



An Afghan policeman stands guard as officials in Herat province burn a pile of opium in July 2011. Authorities had seized 1,886 kilograms of opium and made 265 drug arrests in the western Afghan province during the previous six months.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



combating NARCOTICS

Multinational partnerships help stem the flow of cocaine and heroin into Europe

Months of surveillance paid off in October 2011, when 50 Cape Verdean paramilitary police, in cooperation with Dutch forensics experts, raided a garage in a densely populated neighborhood of the West African island nation's capital. The drugs they found represented the biggest stash discovered in all of West Africa that year: 1,360 kilograms of Colombian cocaine.

Thousands of kilometers away in the village of Zerasari near the Afghan-Pakistani border, anti-narcotics agents from the United States, Afghanistan and Russia had already made a major discovery of their own. The multinational operation captured several drug laboratories that had been hoarding about a ton of high quality heroin.

What united these two operations, which occurred more than 9,000 kilometers apart, was the ultimate destination of many of these confiscated hard drugs: Europe.

A two-directional flow of illegal narcotics – cocaine arriving from the southwest through West Africa and heroin arriving from the east through Central Asia and the Balkans – has encouraged partnerships among nations that once viewed cooperation with apathy or suspicion. As a result, joint operations, training and intelligence sharing have begun to put a dent in a trade responsible not just for widespread human misery but also crime and corruption.

“This is a major success for cooperative actions,” Viktor P. Ivanov, head of Russian drug enforcement, told journalists in Moscow after the success of the U.S.-Russian Zerasari raid. “This shows that there are real actions being taken.”

By *per* Concordiam Staff

COCAINE TRAFFICKING INTO EUROPE

Traffickers have moved an estimated 27,000 to 91,000 kilograms of South American cocaine worth \$3 billion to \$14 billion through West Africa to Europe. Their African base of operations range from small uninhabited islands to the ungoverned belt of territory between the Sahara and the savannahs called the Sahel. The region became a choice trafficking route to Europe in the 1990s, according to Laurence Aida Ammour, a consultant in international security and defense at GéopoliSudconsultance in France.

Vast spaces, poor regional coordination and little to no aerial and maritime surveillance has provided cover for the criminals. Weak laws and law enforcement has long meant that getting caught is unlikely, and getting prosecuted less so. One of the first African bases for Colombian and Peruvian drug cartels was Guinea-Bissau, from which cocaine has been smuggled and shipped into places like Iberia and Italy.

Like Cape Verde, Ghana, Mauritania, Mali, Senegal and other countries in the region are increasing cooperation, information sharing and training with source countries in Latin America and destination countries in Europe. West African-European partnerships, particularly maritime interdiction operations, are starting to bear fruit.

Communications have flowed through Interpol at the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre, a multinational maritime security center based in Lisbon. Col. António Pinheiro, professor at the National Defense Institute in Portugal, explained that drug traffickers flourish when nations underestimate the threat and fail to cooperate. "The key to solve the problem is 'intel' sharing," Pinheiro said.

Another partnership is AIRCOP, launched in late 2011 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Customs Organization and Interpol. The European Union is providing most of the millions of euros to support the effort, aimed at creating intelligence exchanges among airports and police agencies in Brazil and seven West African countries. From the EU perspective, it's better to interdict cocaine at its source or in transit before it arrives as baggage at an airline terminal in Brussels, Rome or London.

UN anti-narcotics official Alexandre Schmidt estimated that of 822 drug seizures in Europe in 2009, 122 of the parcels originated on flights from West Africa. "The drug traffickers have much more sophisticated means and they are using more routes," Schmidt said during a 2011 anti-drug conference in Senegal that discussed traffickers' use of speedboats, jets, cargo ships and potentially even submarines to reach European markets.

