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INCB Continues Successful Control of Key Chemicals Used in Illicit Cocaine and Heroin Manufacturing

The targeting of vital chemicals used in the illegal manufacture of narcotic drugs, especially heroin and cocaine, continues to be a rewarding priority area for the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). Building on the success of a cooperative international venture called "Operation Purple" which focuses on the tracking and interception of commercial transactions of potassium permanganate, a key chemical in the clandestine manufacture of cocaine, countries are launching a similar project code named "Operation Topaz" which will target a key heroin chemical.

The UN's drug control body, the INCB, in its latest Annual Report highlights the launch of a new international programme to prevent the diversion of acetic anhydride, a key chemical used in the illicit manufacture of heroin. At the same time the Report also follows up on the continued success story of "Operation Purple" which is now in its second phase.

In its 1999 Report, the Board already called for an intensive pro-active global project involving law enforcement and regulatory authorities to target the key chemical for heroin, acetic anhydride. "Operation Topaz" was the result of an international meeting convened by the Board in Antalya, Turkey, and hosted by the Government of Turkey in October 2000 with representatives of major manufacturing and trading countries of acetic anhydride and countries where illicit manufacture of heroin takes place.

The Operation will consist of two main elements. The first involves an intensive tracking programme to prevent diversions from licit international trade by tracking shipments of acetic anhydride from the manufacturing countries to their final destinations. The second consists of law enforcement actions for interception and investigation of smuggling and seizures of acetic anhydride and illicit manufacture of heroin to identify the sources where the acetic anhydride was diverted, with a view to developing measures to prevent diversion from domestic distribution channels.

"Operation Topaz" is very much built on the success of "Operation Purple" which was launched in April 1999 and started its second phase in January 2000. That operation is an intensive international tracking programme focusing on potassium permanganate, a key chemical for illicit cocaine production. The number of shipments of potassium permanganate reported to the Board has increased from 205 in the first phase of the operation (April to December 1999) to 467 from January to October 2000. This is an increase in the total volume of trade monitored under the operation from 8,000 tons to over 11,000 tons.

As a result of that operation, altogether 26 shipments of potassium permanganate were stopped or suspended, amounting to 1810 tons. Because of such close monitoring of international transactions in potassium permanganate, the chemical has been prevented increasingly from being diverted to clandestine cocaine laboratories.

For 1999, the potassium permanganate seized in the South America, mainly in Colombia and Venezuela, but also in Bolivia, Peru and other countries in the region, was the highest ever reported. Of the 70 tons seized in Colombia during that year, 48 tons (or 67 per cent) were seized as a result of the activities carried out under Operation Purple, among them consignments smuggled into Colombia from Mexico, Netherlands, Republic of Korea, Spain and the United States. After follow-up investigations with the Republic of Korea, a smuggling network was dismantled in that country, resulting in a further seizure of 750 kg of potassium permanganate and the arrest of Korean and Colombian nationals.

Venezuela reported seizures of potassium permanganate for the first time in 1999. The total of 73.5 tons seized in that country represents the largest amount reported seized by any country for that year. Increasing amounts seized have also been reported from other countries in the South American region, with Brazil reporting 3.5 tons seized in 1999, Ecuador 659 kg and Panama 350 kg.

The Board is calling on all national authorities for follow-up investigations into stopped or cancelled shipments and seizures of precursor chemicals, and for sharing the resulting findings with all governments and international bodies concerned. Only by doing so, can steps be taken to prevent traffickers from obtaining the substances they require from other sources, to uncover illicit drug laboratories, and to identify and prosecute the traffickers involved.

As further follow-up action on precursor control, the Board is recommending to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the chief international drug control policy setting body to transfer acetic anhydride and potassium permanganate from Table II to Table I of the 1988 Convention requiring stricter controls. Apart from looking at the key chemicals used for the illicit manufacture of heroin and cocaine, the Board last year, had also recommended to the Commission to place norephedrine under international control because of its frequent use in the illicit manufacture of amphetamine. The resulting decision of the Commission became fully effective on 20 November 2000.