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Background Note No. 3

'Ecstasy' and 'Ice': Rapid Spread of Synthetic Drugs

During 1995, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) received ample indications that the abuse of synthetic drugs, including so-called "designer drugs", is a growing threat in several regions. In many countries, particularly Japan, Mexico, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Sweden and the United Kingdom, abuse of amphetamines has already been more widespread than abuse of cocaine and heroin combined. There are now signs that abuse of synthetics is increasing in other parts of Asia, Europe and North America. In the United States, five times as many people abuse those substances than abuse heroin, and there are half as many amphetamine abusers as cocaine abusers.

Since the leading synthetic stimulants have very limited medical value -- or none whatsoever -- and since their legitimate manufacture and trade are well controlled worldwide, most amphetamines on the black market such as methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA)

and methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDA) -- both often called "ecstasy" -- and methamphetamine -- often called "ice", "shabu", or "speed" -- have been manufactured in clandestine laboratories.

"Ice" (or "shabu") is powdered methamphetamine hydrochloride (the most common form of the drug) converted into large crystals. The crystals are colorless, tasteless and odourless. Methamphetamine is a powerful stimulant providing feelings of euphoria and of possessing greater energy, ultimately resulting in fatigue and depression. Other effects include increased blood pressure and heart rate, insomnia and loss of appetite. Although ice is sometimes smoked, much of the drug is taken by mouth or by injection. Abuse of ice is particularly widespread in the Far East. In North America and Europe methamphetamine is generally abused as a nasally ingested powder ("crystal" or "meth") or in tablet form ("speed").

Western Europe has been faced with a rapid spread of "hallucinogenic amphetamines" over the last few years. Media attention has already focused on cases of death of young "ecstasy" abusers. There has been a major increase in seizures of these drugs reported to the Board by most countries in Europe, reflecting an increase in their illicit manufacture, mainly in the Netherlands. Illicit manufacture and sale of drugs of this type are attractive to criminal entrepreneurs for several reasons: they are easy to produce, they are lucrative to market and they have been associated with a trendy "techno" lifestyle, which also incorporates widely supported youth preferences in fashion and music.

"Ice" abuse is a major problem in the Far East and Hawaii, and has also been reported on the West Coast of the United States. There have been small seizures in Europe, some of which have been reportedly linked with the smuggling of the drug from the Philippines.

"Ecstasy" is the name associated with a number of illicitly manufactured drugs related to methylenedioxy methamphetamine (MDMA), an amphetamine derivative. Users, who generally take the drug by mouth, experience many of the effects seen with abuse of ice. In addition, some reports indicated that ecstasy also has hallucinogenic properties. However, unless taken in very high doses, which increase substantially the risk of toxicity or death, the drug does not appear to produce the hallucinations associated with the use of, for example, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). Nevertheless, mixtures of amphetamine and LSD have been sold as Ecstasy on the illicit drug market. There is growing evidence that abuse of ecstasy-type drugs may lead to serious brain damage.

In contrast to cocaine and heroin, synthetic drugs are usually produced in the country where they are abused or trafficked within a relatively small geographical region.

The main countries affected by trafficking in the Far East and Pacific are: **Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Thailand**; in North America: Mexico and the United States; and in Europe: Czech Republic, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

A rise in the illicit manufacture of a similar substance, **methcathinone**, has been equally significant. First popularized among abusers in the countries of the former Soviet Union, it is increasingly turning up elsewhere, particularly in the United States.

Seizures of Precursors

To manufacture those drugs by chemical synthesis in clandestine laboratories, starting materials called "precursors" are required. These are almost exclusively obtained by diverting the chemicals concerned from licit manufacture and trade.

In 1994 and 1995, the INCB, working together with competent national authorities, uncovered a number of large-scale diversions of precursors for the illicit manufacture of "ice", especially ephedrine and pseudoephedrine. In several cases, controlled deliveries were undertaken, resulting in the arrest of traffickers and the seizure of precursors. The total quantity of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine reported seized or stopped during the 12-month period from September 1994 to September 1995 would have been sufficient to manufacture the equivalent of up to 6 billion street doses of methamphetamine. One result was that the street price of methamphetamine in California reportedly doubled in 1995.

Two major trends in the illicit traffic in precursors and in the illicit manufacture of drugs were identified in 1995.

First, evidently some drug traffickers are no longer trying to obtain precursors from those countries where controls have been strengthened. They have adapted quickly, changing the routes of diversion to countries where controls are less effective.

Secondly, some traffickers have switched to substitute precursors on which less attention has been focused. For example, after major diversions and attempted diversions of ephedrine drew major public attention in 1994 [see Report of the INCB for 1994], some traffickers appear to have shifted to pseudoephedrine, which can be used equally well for the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine.

