

China Drug Situation Report 2020

Office of National Narcotics Control Commission

June, 2021

Foreword

In 2020, China's narcotics control authorities coordinated and carried forward Covid-19 response and drug control efforts, continued "Border Clearing", "Care for Drug Users" and other operations, comprehensively promoted rectification of critical drug-affected areas, creation and demonstration of model cities, as well as combination of anti-drug and poverty alleviation, which resulted in remarkable new achievements. The year 2020 saw 64,000 drug-related cases solved in China, 92,000 suspects arrested and 55.49 tons of drugs seized. 427,000 persons were identified using drugs, among whom 99,000 went under community rehabilitation services. Due to strict management of the epidemic and severe crackdown on crimes, domestic drug-related crimes have been contained effectively. Drug situation kept improving, featuring positive decline in four aspects: existing drug users, large-scale drug manufacture, illicit diversion of precursors and migration of drug traffickers. A survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics reveals that the public highly appreciated the overall drug control work in China, with a satisfaction rate of 96.96%.

As the pandemic still goes on, drugs keep spreading around the globe. Reports of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) revealed that Covid-19 had not only exerted huge impact on global economy, public health and people's lifestyles, but also brought changes to global drug production, supply, trafficking modus operandi, consumption, etc. Narcotics control work weakened in "Golden Triangle", "Golden Crescent", "Silver Triangle" and other drug source regions. Economic recession drove more farmers cultivating drug plants, leading to a high level of global drug production. With air and land transportation and

people's movement being restricted by lockdowns, maritime drug trafficking was now on the rise. The growth of unemployment rate made more poor and disadvantaged people turn to using drugs or engaging in drug-related crimes. There are currently about 270 million people in the world who use drugs. The epidemic continuously imposed profound impact on domestic drug situation. Drug-related activities were significantly contained under the strict epidemic control measures in the first quarter, yet gradually rebounded with the loosening of measures in the second quarter, and then stayed at the same level compared with previous years with the epidemic management normalized in the third and fourth quarters. Affected by the global drug situation and the Covid-19 pandemic, China's drug situation has shown some new characteristics and the drug control efforts are facing new risks and challenges.

I. Drug abuse

After years of continuous efforts on drug prevention and education for teenagers, identification of drug users, admission and treatment of morbid and disabled drug users, and Campaign "Care for Drug Users", significant achievements have been made in China with the number of drug users increasing much slower annually, population using drugs shrinking year by year, and the number of people sustaining for more than three years from relapse after withdrawal on the rise. However, against the backdrop of global drug situation and the Covid-19 pandemic, drug abuse is still a complex problem featuring new changes.

--The number of drug users continued to decline, and drug abuse had been significantly affected by the epidemic. As of the end of 2020, there were 1.8 million drug users nationwide, a year-on-year decrease of 16.1%, and a decline for three consecutive years. There were 3 million people who didn't relapse for more than three years after withdrawal, an increase of 18.4% year-on-year. A total of 427,000 drug users (down by 30.8%) were identified throughout the year, including 155,000 (down by 30.6%) newly discovered ones. Due to strict control measures for the epidemic and restrictions on the flow of people, vehicles and logistics in the first half of the year, it was difficult for drug users to obtain drugs. Therefore, less drug users were identified in that period. After the adoption of regular epidemic prevention and control measures, the drug abuse problem rebounded in some areas.

--Diversified drugs were abused with increasing use of substitutes. Among the 1.8 million registered drug users, 1.03 million (57.2%) were using synthetic drugs, and 734,000 (40.8%) using opioid. Heroin and methamphetamine were still the most commonly used

drugs, while the use of cannabis was on the rise. New psychoactive substances (NPS) were discovered from time to time in ever-changing packaging and concealment methods. Some were in the guise of stamps, and some were even found in food and beverages, e.g. candies, milk tea, etc. These concealments were highly stealthy and seductive. With the epidemic prevention and control measures going on, commonly used drugs were often not available. Therefore, drug users turned to alternative substances like pethidine, methaqualone, synthetic cannabinoids, “laughing gas” (nitrous oxide), fluoroketamine (substitute of ketamine), etc.

