug couriers. And with a drop in the supply of Afghan heroin, the market is ripe for them.

Another big catch later that month was Balu Seth operating from Bhiwani Mandi. Active for over five years now, Balu Seth has allegedly accumulated over 350 bighas of land in Rajasthan and an orchard elsewhere. Like on earlier occasions, this time again, sources said, he managed to get away due to lack of evidence. With the recent amendment to the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, which grades the duration of punishment to the quantity of drug seized, traffickers now prefer to deal in smaller amounts.

As mentioned, dealers no longer operate from within the city, but ensure a regular supply through their hubs on the city's outskirts. For instance, a

Illicit heroin production units have mushroomed in nearby Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh to serve Delhi, says Devesh K. Pandey.

notorious drug dealer, Bishan Singh Natia, is believed to be hiding in Ghaziabad after jumping parole in 1999. He is alleged to be the main supplier to peddlers of a denotified tribe in northeast and northwest Delhi.

At times, carriers bring the drug from distant places and on reaching the far-flung colonies of Delhi, contact their local clients over mobile phones and fix a rendezvous for transaction. Some, like the carriers from Rajasthan, prefer to transact only at eateries and such joints on highways.

However, not much of the fine quality white heroin produced in some of the more sophisticated units in Uttar Pradesh gets to stay in the Capital. As the Deputy Commissioner of Police, D.L. Kashyap, elaborates: "These consignments are diverted to different cities in South India concealed in goods trucks, to be further smuggled out to European countries via Sri Lanka."

The sharp rise in domestically produced heroin is evident from the sudden increase in the number of seizures and arrests. In the past three months, the Narcotics and

ILL NOT very long ago, Afghanistan used to be the favourite whipping boy of those fighting the drug trade in India. Reams of documents stacked away in official bureaus narrate the story of India being a transit country for Afghan heroin, and to a lesser extent for Myanmar and Thai heroin.

A lot has, however, changed over the years. Thailand has implemented a successful alternative development plan and replaced the illegal farming of poppy with orchids. This has significantly brought down the quantity of heroin being smuggled in from South-East Asia to less than one per cent of the total seizures effected in the past couple of years.

While there are doubts about whether heroin production has indeed come down in Afghanistan, its flow into India has reduced to a trickle. Figures with the Narcotics Control Bureau show that Afghan heroin constituted 64 per cent of the 1,250 kg of the drug seized in 1996-97. In 2000, this went down to 35 per cent and in the last financial year to 21 per cent.

The brief ban on poppy cultivation by the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, a couple of years ago, the fall of the Taliban regime following the American action post-September 11 and the decision of the Hamid Karzai-led Interim Administration not to let poppy cultivation flourish in that country are all being cited as reasons for this drop. Officials say the recent deployment of troops along the India-Pakistan border could have also brought down the smuggling of heroin into the country.

At a different level, there is still disagreement across the globe over whether Afghans have stopped growing poppy. In a recent meeting of the International Narcotics Control Board in Vienna, it was noted that seizures of Afghan heroin were still being made in Tajikistan, and other Central Asian states. The Afghan

drug-lords may have started using different routes, it is being suggested. These theories explain the drop in the flow of Afghan heroin into India. However, the total amount of heroin seized has not come down in the

country. The annual figure has been oscillating between 800 and 1,200 kg for the past six financial years. The disturbing fact is that a significant portion of these seizures is of domestically produced heroin.

As the political situation changed in Afghanistan after September 11, problems cropped up for drug suppliers. According to investigating officers in New Delhi, there was also the problem of reaching the opium factories in Pakistan given the presence of U.S. troops. In all, the flow of Afghan heroin into the illegal drug market grew inconsistent. The shortfall is said to have created a mismatch between demand and supply. At this point, officials say, a search for alternative sources began within India.

In the first week of January, the NCB's Delhi unit made a seizure that revealed to numerous intelligence inputs of Indian producers



Man alias Paheela, and Arthur, an Indian buyer, who are under Narcotics Control.

Drugs on our



Delhi has more than its share of drug addicts.

Photo: Anu Pushkarna

Nigerian carrier. The NCB raided Amaechi's South Delhi hideout and recovered some heroin from him. Later, Rs. 9 lakhs allegedly made from the deal with Amaechi were also recovered from Yasin.

