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SMUGGLING OF DRUGS BY MAIL ON THE RISE, SAYS INCB

In view of the major threat posed to law enforcement by the increase in smuggling of illicit drugs by mail, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) urges Governments to strengthen national legislation and screen all routes of incoming and outgoing international mail. In its annual report, released today (1 March 2006) in Vienna, the Board says the screening process should include the premises of international mail courier companies. It also recommends limiting the number of entry points for parcels to allow for a more effective control of consignments.

Over the past five years, almost every region of the world has experienced an increase in such activity. Besides illicit drugs such as cocaine, heroin, MDMA or GHB, even pharmaceutical preparations containing internationally controlled substances are smuggled through the postal system. Though Governments have stepped up their efforts to intercept illicit drug shipments, seizures continue to rise. In Thailand, for example, authorities seized more than half a million diazepam tablets and capsules in 2004. Diazepam is a tranquilizer of the benzodiazepine family; it is used in the treatment of anxiety and as a sedative.

Though exact figures are not available, the value of such pharmaceutical drugs smuggled via the postal system is estimated to be in hundreds of millions of US dollars.

Other benzodiazepines smuggled by mail and seized by the authorities include alprazolam from Thailand to the United States and clonazepam from Thailand to the United Kingdom. Small quantities of phenobarbital, a sedative and anti-convulsant, were also seized en route from Thailand to the United Kingdom. Australia reported the smuggling of 8.606 kg of GHB, a sedative hypnotic. All these substances are controlled under the provisions of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and need the express authorization of Governments to be shipped across borders.

The large size of some the seizures indicates that traffickers are sourcing these substances for distribution on the illicit market. While some portion of the seized tablets are illegally obtained from licit sources (e.g. by theft, falsified trade authorizations and individual prescriptions, pharmacies not adhering to prescription requirements etc.), significant quantities are provided by counterfeiters of pharmaceutical products. Counterfeiting narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances has become an important element in supplying illicit markets through illegally operating Internet pharmacies.

Illegally operating Internet pharmacies act as the supplier and dealer, for pharmaceuticals containing controlled substances, for which there is high demand by drug addicts. Examples of these substances which are known to be increasingly abused and are sought after at illicit markets are hydrocodone and oxycodone, methadone, fentanyl, amphetamine and dexamfetamine, and methylphenidate.

With regard to illicitly manufactured psychotropic substances, the largest quantities are for Ecstasy (MDMA) totalling 16,247 tablets smuggled by mail and seized in 2004 by Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Portugal, Thailand and Turkey.



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Authorities have also been seizing ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, which are precursors used in the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine. For example, law enforcement authorities of Canada and New Zealand have reported significant seizures of tablets and capsules containing the two substances in the mail.

As in all counter-trafficking activities, close national and international cooperation is essential. INCB calls for the development of standard procedures for conducting investigations into seizures of internationally controlled substances smuggled by mail.