--More secret places and online platforms were used for drug abuse. There were less drug users in public entertainment places such as KTVs and bars, while more were found in private houses, apartments on lease and vehicles. Meanwhile, more and more drug users took drugs together in video chat rooms. Though a large number of people might be involved, it was very difficult to investigate into such cases.

--The harm of drug abuse on public safety reduced, yet the risk still exists. With the number of people who didn't relapse for more than three years after withdrawal increasing and the number of people who use drugs decreasing, incidents caused by drugged driving or hurting others after using drugs declined sharply, so did larceny, robbery and theft cases in this regard. However, as there remains a significant number of synthetic drug users, public safety may still be affected by incidents caused by drug users. Some drug users in big cities, mostly aged between 18 and 35 with high education and stable jobs, used tryptamines such as "rhino fluid" and "capsules zero", which largely increased the risk of HIV transmission.

II. Drug sources

Drugs in China mainly come from abroad, especially the "Golden Triangle" area, which represents the main feature of China's current drug situation. In 2020, 26.3 tons of most commonly used drugs, such as heroin, methamphetamine and ketamine, were seized nationwide, of which 22.4 tons (84.9%) came from overseas. Drug manufacture in China is winding down, with the scale, output and number of clandestine labs on continuous decline, and obviously less domestically made drugs found across the country.

1. Overseas drug sources

--Traditional and synthetic drugs were from the "Golden Triangle" area. In 2020, 6.3 tons (96.2%) of heroin and opium, and 18.8 tons (83.1%) of methamphetamine and ketamine seized in China were from this region. With a huge production capacity and ample supply of drugs, this region has been the main source of drugs in China. Affected by strict epidemic control measures and border-crossing restrictions, a large amount of drugs were stockpiled in border areas, and then trafficked through multiple channels to China and Southeast Asian countries in bulk supply at a lower price to get profits.

--More heroin came from the "Golden Crescent" area and more cocaine from South America. A total of 186 kilograms of "Golden Crescent" heroin and 582 kilograms of South American cocaine were seized throughout the year, increasing by 1.4 times and 2.5 times respectively. "Golden Crescent" heroin was mainly smuggled into Guangdong province through a relatively stable drug trafficking network with clearly coordinated efforts among

individual members. Cocaine from South America was mainly hidden in containers and seized in China's eastern coastal areas.

--Cannabis from North America was on the rise. In 2020, 59 cases were reported on the smuggling of cannabis into China from North America, with 16.9 kg of cannabis seized, up by 20.4% and 160% respectively year-on-year. Cannabis was purchased by domestic buyers through overseas communication apps or darknet, and then trafficked into China by international parcels. Such cases were reported in 17 provinces.

2. Domestic drug manufacture

--Large-scale drug production activities have been curbed domestically, yet the risk of rebound still exists. Due to special operations targeting drug manufacture and strict control on precursor chemicals, drug production activities, especially large-scale clan labs have seen sharp decline in China, with 294 drug-manufacturing cases solved throughout the year, which represents almost the same level as the previous year. There were 167 clandestine labs dismantled and 1.1 tons of methamphetamine and ketamine seized, decreasing by 3.5% and 54.8% respectively, while drug seizures exceeding 100 kg were made only in 2 cases. As the epidemic prevention and control measures became normalized, drug production activities rebounded since the second half of the year, with the numbers of solved cases and dismantled labs increasing by 26.2% and 33.6% respectively compared with the same period in the previous year. In 2020, drug manufacturing activities were discovered in 27 provinces across the country, mostly in small scales, using simple processes and spreading in various places. The output and the share of drugs made in China continued to decrease in domestic market.

