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The deadly proliferation of synthetic drugs is a major threat to public health and is reshaping illicit drugs markets, says the International Narcotics Control Board

In its 2024 Annual Report, the International Narcotics Control Board finds:

- *illicit synthetic drugs are spreading and consumption is increasing*
- *more coordinated action by Governments and others is needed to tackle the problem*
- *synthetic drugs could overtake some plant-based drugs in the future*
- *there is still a problem with access to pain relief medicine in many low- and middle-income countries*
- *INCB initiatives and programmes are positively supporting Governments to address these challenges*

VIENNA, 4 March (UN Information Service) - The rapid spread of illicit synthetic drugs is a deadly problem that presents a serious threat to public health says the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its 2024 Annual Report. INCB is calling for a comprehensive, coordinated strategy to counter illicit synthetic drug manufacture, trafficking and consumption including through better private-public partnerships.

The INCB Report finds that the proliferation of synthetic drugs is fundamentally reshaping illicit drug markets and criminal actors are quick to exploit regulatory loopholes and generate new synthetic substances that are posing great harm to people.

The President of INCB, Jallal Toufiq, said: "The rapid expansion of the illicit synthetic drug industry represents a major global public health threat with potentially disastrous consequences for humankind. We need to work together to take stronger action against this deadly problem which is causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and untold harm to communities."

In its analysis the INCB report looks at the evolution of synthetic drug manufacture, trafficking and use and identifies key trends and patterns. The report also shows how INCB's initiatives and programmes are supporting Governments to address this challenge and makes recommendations to fill policy gaps in regulation that are being exploited by traffickers.

With large numbers of fatal overdoses every year, synthetic substances are stronger in their potency and the duration of action than the plant-based drugs they mimic and demand for them is rising.

Synthetic drugs are easily manufactured and trafficked with little technical or scientific knowledge needed and there is a reduced need for labour or land for cultivation unlike for plant-based drugs. The manufacture can be located anywhere and the same equipment can be used for different synthetic outputs. Traffickers can shift manufacture, movement and marketing tactics to keep operating costs down and profit margins up as well as to reduce risks of interdiction.

"With rapidly emerging substances being used to illicitly manufacture synthetic drugs, it is a constantly moving target and criminal actors are staying ahead of regulatory mechanisms and often acting faster than enforcement agencies can keep up with," said the President of INCB, Jallal Toufiq.

As synthetic drugs are more potent, traffickers can send smaller consignments which are easier to conceal and sometimes use drones and other new trafficking techniques.

Although global demand for plant-based drugs is still higher than the current supply of synthetic drugs seizures of synthetic substances have already begun to outpace seizures of some plant-based drugs.

In addition to posing health risks to people who use them, highly toxic synthetic drugs can have increased safety risks because of dangerous manufacturing and trafficking processes and the dumping of chemical waste by illicit manufacturers can lead to environmental damage.

Actions and initiatives being taken to address synthetic drugs

A series of initiatives developed by INCB is helping Member States to respond to the expanding trafficking in synthetic drugs and increasing manufacture of and trafficking in the precursor and pre-precursor materials used in their illicit manufacture.

Governments are using INCB's various online platforms and tools to check the legitimacy or otherwise of suspicious consignments and to share actionable intelligence on the trafficking of non-medical synthetic opioids and chemical precursors.

Persistent inequities in access to pain relief medicines

There is a persistent problem with the global availability of affordable internationally controlled medicines.

Unequal access to these medicines is particularly a problem for East and South-East Asia, Central America and the Caribbean, and Africa where levels of consumption are insufficient to adequately meet the medical needs of the populations. South Asia continues to be the region with the lowest levels of licit consumption of opioid analgesics in the world.

The problem is not because of a shortage of opiate raw materials with global supply exceeding the demand but rather the estimated requirements of several countries may not accurately reflect actual medical needs.

The Board supports Governments to enhance their ability to estimate and assess their requirements for internationally controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes through INCB Learning which has been used by officials from 154 countries.

To make pain management medicines more broadly available and more affordable, in particular in low- and middle-income countries, INCB is calling on opioid-manufacturing countries to increase manufacture.

Ensuring access to internationally controlled substances for medical purposes during humanitarian emergencies caused by armed conflict remains a challenge that concerns the Board. In the report, INCB highlights special procedures that can be used to improve the situation.

Emerging regional threats and trends

The synthetic drugs market in Europe is likely to expand due to the looming deficit in heroin supply following the 2022 opium poppy cultivation ban in Afghanistan by the de facto authorities.

The manufacture, trafficking and consumption of amphetamine-type stimulants is accelerating in the Middle East and Africa where there are limited drug treatment and rehabilitation programmes.

Africa continues to be seriously affected by drug trafficking with evidence of an increase in cocaine use and associated harms in African countries, probably a spillover effect from transit of cocaine bound for Europe.

Drug trafficking is hindering development in Central America and the Caribbean while the opioid crisis remains a serious challenge for countries in North America.

While Peru recorded the first decrease in illicit coca bush cultivation in eight years, Colombia's cultivation reached a new-all time high in 2023. In the European Union member States reported record amounts of cocaine seizures for the sixth year in a row.

The illicit synthetic drug market in East and South-East Asia continues to grow.

Large-scale shipments of cocaine and methamphetamine continue to be trafficked through the Pacific island States to Australia and New Zealand, and drug use in the Pacific island States is reported to be increasing.

Precursors report

The precursors report identifies major trends in licit trade and trafficking of precursors. INCB continues to stress the crucial role of cooperation with the private sector as an effective strategy to prevent the diversion of and trafficking in chemicals and equipment used for illicit drug manufacture.

Based on recommendations from INCB, two fentanyl precursors and two series of closely related designer precursors of amphetamine-type stimulants (16 substances in total) were added to Table I of the 1988 Convention by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. The scheduling decisions were the first-of-their-kind involving several closely related chemicals which could all be used in illicit manufacture in the same manner.

INCB is the independent, quasi-judicial body charged with promoting and monitoring Government compliance with the three international drug control conventions: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Established by the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, [the thirteen members of the Board](#) are elected in a personal capacity by the Economic and Social Council for terms of five years.

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