

## Summary

With 190 States parties, as at 1 November 2020, the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 enjoys near universal adherence. Article 12 of the 1988 Convention provides the basis for activities related to the control of precursors. Effective 3 November 2020, MAPA (methyl *alpha*-phenylacetoacetate) was added to Table I of the 1988 Convention, bringing the total number of substances listed in Table I to 22 (distinct from the 8 substances listed in Table II). Six of the 22 substances have been added in the last three years alone, indicating the rapid emergence of new substances, some created solely for the purpose of circumventing controls (designer precursors), in recent times. The emergence of such substances, as well as the use of various drug manufacturing methods that avoid the use of controlled precursors, continued to be major challenges faced by the international community in 2020.

The Board took several additional measures with regard to the issue of designer precursors, including updating the limited international special surveillance list of non-scheduled chemicals and the list of substances not under international control but under national control in certain countries. With regard to international trade, the Board's automated system for the prior notification of export shipments, the PEN Online system, continued to facilitate international cooperation between the 165 countries and territories registered to use the system: 90 per cent of the notifications submitted through PEN Online had been viewed and 78 per cent had been responded to, both representing an increase compared with the previous year. Given the demand for materials and equipment in the illicit manufacture of drugs, the Board, for the first time, issued guidelines to prevent and investigate cases of diversion of equipment for illicit drug manufacture, in February 2020.

PICS, developed by the Board to facilitate operational coordination in precursor-related matters, was used successfully in 2020 to identify suspected links between six seizures of acetic anhydride in 2017 and 2018 involving almost 22,000 litres of the substance, on the basis of similarities between jerry cans and labels used by traffickers, indicating the immense potential of the system.

Despite the wide adherence to the 1988 Convention, the quantity and quality of reporting required under article 12, paragraph 12, of the Convention has remained a challenge. In 2020, once again, only 71 countries submitted form D by the due date of 30 June 2020. The number had increased to 120, however, by the cut-off date of 1 November 2020.

During the reporting period, Governments continued to strengthen their legislative provisions related to precursors. Apart from extending the scope of controls over internationally controlled substances, and in some cases even non-scheduled substances, several innovative approaches to regulating designer precursors, including identifying and controlling those with no legitimate or industrial uses, were noted. In addition, Governments took steps to address the issue of the listing of precursors, as well as equipment used for illicit activities involving drugs, on business-to-business Internet platforms. The approaches taken ranged from awareness-raising initiatives involving such companies to changes in laws requiring mandatory registration for the listing of precursor chemicals.

For chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine, the total amount of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine seized, as reported by Governments on form D for 2019, fell to a mere 5.7 tons, from about 40 tons in 2018. This aggravates the trend observed by the Board in previous years whereby quantities of precursors seized fell short of the quantities of methamphetamine seized, and indicates a shift to possible alternatives for such substances. The trend of using the *Ephedra* plant for the manufacture of methamphetamine, as reported in Afghanistan, was also again seen in China.

Seizures of the traditional precursor of cocaine, potassium permanganate, remained largely stable. However, seizures of potassium manganate and sodium permanganate in the Netherlands also indicate a spread in the use of alternative cocaine precursors outside of South America.

There was a significant decline (69 per cent) noted in the total quantity of acetic anhydride seized in 2019, compared with 2018. This appears to be attributable to a decline in identified diversions involving the substance, changes in the traditional trafficking routes and, possibly, an increased reliance on alternative acetylating agents such as acetyl chloride.

With regard to precursors of fentanyl, fentanyl analogues and other synthetic opioids, apart from seizures of NPP and ANPP, which are included in Table I of the 1988 Convention, there were also seizures of 4-AP, a legitimate drug intermediate and non-scheduled precursor of ANPP, in Mexico. The introduction of controls on fentanyl-related substances as a group in China on 1 May 2019 appears to have prompted shifts to non-scheduled alternative precursors for the domestic manufacture of fentanyl in destination countries. The Board has also noted the listing of 4-AP on certain business-to-business websites, which points to the need for Governments to work closely with companies that operate such websites.

For each class of drugs, therefore, the year witnessed the emergence of non-scheduled chemicals, designer precursors and pre-precursors as alternatives to controlled precursors. Cognizant of such developments, the Board held consultations with Member States during its session in November 2020, while commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the entry into force of the 1988 Convention, with a view to advancing the policy discussion on options to address the proliferation of non-scheduled chemicals at the international level and building consensus on the topic.

The year 2020 shall inevitably be linked to the global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which had an impact on virtually all spheres of human activity. As regards precursors, at least insofar as the first half of the year is concerned, the pandemic appears to have left its imprint on both licit and illicit activities related to precursors. There were 17 per cent fewer pre-export notifications in that period compared with the corresponding period in the previous years, even though Governments used innovative approaches, including the use of electronic means for the submission of import and export requests and the granting of authorizations. There was also a decrease in the number of incidents voluntarily communicated by Governments through PICS. Both developments point to a reduction in the corresponding activity, albeit temporary, caused by the pandemic.