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CONTROLLING CHEMICALS: KEY TO FIGHTING DRUG TRAFFICKING

Board Calls on Governments -- Especially in EU Countries -- to Apply More Effectively International Precursor Controls

While an ever increasing number of Governments in various parts of the world are successfully preventing drug traffickers from obtaining the chemicals they need to illicitly manufacture drugs, the 1997 report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) points out that the results from other countries, especially industrialized nations, including some European Union members, look less impressive. The Board's current annual report contains serious concerns over the fact that those countries, often the key manufacturing or trading countries of chemicals drug traffickers require, are reluctant to introduce and adhere to strict control measures.

The Board, therefore, reminds Governments that the monitoring systems that they must establish under the 1988 Convention to identify suspicious transactions require sharing of information, or they will not function.

The precursors and essential chemicals used in illicit drug manufacture are controlled under the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. The INCB monitors countries' compliance with the relevant treaty provisions. In doing so, the Board assists Governments in identifying suspicious transactions and taking appropriate action.

The Board fears, in particular, that loopholes exist in some important regions such as Europe, and that they are exploited by drug traffickers.

To make drugs illicitly, traffickers must obtain certain chemicals, often called "precursors" and "essential chemicals". They therefore need to "divert" those chemicals from licit channels, often international, into illicit traffic. It is at that choke point that Governments, working with the Board, have been targeting and successfully thwarting drug traffickers' attempts.

According to the Report of the Board, many Governments worldwide have agreed on the importance of establishing and using practical working mechanisms to share and check information on shipments of controlled chemicals. More and more countries are now systematically checking the legitimacy of shipments of those chemicals. They are also sharing information on suspicious cases to prevent drug traffickers from going elsewhere to obtain the chemicals they need. Those actions

are often taken through the Board.

Those Governments more reluctant to take concerted action often cite certain concerns over the issue of information sharing on the basis of the commercial or operational sensitivity of some information. While the Board understands such fear, it says it is not sensitive information that is required to prevent diversions, and that it remains the prerogative of the Government that provides the information to decide what should be shared.

In that connection, the Board notes that *Governments of developing countries have been able to introduce controls without hindering licit trade. The Board appreciates the actions of those Governments, and urges industrialized countries that have not already done so, and in particular Member States of the European Union, to take similar, or otherwise alternative, actions that are equally effective in preventing diversion of the chemicals that drug traffickers need.*

An increasing number of Governments have taken effective steps as proposed by the Board. Such actions have stood the test of time, and have proven to be effective. It is no longer the time, the Board says, for Governments to simply say that they are able to, or unable to, accept one measure or another. All Governments must now take concrete action in precursor chemical control.

Effective Action Yields Success

Concerted actions does lead to success. As the Board points out, attempted diversions have been uncovered, and large quantities of chemicals have been seized, or shipments stopped, suspended or voluntarily canceled because of suspicious circumstances or other irregularities. Had those chemicals fallen into the hands of traffickers, they would have been sufficient to produce a large part of the world's illicitly manufactured drugs.

The Board, in its report, highlights some of the important cases where more efficient controls have prevented the diversion of precursors used in the illicit manufacture of psychotropic substances such as amphetamine, methamphetamine and amphetamine-type stimulants such as Ecstasy, and of other chemicals needed for the illicit manufacture of the narcotic drugs cocaine and heroin. It also notes new patterns of diversion, and routes uncovered for the first time, and the large quantities of chemicals involved.

Cocaine Processing

Enough of the solvents used in illicit cocaine processing were detained or seized in, or *en route* to, South America to produce some 200 to 250 tonnes of the drug for the illicit market. That quantity compares with the approximately 800 tonnes of cocaine that is produced illicitly in South America each year. In one country alone, namely the United States, 15 suspicious shipments of solvents to Latin America were stopped, enough to make more than 100 tonnes of the drug (about 500 million doses). And in early 1997 a large cocaine laboratory with an estimated annual capacity of manufacturing some 300 tonnes of cocaine hydrochloride was discovered in Colombia, dismantled, and chemicals seized.

Illicit Manufacture of Heroin

Similarly, all of the more recent cases of diversion and attempted diversion of acetic anhydride, used for the illicit conversion of morphine to heroin, have involved very large quantities. In total, Government actions have led, in 1996, to the stopping, seizing or preventing diversion of some 360 tonnes of acetic anhydride destined for use in illicit heroin manufacture. That quantity would have been sufficient to make almost 150 tonnes of heroin for the illicit market, compared with an estimated 430 tonnes to 530 tonnes that is manufactured illicitly worldwide.

Illicit Manufacture of Amphetamine and Ecstasy

Until recently, little information had been available on the diversion and trafficking of the precursors required for the illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants. That changed in 1997, when several cases of large-scale diversion, attempted diversion and seizures of P-2-P and MDP-2-P have come to the attention of the Board. Two cases of smuggling of large quantities of precursors from China to the Netherlands have been reported. One involved the seizure in the Netherlands of 3,000 liters of P-2-P, destined for the illicit manufacture of amphetamine. The second involved the seizure, again in the Netherlands, of 1,000 liters of MDP-2-P, smuggled from *Hong Kong SAR China*, destined for the illicit manufacture of Ecstasy. A further 3,000 liters of the chemical, part of the same order, were also seized by customs authorities in *Hong Kong SAR China*, pursuant to the introduction of relevant legislation.

