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INCB REPORTS ON NEW PROCESSES, ROUTES AND SUBSTANCES USED BY CRIMINAL NETWORKS TO MANUFACTURE DRUGS

VIENNA, 24 February (United Nations Information Service)—Highly organized and powerful criminal networks are using new processes, routes and substances to keep drug manufacturing operations alive, warns the INCB in its Annual Report published today. In the face of stricter controls of chemicals, traffickers are finding new ways to fuel their illegal exploits and are still able to obtain the chemicals they need from legal trade channels.

The demand for methamphetamine precursors has had serious repercussions throughout the Americas, where some Governments are making major efforts to free their countries from the grip of powerful criminal organizations. As the Report indicates, the power of such networks is linked to the vast wealth generated by illicit drug manufacture, particularly of methamphetamine.

In the past, illicit manufacturers of methamphetamine had relied almost exclusively on ephedrine and pseudoephedrine. According to the Report, the implementation of the comprehensive ban on these substances by the Mexican Government forced traffickers in that country to change their drug manufacturing techniques. Instead of employing ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, criminals are now more often using a different process using phenylacetic acid. Since the ban, reports of phenylacetic acid detected at clandestine laboratories has increased substantially and authorities have seized more than 18 tons of that substance. In view of this alarming trend, the Board recommends that Governments put in place stronger controls over transactions involving phenylacetic acid.

Traffickers have shifted their focus from obtaining ephedrine and pseudoephedrine as raw materials, to trafficking in pharmaceutical preparations, usually in the form of tablets or capsules. In 2009, transactions involving 10 tons of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine in raw material and 32 million tablets of the same substances were suspended, stopped or seized around the world with Mexico as the main destination. Over 70 per cent of the stopped shipments and seizures involved pharmaceutical preparations, some of which were clearly never intended for sale through legitimate channels. Those preparations originate in countries such as India and Bangladesh which are sometimes continents apart from the clandestine laboratories.

But amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) manufacture is spreading to many regions. For example, in July 2009, authorities in Guinea announced a series of chemical and equipment seizures at several locations in Conakry, confirming fears that illicit ATS manufacture takes place in Africa. In this connection, the Report also mentions stopped shipments of large quantities of pseudoephedrine destined to the Central African Republic, Ethiopia and Kenya.

INCB is helping Governments to efficiently exchange data on trade, diversions and seizures. Together with the INCB online system for pre-export notifications, international collaborative initiatives and operations have resulted in more effective monitoring of suspicious transactions and the identification of trafficking trends and networks. Improved exchange of intelligence information has yielded significant results in targeting the diversion of chemicals. In 2008, 20 countries seized acetic anhydride



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totalling more than 200,000 litres, which is the second largest amount ever reported. In Afghanistan, black market prices for acetic anhydride, the main heroin precursor chemical, have plummeted.

The Government of Afghanistan is making efforts, for example by prohibiting the imports of acetic anhydride and building law enforcement capabilities for chemical interdiction. However, precursors for heroin continue to be diverted from domestic distribution channels elsewhere and traffickers are targeting new countries in almost every region of the world. The INCB Report notes the large-scale diversion of acetic anhydride taking place within the European Union, for example in Slovenia and Hungary, and warns about the diversion from domestic channels in countries such as Japan and the Republic of Korea. Between September 2008 and August 2009, INCB and exporting countries stopped suspicious shipments of over 95 tons of acetic anhydride to Iraq alone. As is the case with other chemicals, Africa has emerged as a vulnerable point for diversion. In 2009, two shipments of almost 20 tons of acetic anhydride each, destined for Djibouti, were stopped after authorities detected that the import permits were forged.