

TAJIKISTAN: Up to 100 tonnes of heroin passes through Tajikistan every year-- equal to the annual heroin demand in Western Europe and North America combined, according to the latest UNDP report. Unless Tajikistan makes a genuine effort to reduce drug trafficking, the use of its territory as a key conduit for drug flows from Afghanistan is set to increase. The country's internal problems associated with dramatically increased numbers of drug addicts will become increasingly pronounced. See CISDB, December 8, 2005, I.

I TAJIKISTAN: Drug problems

EVENT: The UNDP estimated this week that up to 100 tonnes of heroin pass through Tajikistan every year.

SIGNIFICANCE: Such a large volume of heroin -- a conservative estimate -- would equal annual demand in Western Europe and North America combined. Weakened border control following Russia's withdrawal, powerful drug mafias and an impoverished population act as principal factors behind Tajikistan's acute problems with illegal narcotics trafficking and consumption.

ANALYSIS: Following the withdrawal of Russian border guards from the Tajik-Afghan border, drug trafficking in the region has increased considerably:

- the internal Tajik drug market is estimated at 120-200 million dollars; and
- estimates of the amount of heroin smuggled through Tajikistan varies from 100 to 200 tonnes per annum.

Drug profits. Heroin costs:

- 400-500 dollars per kilogramme in Afghanistan;
- 1,000 dollars on the Afghan-Tajik border; and
- 10,000 dollars on the black market in Moscow.

Thus, annual income from heroin trade amounts to between 500 million and 1 billion dollars. This compares with Tajikistan's GDP of 2.1 billion dollars.

Scope of the problem. According to Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency, the country accounts for more than 90% of Afghan drugs seized in Central Asia today, a fact confirmed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). With 56 tonnes of heroin intercepted in 2003, Tajikistan -- with a population of 6.3 million -- ranks third in drug seizures, after Iran and Pakistan, which have populations of 68 million and 161 million people respectively.

Trafficking methods. Although smugglers employ increasingly sophisticated techniques, conventional practices prevail:

- stashing drugs in the false bottoms of cars and trucks when crossing the border;
- using mule carts and camels for transport;
- swallowing sachets of drugs to discharge later.

An increasing number of women and children act as couriers, providing smugglers with a cheap means of moving the contraband. Some mothers hide drugs on their children; others in their own clothes. The use of these methods should in principle make detecting narcotics trafficking relatively easy (see CISDB, June 21, 2005, I.).

Sustaining factors. However, a number of Afghan warlords involved in opiate trafficking in the northern provinces enjoy 'good' relations with Tajik border posts. Border security on the Afghan side remains extremely weak and operates outside the control of the central authorities in Kabul:

- Many of the commanders in charge of the Afghan provincial border are believed to have links to the illegal drugs trade.
- They also have connections in Tajikistan through clan and family ties.

The number of clandestine laboratories operating in northern Afghanistan has been on the rise. These factors combined make Tajikistan an attractive, almost easy, conduit for drugs.

Drug markets. The area of highest seizures is between the Uzbek-Afghan border and the Pamir mountains. There is some indication that Afghanistan's heroin may be reaching western China via the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan route, but this has yet to receive official confirmation.

Much of the smuggled heroin is taken out of Tajikistan to markets in Europe and Asia. The trafficking takes place by rail and is conducted by criminal syndicates and gangs. (see EEDB, July 19, 2002, II.).

Russia's role. Until last year, Russia was in charge of patrolling a 1,344-kilometre (km) stretch of the Tajik-Afghan frontier. The Tajik authorities controlled only 70 km of this border and the long but inaccessible border with China. In 1993-2005, Russian border guards reported that they:

- intercepted 30 tonnes of drugs, of which eleven tonnes were heroin;
- stopped 4,600 illegal border crossings;
- confiscated over 1,000 firearms; and
- destroyed 336 hideouts.

Surrendering control. In 2003, when a ten-year bilateral agreement on joint protection of borders with Russia ran out, Dushanbe did not renew

it, arguing that Tajikistan was capable of guarding its own frontiers. In September, the last of the 11,000-strong Russian contingent left Tajikistan:

- Over 700 km of the eastern part of the border in the inaccessible high mountain region of Badakhshan were surrendered in December 2004.
- The middle section of the border, known as Moskovsky, was handed over in June.
- The withdrawal from the remaining 243 km in the western Panj sector was completed in late August.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that senior members in the Tajik government provide protection for drug trafficking, which suggests that they, together with the drug barons, could have been influential in promoting the government's decision to take over border protection.

Main problem areas. Along the Afghan-Tajik border, the main 'hot spots' for smuggling drugs appear to be through the Moskovsky and Panj sectors of the border, which until this year were protected by a chain of Russian checkpoints with squads of five to ten soldiers. In some cases, these checkpoints were equipped with armoured personnel carriers. In the summer, the smugglers' route passes through the mountainous areas of Badakhshan, which is now guarded by the ill-equipped Tajik Border Service.

Cadres shortage. Almost 80% of the servicemen in the Russian contingent were Tajik conscripts, and, in 1993-2005, over 40,000 Tajiks served as contract soldiers with Russian border guards. Following the Russian withdrawal, these soldiers refused to join Tajik border guards, citing low pay and poor service conditions as the main reasons. Currently, Tajik border guards comprise only 6,000 men, of whom only 200 are properly trained officers, educated in Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine. This is less than 25% of the required number of cadres.

Foreign assistance. Military training in Tajikistan is just beginning. In view of the internationally recognised gravity of the drugs problem in the area, foreign states have offered limited support to Tajikistan:

- Five to six Russian officers will be allocated to each Tajik detachment as military advisers. Together with military instructors, they will amount to 300 Russian servicemen.
- In September 2005, the EU agreed to pay 30 million dollars in instalments, with a portion of this money to be spent on improving coordination between the Tajik and Afghan border authorities.
- The United States has allocated 16.5 million dollars from the fiscal 2005 supplemental to assist Tajikistan in fighting illegal narcotics trafficking and improving border security.

Despite the handing over of some Russian equipment, Tajikistan requires a one-time investment of over 100 million dollars in order to tangibly enhance its border control.

Social impact. Figures from UNODC point to a 17-fold increase in opiate abuse between 1990 and 2002 across Central Asia. The Tajik authorities estimate the number of drug addicts in the country to be around 55,000-75,000 people, of whom 80% are heroin addicts. Still, the social impact of drug trafficking remains largely unreported. The drugs that remain in Tajikistan tend to increase the level of crime, corruption, drug addiction and HIV/AIDS. The loss of income associated with the withdrawal of Russian troops from the regions along the Tajik-Afghan border is likely to push more locals into drug smuggling.

CONCLUSION: Unless Tajikistan makes a genuine effort to reduce drug trafficking, the use of its territory as a key conduit for drug flows from Afghanistan is set to increase. The country's internal problems associated with dramatically increased numbers of drug addicts will become increasingly pronounced.