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TARGETING COCAINE TRAFFICKERS: "OPERATION PURPLE" SCORES SUCCESSES

The launch of an international operation that tracks the global shipments of a key chemical used in the clandestine manufacture of cocaine is highlighted by the International Narcotics Control Board in its just released annual report. The initiative, code-named "Operation Purple", has already resulted in major successes in preventing traffickers from obtaining the chemical agent, "potassium permanganate" which is most frequently used in the illegal production of cocaine. Preliminary results of the operation show already that it surpassed initial expectations and participating authorities consider it as one of the most successful operations so far within the framework of international precursor chemical control.

"Operation Purple" is an intensive international tracking program, involving Governments of major manufacturing, exporting and importing countries and territories in all regions. The Board, in line with its international mandate, is participating fully in the initiative, in particular by evaluating the legitimacy of individual transactions in the light of the information available to it, including transactions destined for countries not yet participating in the operation. The International Criminal Police Organization (ICPO-Interpol) and the World Customs Organization (WCO) fully support the operation in their respective areas of competence.

In order to identify suspicious shipments and prevent their diversion into illicit traffic, the operation includes the careful tracking of all major consignments from the manufacturing country, through all trans-shipment points, to the end-user, as well as alerting all relevant counterparts of suspicious transactions or stopped shipments. The operation, undertaken jointly by law enforcement and regulatory authorities, has resulted in stopping or otherwise seizing suspicious shipments.

Over 200 international transactions of potassium permanganate, amounting to a total of around 5,800 tons, were monitored and reported to the Board in the period of 15 April 1999 to 1 November 1999. As a result, 13 suspicious shipments were identified. Most notably, 6 proposed exports from China amounting to a total of over 1,000 tons of potassium permanganate, were stopped by China when the competent authorities of Hong Kong SAR of China determined that the orders had not originated from those intermediaries located in the territory, as reported on the documents. A shipment of 80 tons of that substance destined from China to Venezuela was stopped when the Venezuelan authorities found that the importing company in question was not duly authorized.

In addition, the Governments of Belgium, Germany, Netherlands and the United Kingdom stopped certain exports of potassium permanganate to Latin America, following requests from the competent authorities of the importing countries.

Potassium permanganate, commonly used in industry, is also used by traffickers in processing cocaine and is the chemical of choice, as a notable colour change during the process makes it easy for untrained chemists to identify the end of reaction. Potassium permanganate is controlled internationally under the United Nations Convention against Illicit Manufacture of Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 (1988 Convention). The name of this international operation, Operation Purple, was taken from the colour of the substance.

International Narcotics Control Board

Altogether a total of almost 1,200 tons of potassium permanganate was prevented from being shipped as a result of "Operation Purple". This is a marked development when stopped shipments amounted to only several tons a few years ago.

Activities of both law enforcement authorities and regulatory authorities have been fully integrated in tracking individual shipments and in investigating the legitimacy of operators involved. In particular, the operation has proven that tracking of individual shipments is feasible for commonly used chemicals, such as potassium permanganate, and not only for substances which might have more limited licit uses.

About 20kg of potassium permanganate would be needed to make 100 kg of cocaine illicitly. The amounts of the shipments stopped would, however, not have been used entirely in clandestine cocaine manufacture. Traffickers frequently make multiple attempts to obtain the chemicals they need; those multiple attempts often in different countries are now being discovered because of the joint action by different authorities. In addition, certain shipments have been stopped because of administrative irregularities, not necessarily related to trafficking attempts, the Board notes.

In view of the success of "Operation Purple", participants have decided to extend it for an unspecified period of time, in a slightly modified form. "Phase 2" of the operation will start in January 2000 and additional countries will be invited to collaborate. During that phase, the Board will serve as the focal point for the necessary information exchange among participant countries, in addition to assisting Governments to verify the legitimacy of transactions, including those destined to non-participating countries.

Preventing diversions of acetic anhydride, a critical chemical used in illicit manufacture of heroin, has yet to be achieved. Based on the initial success of "Operation Purple", the Board intends, to work with Governments and initiate an intensive pro-active global programme involving law enforcement and regulatory authorities, similar to that for potassium permanganate, with the objective of identifying and preventing diversions of acetic anhydride at both the national and international level. In addition to tracking shipments of acetic anhydride which are part of international trade, the programme will also aim to investigate illicit laboratory activity and smuggling of acetic anhydride with a view to identifying and preventing diversions from manufacture and domestic distribution channels.

**Total Amount of Shipments of Potassium Permanganate
Stopped or Seized During the Period 1996 to 1999
(in metric tonnes)**

1996	1997	1998	1999
5	181	442	1650*

(*) preliminary figures

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Some Major Shipments of Potassium Permanganate Stopped During 1996/1997/1998



Some Major Shipments of Potassium Permanganate Stopped During 1999