Around the same time, the NCB recovered 5 kg of heroin from a Mumbai five-star hotel. Here too, the heroin was indigenously made and the carrier Mokasa, a Kenyan woman of Indian origin, had apparently obtained it from a local supplier during her stay at a Karol Bagh hotel in Delhi. She was to deliver this consignment to another Kenyan, Larry Obwell, in Mumbai. The colour of heroin was once again white.

These two cases set the drug enforcement agencies across the country thinking. Rarely had domestically-produced heroin been white in colour. With a limited resource base and more importantly, a not very affluent consumer profile,

As supply from Afghanistan has come down, indigenous production of heroin appears to have gone up. This also raises doubts about diversion of the legal poppy crop. Pranab Dhal Samanta reports.

trying to reach out to the international market. Yasin, alias "Paheela", who had spent most of his life as a milk supplier in Bareilly, was picked up with 7 kg of indigenously-made white heroin from near Delhi's Nehru Park. On questioning, he revealed that he had recently sold 3 kg of heroin to Arthur Frank Amaechi, a

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India's own golden triangle

FOR YEARS now, India has been one of 11 countries where opium is grown legally. And in all these years, the commercial logic on which this activity was justified has remained much the same. Often, one gets to hear rumblings in official circles that it is only a "small mafia" that benefits from the cultivation, yet rarely has there been any organised rethink on the purpose of continuing this activity.

On an average, as per the United Nations Drug Control Programme, opium is cultivated on about 25,000 hectares across specified areas in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. The total yield is estimated to be between 900 and 1,000 metric tonnes annually. Of this, more than 70 per cent is exported in its raw form while the rest is further processed for consumption of the domestic pharmaceutical industry.

Morphine, thebaine, noscapine, papaverine, and natural codeine are among the important alkaloids of opium with commercial value. Since India exports most of its opium in the raw form, the processing is done by the importing country. The processing for domestic consumption is done at Gazipur (Uttar Pradesh) and Neemuch (Madhya Pradesh).

The bulk of the exports is to the United States. Of the 570 metric tonnes of opium exported in 2000-01, about 400 tonnes went to the U.S. In 1999-2000, 495 of the total export of about 650 tonnes were U.S.-bound and the year before that 420 of the 528 tonnes exported headed that way.

Most of the U.S.-bound consignments, according to sources, bear the address of either Noramco or Mallinckrodt, two U.S. pharmaceutical giants. Officials say these two companies are the biggest buyers of raw Indian opium. On obtaining the opium, they process it in their laboratories and use the alkaloids for preparing medicines that are exported in a finished form to different parts of the world including India.

From purely the angle of revenue earned, these 500-600 tonnes of opium bring Rs. 200 crores to Rs. 300 crores annually. Last financial year, this amount was about Rs. 283 crores. This has often proved to be a major justifying factor for continuing opium cultivation. However, what gets ignored is that it takes almost a similar amount to keep the whole production and enforcement system afloat.

If one were to juxtapose these figures with the amount spent on importing opium-based medicines, the picture would be very different. For instance, one of the most sought after opium alkaloids by the Drug

main resorts being that the farming is done on individual holdings less than 0.2 hectares each, making it impossible for physical monitoring. Though authorities do specify a minimum qualifying yield for farmers in different States, the crop is so sensitive to climatic changes that variations in yield can be easily justified. As the Narcotics Commissioner, H.V. Chaudhan, explains: "We have raised the minimum qualifying yield over the years, but one can never be sure that the farmer has not stacked some opium away. Now, we will be issuing smart cards to farmers which should make it easier for us to keep track of their past yields."

It is the conversion of opium into heroin that has rung the alarm bells. Routine intelligence inputs constantly point to local dealers attempting to strike deals with international drug operators through couriers.

Though officials at the helm consider it premature to discuss the issue, investigators are worried. Right now, the growing business of domestic heroin production lacks a brand. For instance, Afghan heroin is known across the drug world through brands such as 555, 777 and Shah Alam Factories. These are well-known codes and the way these seals are embossed as well as arranged on the packets sends a particular message.

The Indian producer probably lacks such an organised link-up with the international drug mafia. Even the best quality Indian heroin is today found in loose plastic packets and hurriedly made pouches. "But acquiring all this sophistication is only a matter of time. Producers are aware that there is a Western market to capture and in due course, they will improvise. And if Afghan heroin gets elusive by the day, this will happen faster," says an official.

Not all agree that Afghan heroin will desert the market easily. As the NCB Director-General, M.K. Singh, says: "It is too early to conclude that heroin production in Afghanistan will stop in the days to come. To say that this will lead to surge in domestic production of heroin is also premature."

