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Illicit Drug Manufacturers Hit Hard by Chemical Controls

A drug control treaty adopted in 1988 requires its parties to keep close watch over the movements of some common industrial chemicals essential to the manufacture of drugs such as heroin, cocaine, "Ecstasy" and "Ice". Those controls have started to work.

According to the latest Report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), drug traffickers last year found it more

The key 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.

difficult than ever to obtain the chemicals they needed for the clandestine manufacture of illicit drugs. This development, says the Board, is a direct result of the further strengthening of the international system of controlling drug precursors and chemicals under the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

The legislation enabling local and national regulatory authorities to require various types

of monitoring of the domestic and international movements of licit chemicals -- and the exchange of information at the international level -- has become the secret weapon of the global fight against drug trafficking.

Fields of poppy, coca and cannabis may defy detection and smugglers may enjoy a low rate of interdiction, but companies producing such drug-manufacturing essentials as **acetic anhydride** or **acetone**, which have many legitimate uses, must report suspiciously large or unusual domestic and international orders to Governments, which then share that information with the Board.

Diversions and attempted diversions from licit commerce to illicit drug laboratories must be reported to the INCB, which in the past year has been increasingly called into action.

Again and again, regulatory and law enforcement authorities have, with the INCB's

In cases where it is believed that chemicals may be destined for use in illicit drug manufacture, a shipment may be seized. Or, in cooperation with law enforcement authorities, the shipment may be allowed to proceed as a "controlled delivery", with a view to arresting the traffickers involved and shutting down their illicit laboratory.

assistance, spotted dubious shipments and

have either stopped their export or arranged controlled deliveries that have resulted in seizures and some dramatic arrests.

One promising note of the current INCB Report is a section highlighting the actions taken recently by an increasing number of major manufacturing, exporting, importing and transit countries to prevent the diversion of controlled chemicals. Many Governments are now systematically checking the legitimacy of shipments involving "watched" chemicals. They are also sharing information on suspicious cases, particularly on stopped shipments, to prevent traffickers from going elsewhere to obtain the needed chemicals.

Rapid exchange of information -- often channelled through the INCB as an impartial international entity -- has proven to be the most effective means of preventing chemicals from being diverted from international trade.

Thus, last year the Board was able to identify previously unknown routes and transshipment points for diverted **acetic anhydride**, a chemical used in converting morphine to heroin. The Board found that Government actions in application of the 1988 Convention had led to the spotting of attempts to divert at least 300 metric tons of acetic anhydride -- enough to make approximately one billion street doses of heroin. That was almost ten times the amount of heroin reported seized worldwide in 1995.

Because of suspicious circumstances, authorities were also able to stop the export of almost 1,800 tonnes of chemicals used in the illicit processing of cocaine, enough to make more than 100 tonnes of the drug. Many seizures involved domestic movements of chemicals, such as the large quantities of substances used in making cocaine, which were seized by Colombia.

Tightened controls over **ephedrine** and **pseudoephedrine** throughout the world, together with law enforcement successes notably in Mexico and the United States, have led to the prevention of diversion of chemicals to clandestine drug manufacturing, but traffickers are now turning to alternative ways of making methamphetamine.

Developments have been rapid. The

introduction of stricter controls is credited with preventing the diversion from licit channels of up to 250 tonnes of ephedrine or 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 street doses.

Leading "Watched" Chemicals:

Acetic anhydride (used in processing heroin from morphine): A chemical manufactured licitly throughout the world, with a variety of legitimate uses, including the manufacture of pharmaceuticals and plastics.

Hydrochloric acid (used in purifying cocaine and methamphetamine): A strong acid used as a key ingredient in many industrial cleaning compounds.

Sulphuric acid (used in purifying cocaine and methamphetamine): A strong acid; the main ingredient in car battery fluids and many household cleaning compounds sold in hardware stores.

Acetone (used in processing cocaine): A common solvent used to clean, for example, paintbrushes.

Methyl ethyl ketone (used in processing cocaine): A solvent used in the production of, for example, adhesives and inks.

Ephedrine (a starting material ["precursor"] for methamphetamine and Ecstasy): A substance derived from ephedra, a plant which grows wild in many parts of the world. It is an ingredient in many cough medicines.

Pseudoephedrine (another precursor for methamphetamine and Ecstasy): A substance widely available in over-the-counter nasal decongestants.

While large quantities of chemicals that are supposed to be watched under the 1988 Convention still reach the hands of traffickers for use in clandestine laboratories, present controls and enforcement actions have seriously reduced the availability of some chemicals and illicit drug manufacturing operations. And, the black-market prices of some chemicals have risen accordingly.

Traffickers, in an effort to skirt the increased risk of detection, are turning more and more to manufacturing methods that require new or less-controlled starting materials. Substitutes for many treaty-controlled chemicals are being put to use, particularly in the processing of cocaine and the manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants.

New methods and routes of diversion of controlled chemicals were noted during the

past year. The Board reports, for example, that traffickers now divert a large part of the acetic anhydride needed for heroin manufacture in South-West Asia from or through the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, as well as from India.

Despite the significant successes scored in this area in 1996, the Board also notes that a lack of uniform action by many countries continues to benefit traffickers. Successes could have been multiplied if more Governments had established frameworks for precursor control or had taken action to verify the legitimacy of transactions involving the substances in question. The Board sees a need for greater cooperation with industry in keeping track of licit trade in and use of controlled chemicals in order to make it easier to identify suspicious shipments.

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The entire text of the INCB Report can be found on INCB's Home Page
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