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BOARD REPORTS SUCCESS OF INTERNATIONAL ACTION TO STOP DIVERSION OF CRUCIAL HEROIN CHEMICAL UNDER 'OPERATION TOPAZ'

The manufacture of up to 230 tonnes of heroin (1) has been prevented through an international operation to track global shipments of a crucial chemical says the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its Annual Report published today (27 February 2002). The first eight months of 'Operation Topaz' have seen very positive results with Governments preventing the diversion into the illicit drug trade of more than 200 tonnes of *acetic anhydride* from legal international trade, denying traffickers of vital supplies for the manufacture of heroin. The equivalent of up to 2.3 billion doses has been kept off the streets.

Thirty six countries (2) and territories worldwide are now participating in 'Operation Topaz', which began in March 2001. INCB acts as the focal point for the operation which also involves the World Customs Organization, the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) and the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP).

The investigation is successfully applying lessons learnt under a similar international programme, 'Operation Purple', which prevented the diversion of over 1,100 tonnes of a key chemical used in clandestine cocaine manufacture, *potassium permanganate*. The Board now hopes that standard operating procedures used in both operations can be institutionalized by Governments to continue to prevent diversions of these chemicals from international trade.

Both operations require authorities to track the movement of individual shipments from the manufacturing country to their final destination. Importing countries must verify the legitimacy of each shipment, determine the bona fides of importing companies, and provide feedback to the exporting country before shipments can proceed. An important component of 'Operation Topaz' is the investigation of cases of smuggling, and seizures at illicit storage facilities or heroin laboratories, to track the *acetic anhydride* back to its original source.

Since the operation began, law enforcement authorities in Colombia, Iran, Slovenia and Turkey have effected seizures of *acetic anhydride* amounting to over 51 tonnes, successfully preventing the substance from reaching areas where the illicit manufacture of heroin takes place.

The President of the International Narcotics Control Board, Professor Hamid Ghodse, said: "For 'Operation Topaz' to be fully successful, seizures such as these are the beginning of further investigations to identify the source of the chemical and those responsible for its diversion. We also need to take steps to stop traffickers trying to sidestep the stringent monitoring processes by diverting shipments to non-participating countries by checking the legitimacy with those Governments too."

So far under 'Operation Topaz', about a quarter of the shipments monitored were exported to non-participating countries, and those 300 shipments continue to be closely monitored. Exporting countries are encouraged to suspend shipments until the importing country has had time to verify the transactions and complete their investigations.

Preliminary findings show that the global pattern of trade in *acetic anhydride* differs considerably from *potassium permanganate*, with both the number of transactions and the amounts shipped being much larger: exports of around 180,000 tonnes (3) of *acetic anhydride* were monitored during the first eight months of the operation. The trade routes are also more complex. Nearly 85 per cent of *acetic anhydride* shipments pass through transshipment points, whereas most *potassium permanganate* is shipped directly from manufacturing country to consuming country. The complexities of trade mean careful tracking of shipments from country of origin to final destination is needed to ensure the operation is effective.

During 2002, INCB will be assisting international initiatives by Governments to prevent diversion of precursors used in the illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), to prevent diversions of those substances into illicit traffic.

(1) Depending on the method of manufacture, the amount of *acetic anhydride* diverted from the illicit drug trade could illicitly manufacture between 55-230 tonnes of heroin.

(2) The following Governments are participating in the operation: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Hong Kong SAR of China, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, India, Iran, Israel, Mexico, Myanmar, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, Russian Federation, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States and Uzbekistan.

(3) In comparison, for 'Operation Purple' a total of 542 pre-export notifications involving an amount of nearly 20,000 tonnes of *potassium permanganate* were received from 1 January to 1 November 2001.