As the authorities continue to contrast the heroin problem in India with that of Afghanistan, little attention is being paid to the rapidly prospering domestic producer. After all, in the span of a few years, Yasin the milk vendor could afford to have two cars and a Toyota Qualis which he had bought days before his arrest. And when investigators asked him why he bought the Qualis, he retorted: "To supply milk!"

in often lead to areas where opium is grown legally. For instance, Yasin was supplied opium by a person in Mandasaur, Madhya Pradesh. In another case, one Chandra Prakash Rathhi was caught with 6 kg of indigenous heroin which was again traced to Mandasaur. The list is endless.

Till recently, the logic given was that opium consumption has been a traditional habit in many parts of the country, so some diversion was a "tolerable" offence. When individuals began setting up small-time units to produce heroin, officials said the quality was far too inferior and was largely meant for local consumption. This heroin or "brown sugar" then found its way into the slums of the cities, raising some concern. Yet, the emphasis remained on India's role as a transit country for Afghan heroin.

Gradually, the Indian producer seems to have graduated. Investigative agencies have found that producers now make heroin with different purity levels to target addicts ranging from the poorer strata to affluent sections of society. There are two links on the supply side that investigators have been grappling with in their efforts to crack down on indigenous producers. The first is with poppy fields and, the other, with the easy procurement of acetic anhydride. High prices of opium in the black market lure farmers to sell part of their produce to heroin producers. The Government pays the farmer between Rs. 630 and Rs. 1,200 a kg depending on his turnover. In comparison, investigators have found that farmers get anything between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 15,000 a kg in the illegal market.

Once the opium has been obtained through these channels, the producer looks for acetic anhydride which is usually got from truck drivers transporting the chemical. For instance, Yasin had a lorry driver who would bring his truck carrying the chemical to a particular eatery along the highway near Bareilly. The driver would take the vehicle to a nearby tyre shop to check the air pressure and in the meanwhile large amounts of the chemical would be taken away from the truck. The rate is anything between Rs. 1,000 and Rs. 1,200 a litre. The market price of this controlled substance is less than Rs. 200 a litre. The stuff is then transported to a makeshift unit where the opium is boiled for hours, the residue collected, and treated with various chemicals. The process can take more than 10 hours depending on the purity being sought by the producer.

Checking diversion of opium into illicit channels has proved very difficult for the authorities. One of the

domestic producers did not make much of an effort to produce fine-quality white heroin.

The process of making heroin requires that the morphine obtained from opium is treated repeatedly for hours with acetic anhydride, sodium carbonate, acetone and certain other chemicals. This is an elaborate affair and it is usually difficult for producers to get sufficient amounts of acetic anhydride, a controlled substance in the country. But in the case of Yasin, he left no stone unturned in trying to produce white heroin. "Indian heroin has usually been brown in colour and is seen as much inferior to Afghan heroin. It could never fetch much in the market and has been largely used for domestic consumption," says a senior NCB official.

In his statement to the NCB, Yasin said he had undertaken this venture because international buyers always preferred white heroin. The business was obviously lucrative as Yasin had sold 3 kg of the drug at Rs. 3 lakhs a kg. A few years ago, this was the price of Afghan heroin while Indian heroin went for anything between Rs. 80,000 and Rs. 1,50,000 a kg. Today, investigators say, international operators are ready to pay anything up to Rs. 4 lakhs for good quality white Indian heroin.

The problem of indigenous production of heroin is not new. In fact, the NCB's 2000-01 annual report had candidly observed: "The discovery of a number of heroin processing facilities and investigations into seizures in various parts of the country confirm that some of the opium diverted from the licit crop is being processed into heroin in and around opium growing areas."

The report had then stated that there was not much evidence of this heroin being smuggled abroad. Yasin's arrest belied these claims. In any case, some officials believe it is about time the spotlight shifted from Afghanistan and Pakistan to indigenous production, as this also caters to addicts across the country.

The moment one raises the question of indigenous heroin, the issue of opium being diverted to illicit channels from farms where poppy is legally cultivated immediately crops up. Spread over 25,000 hectares in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh involving over one lakh farmers, these farms are allegedly the source of opium to most heroin producers in the country.