--The illicit diversion of precursors was contained, yet the administration of their

pre-precursors remains challenging. Continued efforts on precursor control and Operation “Border Clearing” have effectively contained the illicit diversion of precursors, and resulted in less listed chemicals being diverted into illicit channels. In 2020, 307 cases were solved in relation to smuggling, illegal trading, transportation, and manufacturing of tools or substances that could be used for producing drugs, a year-on-year decrease of 7.5%, among which 2,335 tons of various chemicals were seized. However, drug criminals turned to unscheduled chemicals to make drug precursors in order to avoid punishment, leading to an increase in illicit diversion of those chemicals and difficulties in supervision, interception, and investigation. In response to this situation, China has started the scheduling process of six chemicals including MAPA in 2020.

III. Drug trafficking

Traffic in drugs was severely disrupted by specialized campaigns against drug smuggling and trafficking, such as Operation “Border Clearing” and cracking down activities on drug retailing. In 2020, 47,000 drug smuggling, trafficking, and transportation cases were solved nationwide, with 70,000 offenders arrested and 43.9 tons of drugs seized, down by 24.1%, 18.1%, and 10.9% year-on-year respectively. Among those offenders, 11,000 were migrant drug traffickers, down by nearly 40% compared with the previous year. With the economic and social development as well as the continuous upgrading of transportation and logistics infrastructure, drug trafficking activities involving new Internet technologies, new modus operandi, and new industries have increased significantly.

--Drug trafficking involving Internet, logistics delivery and postal service increased. The number of drug trafficking cases through logistics delivery and postal channels continued to increase, with 3,011 such cases reported and 4.3 tons of drugs seized in 2020, increasing by 9.5% and 1.1% respectively. Among those cases, 414 cases with 2.7 tons of drug seizures involved trafficking through logistics and freight channels, and 2,303 cases with 1.6 tons of drug seizures involved trafficking through postal parcels and express deliveries. This demonstrated the feature that the bulk of drugs were transported through logistics and small shipments through parcels. The Internet was also used in many ways for drug trafficking with 4,709 online drug cases solved, 8,506 suspects arrested, and 856.9 kg of drugs seized, accounting for 7.4%, 9.2% and 1.5% of the national total respectively. Against the backdrop

of the epidemic, online virtual platforms, forums, groups, etc. have become gathering places for drug-related activities. Criminals released drug-related information online, leveraged digital currency payment, parcels, local express or small courier companies to trade drugs. They even changed delivery addresses in the middle of the transportation, making it even more difficult for law enforcement agencies to detect and punish those crimes.

--Major maritime cases occurred. The spread of Covid-19 has brought changes to drug trafficking activities. Last year saw 33,000 cases solved involving drug trafficking by land, a year-on-year decrease of 25.7%. Drug trafficking by air and railway also dropped significantly. As maritime transportation was less affected by the pandemic, bulk drug smuggling through this channel has become a prominent issue. A multiple of maritime drug trafficking cases were solved in Fujian province and other places, leading to seizures of nearly 1 ton of various drugs.

-- Drug trafficking activities near China's southwest border areas were prominent. With their base in this region, some domestic and foreign drug trafficking groups used darknet, mobile payments, satellite positioning and communications to smuggle "Golden Triangle" drugs into China's southwest border areas, and then to its central region before further distribution to the north, northwest and northeast regions. The use of high-tech and disguising methods made it more difficult for law enforcement to detect and intercept.

Afterword

In 2021, China's narcotics control agencies will continue to fulfill the mission and responsibilities by carrying further on Operation "Border Clearing" and Campaign "Care for Drug Users", focusing on NPS, rectification of critical drug-affected areas, creation and demonstration of model cities and addressing drug problems in the rural areas. We will spare no efforts in drug interdiction, prevention and education, precursor control and international cooperation; we will promote the application of forensic and big data technologies to drug monitoring such as sewage monitoring, hair follicle drug test, social survey, etc.; and we will prioritize prominent drug problems, upgrade social work, and keep pursuing quality development in all aspects of drug control, so as to further consolidate the achievements obtained so far, and to contribute to the 14th "Five-Year Plan" and the effort to build a more modern country.