

## From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

### Narco-traffickers target India's neighbors

*Economic globalization has paved the way for an expansion of "free trade" in drugs, bringing cheer to the drug barons.*

In a recent interview with the Indian daily *The Hindu*, Dr. D.C. Jayasurya, United Nations Regional Project Coordinator, Precursor Control Project, said that, following the tightening of controls and enhanced vigilance in India and Nepal, he fears that the drug traffickers might make Bhutan, a tiny Himalayan kingdom adjacent to both India and China, their "next target." He also pointed out that the Bangladesh port city Chittagong has become highly vulnerable to the traffickers.

Jayasurya associated the growth of drug trafficking with the opening up of national economies. The advent of free trade in Southeast Asia, he noted, has substantially reduced customs regulations, enabling traffickers to divert large volumes of precursor chemicals, such as those used to convert opium to heroin, from one country to another.

As a result of lax customs regulations, thousands of tons of precursor chemicals are getting to where opium is grown, through various routes, to produce heroin. Without customs control it is very difficult to track precursor chemicals, since governments are unable to quantify the amount of chemicals that are being used by local industry. Dr. Jayasurya claims that his investigations have shown that chemicals were diverted not from the factory premises, but during the process of shipment, where the drug cartel operators have a definite presence.

Worldwide, the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) has identified 22 chemicals, including acetic anhydride, acetone, N-acetyl-anthranilic acid, lysergic acid (LSD), ephedrine, phenyl-2-propanon, hy-

drochloric acid, potassium permanganate, sulfuric acid, and piperonal, as the major precursor chemicals used in the manufacture of illicit drugs and psychotropic substances.

In India, Dr. Jayasurya continued, a major problem in tackling precursor chemical trafficking is the lack of data about the production and use of the chemicals by industry. According to available estimates, the chemical industry has the capacity to produce 90,000 tons of acetic anhydride, but officially only 45,000 tons are produced. Newspapers in India report occasional seizures in airports of small quantities of the chemical.

International Narcotics Control Board officials say that the free movement of precursor chemicals and drugs in Asia, with the onslaught of economic globalization, has created drug-addiction problems in countries which were virtually untouched before. The INCB claims that Thailand now has 500,000 addicts. China, by one estimate, has more than a million. And relatively poor Vietnam has 180,000 heroin addicts.

In South Asia alone, it is estimated that there are nearly 2.2 million heroin abusers, of whom 1.5 million are in Pakistan and about a half-million in India. The rest are in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, according to Abdul Latif, regional representative of the UNDCP.

More worrisome are the ties between the narco-cartel and some well-armed and financially powerful terrorist outfits, such as Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and the National Socialist Council of Naga-

land, the United Liberation Front of Asom, and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland in northeast India. An array of terrorist organizations, spinoffs of the 1980s Afghansi guerrillas, are operating in Pakistan, in the disputed state of Kashmir, and inside Afghanistan.

The drug enforcement agencies in India have reported links between drug cartels in the Indian state of Punjab, controlled mostly by renegade "Khalistani" terrorists, and the cartels operating from Ibero-America. Several years ago, two bank accounts, into which Ibero-American drug cartels were depositing funds, were seized. The Narcotics Control Board of India suspects that many such bank accounts are now being operated in India by foreign drug cartels. With growing emphasis on opening up the banking system, as part of financial globalization, drug accounts will no doubt expand.

Also ominous is the massive growth of narco-traffickers in the nearby Central Asian countries. According to Dr. Jayasurya, nearly 3 million members, divided into 5,700 gangs, with sophisticated equipment, are handling drugs in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe, and are flooding Europe with Pakistani and Afghan heroin.

The latest trend in the subcontinent indicates that heroin from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar is entering India in larger volumes through the border areas of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and the northeastern borders along Myanmar. Much of this is carried to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan by the terrorists, and traded for arms coming in from Thailand and Cambodia. Recently, India and Nepal have equipped customs and police outfits manning the entry and exit points between the two countries, with precursor test kits to check for the misuse of chemicals.