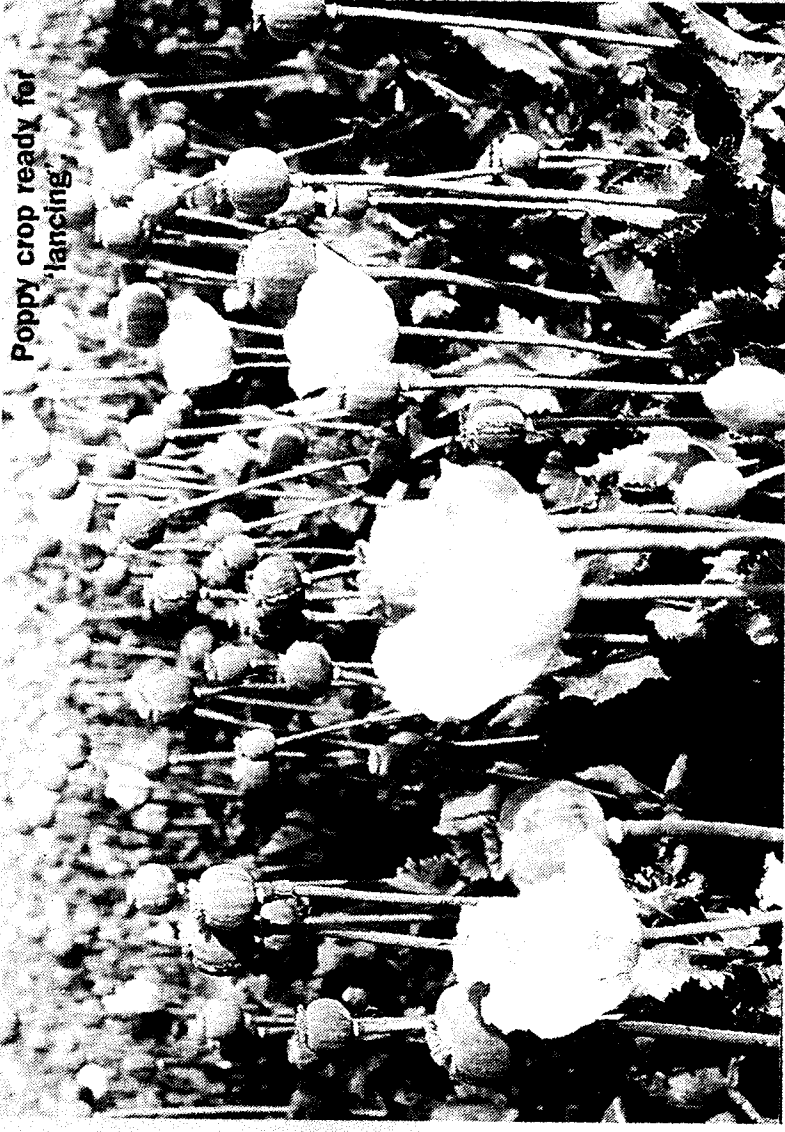
Though officials admit to this privately, there are no figures or official benchmarks to measure the amount of diversion to illicit channels. The only indicator is that investigations into most seizures of domestic hero-

Indian opium under the spotlight is the competition at the global level from other opium-producing countries. Australia, and to a lesser extent Turkey, have emerged as the strongest contenders. In recent years, an official explains, these countries have been able to provide all the alkaloids present in Indian opium without actually letting the poppy plant flower.

This method was adopted by Australian authorities to curb the diver-

Chauhan, concurs: "The lancing happens over a brief period of 20 to 25 days, making it very difficult to monitor each of the one lakh-odd farmers."

By sticking to this process, India today is the only country where collecting opium gum is legal. Till sometime ago, the one market advantage India had in using this method was the presence of thebaine — again used in pain-killers across the globe — in larger quanti-



Poppy crop ready for lancing

sion of legally grown opium into the wrong hands. Here, once the poppy plant reaches the later stages of growth, it is allowed to dry and then chopped off mechanically. The dry poppy capsules are then crushed in a machine and the residue obtained is called "concentrated poppy straw". India's principal competitors have devised methods by which morphine and other alkaloids can be extracted from this.

In comparison, the poppy plant is allowed to flower in India and the shell around the flower is cut in a particular way known as "lancing". A white fluid called "opium gum" which rapidly turns deep brown on contact with air, is collected. This is then stored and either exported or sent to the alkaloid factories at Gazipur and Neemuch.

According to officials, the chances of diversion are higher in this method as most of the lancing activity is carried out by the farmers. The Narcotics Commissioner, H.V.

Controller of India for domestic purposes is codeine. Used the world over to make pain-killers, the Indian pharmaceutical industry uses it to make cough syrups.