STOPPING HEROIN

Based on its capacity to finance terror organizations, destabilize countries and spread disease via needle use, heroin trafficking into Europe and Eurasia represents perhaps an even worse scourge. More than 80 percent of the world's heroin comes from Afghanistan, where opium poppies remain a source of black market income for hundreds of thousands

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– UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

of farmers. Eradication efforts have met with mixed success, production of the drug varying with the weather and the intensity of anti-drug operations.

By one UN estimate, the Taliban makes up to \$300 million a year from drug trafficking. This is only one part of the billions of dollars in proceeds from the sale of Afghan heroin and opium – traffickers and dealers grab the largest share – but this illicit money source pays salaries for Taliban fighters, buys weapons and bankrolls attacks.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon took up the theme in his message for the 2011 International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. "Drug trafficking, once viewed largely as a social and criminal problem, has transformed in recent years into a major threat to the health and security of people and regions," he said. "The \$61 billion annual market for Afghan opiates is funding insurgency, international terrorism and wider destabilization."

Afghanistan opiates have ensnared millions of addicts in Central and South Asia, but the biggest profits come from smuggling the drugs to Europe, including Russia. Large quantities of the Afghan heroin end up on the streets of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Interpol described the two main trafficking channels as the "Balkan Route" through Turkey and Southeast Europe and the "Silk Route" through Central Asia. "The anchor point for the Balkan Route is Turkey, which remains a major staging area and transportation route for heroin destined for European markets," Interpol reported. As for the Silk Route, "Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are vital transit countries," the police agency noted.

At a December 2011 conference in Germany, Afghanistan and seven neighboring nations agreed to cooperate more closely against drug trafficking and organized crime. Yury Fedotov, executive director of the UNODC, noted that countries of the region would share counternarcotics intelligence for the first time and hoped to establish joint anti-narcotics patrols.

The same organization admits there's room for improvement at Balkan transshipment points. There transnational gangs originating in Italy, Turkey, the Caucasus, Russia and Southeast Europe exploit the sometimes porous borders



to conduct their trade. Considering the millions of cars and trucks that cross the borders in the region, a satchel of heroin can be difficult to detect. Ioannis Michaletos of the Athens-based World Security Network Foundation called the heroin trade the “locomotive for the generation of illicit earnings in Southeastern Europe,” and the UNODC’s World Drug Report 2010 tried to explain why:

“Once heroin leaves Turkish territory, interception efficiency drops significantly. In the Balkans, relatively little heroin is seized, suggesting that the route is exceedingly well organized and lubricated with corruption. In 2008, the countries and territories that comprise South-East Europe (a total of 11 countries, including Greece and Cyprus) seized 2.8 mt [metric tons] of heroin in 2008. This is in sharp contrast to what is seized upstream in Turkey.”

The news website SETimes quoted Hajrudin Somun, former Bosnia and Herzegovina ambassador to Turkey, who said that drug smugglers prefer doing business in politically unstable countries or those that have historically ranked low in the fight against organized crime, such as Bulgaria and Romania.

“There are some joint regional countries’ police actions against the drug trade and trafficking, but more political

will is needed for linking such activities in an organized chain of coordination,” Somun told SETimes in 2012.

The EU admissions process has been a source of anti-corruption reform in the region. Even recently admitted EU members Bulgaria and Romania have had to wait to join the Schengen zone until European leaders can quantify an improvement in border control and crime fighting. Schengen is the European passport-free zone within which people and goods move more or less freely.

But drug eradication can’t be focused on a single region. It must be a global effort, said Jean-Luc Lemahieu, Afghan country representative for the UNODC. He praised the progress of anti-opium programs in Helmand province and called for greater international assistance in attacking the Afghan drug trade. “More robust regional and global cooperation is essential,” he said. “Our responses should not be limited to Afghanistan alone or even to the region. This is a wake-up call.” □

Afghan policemen guard a handcuffed man caught with 55 kilograms of opium and a Kalashnikov assault rifle in July 2011. Even though Helmand farmers tend nearly half the poppy-growing land in Afghanistan, the amount of land used for poppy cultivation declined 3 percent in 2011.