

Drugs threaten Russia's national security

by Denise Henderson

On March 3, Russia's State Duma (parliament) received a report from the government on the growing problems related to drug use in the country. Nikolai Gerasimenko, the chairman of the Duma's Health Committee, said there are now more than 2 million regular users of illegal drugs in Russia; 4 million people have experimented with narcotics, while some 400,000 are addicts. Gerasimenko said he expects those figures to double by the year 2000.

Deputy Interior Minister Vladimir Kolesnikov, the deputy chairman of the government commission on drug abuse and sales, said there were 185,000 drug-related crimes in Russia in 1997, a 91% increase over the previous year. The largest increases were among young adults, minors, and women. Gennadii Onishchenko, the chief state sanitary physician, said the growth in the use of drugs is contributing to an increase in HIV cases. He noted that of the 4,300 people registered as HIV positive, over 90% are drug addicts.

Today in Russia, there is a direct correlation between International Monetary Fund-imposed poverty and drug use, as more and more Russian workers find themselves unemployed. In 1997, for example, the Department of the Illegal Use of Drugs reported that the number of illegal drug users in the region of Russia's third largest city, Nizhny Novgorod, had reached 180,000, or 5% of the population. The number of drug-related crimes increased by 20%, reaching 800 per year. Two-thirds of the criminals are younger than 30 years old.

The most affected districts of Nizhny Novgorod are Avtozavodsky, Sormovsky, and Prioksky—the city's industrial districts. But among drug addicts, only 9.6% are currently employed, while the majority (52.9%) are unemployed—as are the majority of people in these districts.

Most of the drugs are grown in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, and in Ukraine and Moldova, and transit through Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Krasnodar and Stavropol territories in Russia.

Addicting children

Most vulnerable to drug addiction, as well as to the organized-crime mafias which run drugs, prostitution, and almost all of Russia's "shadow economy," are the young people. It is estimated that many users are between the ages of 13 and 25, and many young girls become prostitutes in exchange for their "fix." According to Interfax news agency, "In Moscow

and St. Petersburg alone, the monthly turnover of narcotics comes to about \$90 million. Total turnover for the country in 1997 amounted to more than \$2.5 billion," but "the true amount could be double or even triple this figure." "In Moscow schools," says Interfax, "we see instances of the massive sale of narcotics at super-reduced prices — so as to initially get teenagers into the habit, and only later demand more money. Drugs are even distributed free of charge at many educational institutions. As a result, drug addiction among primary school children and older students has increased 600-800% over the past four years."

And as in western Europe and the United States, the widespread use of Ecstasy is now of concern in Russia. Ecstasy, or methylene dioxy-methyl amphetamine (MDMA), is most often used in "virtual reality" discotheques, where parties go on all weekend, and where participants lose all sense of identity. Besides being addictive, the drug creates a state of mental disorder.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs is expecting that Russia will have 3 million drug addicts in 1998. But this takes into account only those using "the classic variety of drugs," says Interfax. "If we add in those who have no aversion to any kind of 'dope,' those who sniff glue and the like, the figure is expected to come to at least 10 million Russians."

Other republics in the Commonwealth of Independent States have expressed similar concerns. In a Jan. 1 interview, for example, Maj. Gen. Slem Absametov, First Deputy Chairman of Kazakhstan's National Security Council, reported: "We have observed a steady trend in recent times, whereby the republic is turning into a transit territory for the international drug trade. Significant in this regard is the energetic activity of criminal groups—both home-grown and foreign-inspired." Absametov reported that in the summer of 1997, Kazakhstan had successfully concluded an operation to shut down a channel "for shipping heroin and cocaine from Brazil and Pakistan to Almaty and farther on to the Russian Federation. This channel was set up by members of a Nigerian drug group." Twelve kilograms of heroin and 2 kilograms of cocaine were confiscated in that operation, which was followed in October by the seizure of 3 kilograms of heroin and the arrest of five individuals. Overall, said Absametov, "some 41 criminal cases have been instituted with respect to 48 major drug dealers. More than 2 tons of marijuana, raw opium, hashish, heroin, cocaine, and other drugs have been confiscated."

But in Central Asia, the Chu Valley, which covers several Central Asian republics, remains a source of the plants used to produce drugs, including marijuana, wild hemp, and ephedra. Kazakhstan is also a transit point for drugs on their way to Russia from Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan, where up to 60% of all the opium delivered to the international black market is produced. Uzbekistan has a similar fight against drugs ongoing. In 1997, fifteen tons of acetic anhydride, a crucial chemical for producing narcotics, was seized in one raid.