Also in 1997, a series of cases of diversion and attempted diversion of P-2-P and MDP-2-P, involving several European countries (including Germany, Portugal, Romania, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), has been identified. In most cases, the shipments were destined to Belgium and the Netherlands. It was intended that a total of 24 tonnes of P-2-P, originating from India, would be

imported into Europe. At least 11 tonnes of the substance were imported, and presumably diverted for use in illicit drug manufacture.

Again, the quantities of precursors prevented from being diverted are significant. For example, a stopped shipment of 10 tonnes of P-2-P would have been sufficient to manufacture up to 5 tonnes of amphetamine (equivalent to up to 500 million street doses), and a prevented diversion of 5 tonnes per month of MDP-2-P would have been enough to manufacture almost 25 tonnes of Ecstasy per year (equivalent to approximately 250 million street doses).

Illicit Manufacture of Methamphetamine

Continuing successes in identifying attempted diversions of, and seizing, both ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, the two precursors most frequently used in the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine, have had a major impact in limiting the supply of those substances for illicit manufacture. As with other chemicals, the quantities involved in recently uncovered diversion attempts have been high. Cases that came to the Board's attention before 1996 related to single consignments of not more than 5 tonnes. Since that time, attempts to divert larger shipments have been reported. For example, a suspicious shipment of 10 tonnes of ephedrine that was allegedly to be shipped to Myanmar in 1997 would have been sufficient to manufacture up to 7 tonnes of methamphetamine, or some 400 million street doses of the drug. In another case, 20 tonnes of ephedrine, purportedly destined for D.P.R. of Korea, were stopped in Belgium.

Overall, as a result of actions taken by Governments in 1996, 12 cases of attempted diversions involving ephedrine were discovered, and a total of 12 tonnes of the chemical was prevented from entering into illicit channels. Additionally, seven ephedrine shipments, amounting to 4.5 tonnes, were stopped because of suspicious circumstances. The introduction of stricter controls is credited with preventing the diversion from licit channels of up to 250 tonnes of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine per year in North America alone. That quantity would have allowed traffickers to manufacture illicitly more than 160 tonnes of methamphetamine, representing some 15 billion doses.

Increasingly, professional chemists have become involved in the illicit manufacture of amphetamine and amphetamine-type stimulants, either recruited by organized traffickers or working independently. The involvement of such chemists is indicative of the continued search for new methods of synthesis requiring precursors that are not scheduled under the 1988 Convention, or are only controlled at the domestic level under voluntary measures, or for new drugs that are not currently controlled at the national or international levels.

Common Drugs and the Chemicals Required for Their Illicit Manufacture

Heroin: a narcotic analgesic derived from the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). It is made by reacting morphine, extracted from opium, with acetic anhydride. The street product is most often found as a white, off-white or light brown powder. *Acetic anhydride* is a chemical manufactured licitly throughout the world, with a variety of legitimate uses, including the manufacture of pharmaceuticals and plastics.

Cocaine: a potent stimulant. It is frequently encountered as an odourless, white, crystalline powder that is generally sniffed and absorbed through the mucous membrane of the nose. "Crack" is another form of cocaine prepared specifically for smoking. Cocaine is extracted from the coca leaf, and then purified, using solvents such as acetone and methyl ethyl ketone. *Acetone* is a common solvent used to clean, for example, paintbrushes, and in nail varnish remover. *Methyl ethyl ketone* is a solvent used in the production of, for example, adhesives and inks.

"Ice" (or "shabu"): is powdered methamphetamine hydrochloride (the most common form of the drug) converted into large crystals. It is a powerful stimulant. Abuse of ice

is particularly widespread in Asia. In North America and Europe methamphetamine is generally abused as a nasally ingested powder ("crystal" or "meth") or in tablet form ("speed"). It is manufactured illicitly using ephedrine or pseudoephedrine as starting materials. The related psychotropic substance amphetamine, widely abused in Europe, is manufactured illicitly using 1-phenyl-2-propanone (P-2-P). *Ephedrine* is derived from ephedra, a plant which grows wild in many parts of the world. It is an ingredient in many cough medicines. *Pseudoephedrine* is widely available in over-the-counter nasal decongestants. *1-Phenyl-2-propanone* is used in the pharmaceutical industry for the licit synthesis of amphetamine, methamphetamine and some of their derivatives.

Ecstasy: is the name associated with a number of illicitly manufactured drugs related to 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA), a derivative of amphetamine. Ecstasy is manufactured illicitly using one of a related series of starting materials, such as safrole, isosafrole, 3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone (MDP-2-P) and piperonal. *3,4-Methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone* is used in the manufacture of perfume components, and in the flavouring industry.