Few countries, however, reported seizures of "ecstasy" precursors such as **safrole, piperonal** and MDP-2-P, despite the continuing widespread abuse of those drugs, particularly in Europe. However, some attempts to divert such precursors were uncovered in 1995. A number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe have been identified as sources of

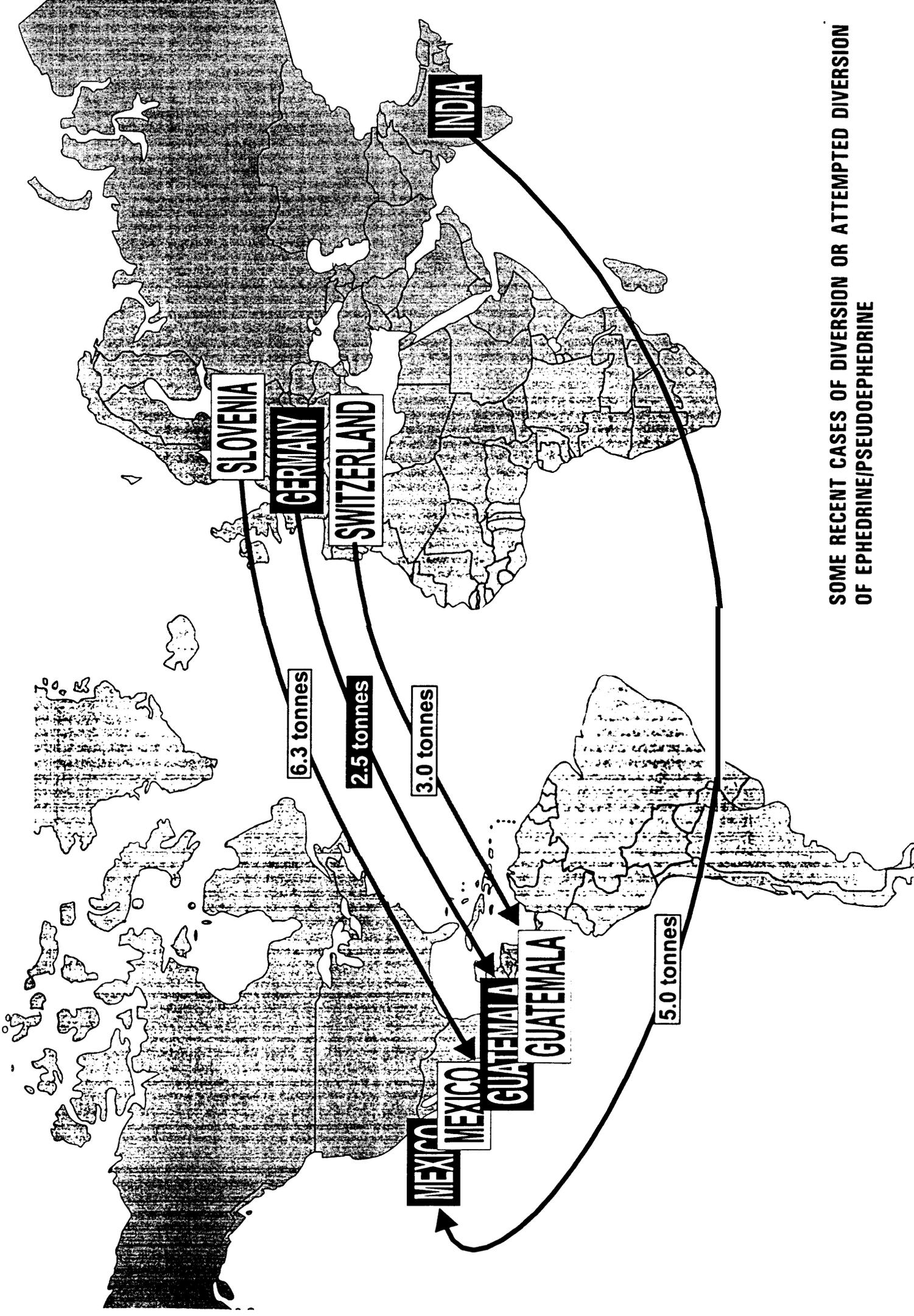
Precursors are controlled under the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Dregs and Psychotropic Substances. The INCB monitors compliance by Governments of the relevant treaty previsions. In so doing, the Board assists Governments in identifying suspicious transactions and stopping them or arranging controlled deliveries, where appropriate.

precursors for "ecstasy" destined for Western Europe and other regions.

While the Board continues to gather reports on the sources and routes of diversion of many previously **under-**scrutinized precursors, it is **still** unclear exactly where those substances are being converted into illicit synthetic drugs

While further progress **is** under way in legislative controls and law enforcement, there has been **little** sign of prevention campaigns **targeting** the young people who are exposed to these drugs **in** clubs and discotheques The Board regards demand reduction as a key element **in** combating the abuse of **synthetic** stimulants, including "designer drugs"

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SOME RECENT CASES OF DIVERSION OR ATTEMPTED DIVERSION OF EPHEDRINE/PSEUDOEPHEDRINE