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# FEATURE

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## **NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING - LAW ENFORCEMENT MAY NOT BE THE ANSWER, SAYS REPORT**

by André McNicoll

OTTAWA, IDRC -- The present pattern of the narcotics trade is the result of a colonial imprint and the North's own "progressive" pharmaceutical industry, claims a report to be released soon by the Ottawa-based North-South Institute.

The report, the first comprehensive study of the social and economic aspects of narcotics production, traces the origins of the illicit drug trade to Britain's aggressive 19th century policy of having its Asian colonies produce and consume enormous quantities of opium to generate revenues for the Crown's coffers.

Much of the contraband in opium and heroin still originates in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia's so-called Golden Triangle which is made up of Thailand, Burma and Laos.

In more recent times, according to the report, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has occasionally encouraged the drug trade in northern Laos to try and contain communist Pathet Lao activism.

And in the midst of the confusion and political intrigues throughout Indochina after World War II, French-Corsican syndicates became firmly established as major exporters of heroin to Europe with France's covert, if not overt, support.

Strict law enforcement, often calling for crop destruction and therefore severe poverty for the farmers, has repeatedly resulted in consumers switching

to more easily smuggled and potent forms of drugs. It has also resulted in cultivation being pushed back into more distant areas, or to new regions and countries altogether, the report emphasizes.

Much of the report focuses on the economics of producing opium, cocaine and cannabis (marijuana and hashish). Production tends to be labour-intensive and suitable to the family as a unit of work. Plots are small, and in the case of poppies from which opium is produced, they rarely exceed half a hectare. They normally represent only a small fraction of the farmer's total cropped land, the rest serving to grow food crops.

In virtually all major producing countries, and irrespective of the drug, use of the illicit narcotic is widespread. Among the hill tribes of the Golden triangle, opium is used to treat the symptoms of gastrointestinal diseases, as a painkiller and for recreation. As a form of currency, it is exchanged for salt, rice and other commodities provided by local Chinese traders.

The coca bush, from which the powerful stimulant cocaine is derived, is cultivated throughout the Andean region of Latin America. Coca use is widespread in the region as a folk medicine and for recreation. The market for coca leaves is so steady in fact that they are used as a form of currency at a fixed rate of exchange in stores and other trade and barter situations.

In Jamaica, where cannabis is described as the country's main cash crop and most important single source of foreign currency, use of the drug has been labelled as "one of the highest rates for any nondeviant population in the Western world".

Where national production has reached high levels, there are serious economic consequences. In Bolivia, coca cultivation has become an essential component of the economy. There is much land speculation, and rural unemployment among farm families not inclined to this type of farming.

In Colombia, trafficking has resulted in marked disparities in the distribution of income within regions. It has contributed significantly to

inflation and therefore to an increase in the prices of virtually all goods and services. At the same time, it has decreased the production of necessary goods and services.

### **Pattern of abuse changing**

But the flow of illicit drugs is not just from the poor countries to the industrialized North. According to the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), the major drug problem emerging is the diversion to developing countries of surplus supplies of amphetamines and methaqualone (a barbiturate-type substance) produced in industrialized countries.

Exporting countries allow shipments to free trade zones -- particularly those in Europe. There, the drugs are repackaged and relabelled "Vitamin C" or other such innocuous names, making it possible for importers to get the drugs through customs in developing countries.

Across Africa, Asia and the Middle East, authorities have been seizing large illicit supplies of psychotropics, reflecting ever more serious abuse of mood-modifying drugs in the Third World. International regulatory agencies agree that this emerging pattern of intoxication in the developing world presents new and serious health hazards.

### **Crop substitution**

The report describes the results of recent crop substitution experiments in Southwest and Southeast Asia as "optimistic", even if still largely unproven and exploratory.

A 1400-hectare pilot crop-substitution program in the opium-growing region of Pakistan showed that revenue from growing high-yielding wheat and maize was high or higher than the income obtained from cultivating opium.

The most important venture in crop substitution has been in Thailand where 11 experimental agricultural stations and a research training centre have been set up. Substitute crops successfully developed at experimental stations include coffee, new varieties of upland rice, kidney beans, navy beans and

off-season vegetables. The returns from some crops, especially coffee, compare favourably with revenue from the sale of opium.

The Thai program was planned with great care. It included primary health care, the development of handicrafts, and the provision of marketing, trading and storage facilities. It is estimated that in the participating villages opium production has been cut by half.

Crop substitution in coca-growing regions presents more serious difficulties, the report warns. A perennial with a well developed root structure, the coca bush requires a far more vigorous effort to eradicate than the rather fragile poppy plant. A suitable alternative crop has not yet been identified, although the U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics Matters has been funding several pilot agricultural projects in Bolivia and Peru.

The case of cannabis may be even more difficult because the volume of trade is enormous. A 1978 aerial survey of the northeastern Guajira Peninsula of Colombia estimated that 70 000 hectares of cannabis were under cultivation with a possible annual yield of 100 000 to 200 000 tonnes. The plant grows wild, and the correlation between the poverty of the grower and the crop is less consistent than in the case of either cocaine or opium.

The drug problem will be around for a long time, concludes the report, but perhaps the time has come to think about means other than law enforcement to control the situation.

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