The projected demand for codeine by the Drug Controller has on an average been about 25 tonnes a year. The demand has consistently hovered around this figure for the past four years. Despite having some of the largest opium fields in the world, India annually imports more than 10 tonnes of codeine. This is because the opium that is left for domestic consumption only accounts for about 13-14 tonnes of codeine. Ironically, one of the two U.S. companies which imports Indian opium also sells India the extra codeine needed for domestic consumption. In fact, the revenue earned from the domestic market is nominal. In 2000-01, this was just about Rs. 83 crores.

Another aspect which has brought the commercial viability of

ties. But of late, India's competitors have developed a thebaine-rich variety of poppy. As a result, India's contribution to the total thebaine consumption in the world has come down to 16 per cent. Yet, thebaine is the only alkaloid on which depends the future of India's opium exports with authorities looking at making it the cornerstone of their marketing strategy.

While all this is happening, a school of thought has come to believe that India's export earnings are far too less for the country to risk an increase in diversion from these fields. Moreover, there is hardly any direct link between the opium extracted and the Indian pharmaceutical industry, which presently imports most of the alkaloids it needs.

As an official questions: "Are we to risk growing opium, so that two companies in the U.S. don't have to find poppy fields elsewhere?" — P.D.S.

New Delhi a transit point in heroin trafficking: U.N. report

H10-12 Drug Trafficking Cyber-crime. Such a
By Sridhar Krishnaswami

UNITED NATIONS, FEB. 27. The International Narcotics Control Board in its report for 2001 has focussed, among other issues, on cyber crime calling on nation states to regulate the web in a sensible fashion. While globalisation and new communication technologies have brought innumerable benefits to society, it has also provided opportunities "for new and traditional forms of drug related crime", it says. "The International Narcotics Control Board has decided to address the theme of globalisation and new technologies...not in a spirit of rejection but because of the danger that the beneficial effects of these phenomena on society are being undermined by individuals and criminal groups for illicit gain", the INCB argues. "For the Internet there is the real danger that its benefits might be seriously undermined by criminals for illicit gain. Governments must address the challenges that new technologies pose to drug law enforcement in an era of increasing globalisation", the chairman of the Board, Hamid Ghodse remarks.

The INCB while detailing its case on different aspects of cyber crime is calling on governments to take action with a view to preventing organised crime from continuing to exploit the technological advances as also to consider developing a United Nations Convention on

Cyber-crime. "Such a Convention would provide a global classification and definition for high tech and computer related crime and a framework for legislative harmonisation and international cooperation in the investigation and prosecution of cross border crime committed or facilitated by electronic means", the INCB argues.

Thorough and extensive in its preparation and presentation — especially as it deals with different regions of the world — the INCB has also made the point that Afghanistan clearly has a capacity to become the world's largest producer of heroin next year and has urged the international community and the United Nations Security Council to help prevent that. This could come by way of alternative crop substitution and assistance to stop the trafficking of opiates. With nearly 90 per cent of heroin from Afghanistan hitting the streets of Europe, there is the increasing danger of shifting markets to Russia, Iran and Pakistan. Officials here are making the point that although the interim government of Hamid Karzai has issued a ban on the cultivation of opium, questions are being raised on the effectiveness of the ban.

"Afghanistan is a very, very tough problem", says U.S. Ambassador, Herbert Okun, a member of the INCB. Mr. Okun who briefed mediapersons here on the

Board's report argued that even if the ban on poppy cultivation is effective in Afghanistan, the country has a three to six year supply of heroin, some of which had been unloaded since the outbreak of war last October. South Asia, according to Mr. Okun, is "very vulnerable" because it sits between the Golden Triangle of South East Asia and the Golden Crescent of South West Asia.

The region is vulnerable for two reasons: to transit and to traffickers who are trying to increase their markets. Although India has been largely successful, South Asia has reasons to be concerned, Mr. Okun remarked. The INCB has said that the southern parts of West Asia continue to supply most of the heroin smuggled into and through India and Nepal.

"New Delhi has become a major transit point for heroin trafficking; most of the heroin is smuggled into countries in Europe and North America, occasionally through Sri Lanka", the report says. Staying in the realm of trafficking the INCB points out that maritime routes leading from the coast of Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka and Maldives are used for transshipment. "Ports in Southern India are increasingly being used for smuggling drugs as evidenced by the sharp increase in the number of seizures made of consignments of narcotic drugs being smuggled by sea along routes leading from India to Sri Lanka", it says.

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