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Golden Triangle cartels turning to synthetic drugs

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Top News

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BANGKOK — Once famous for heroin and marijuana, the drug-producing region of the "Golden Triangle" now has become one of the largest producers of synthetic drugs in the world, with turnover estimated to be worth billions.

From "yaba" (crazy pills) to the increasingly popular drug among users, crystal methamphetamine or "ice", the drug laboratories in Myanmar's autonomous Shan State or deep in Laos' jungle can manufacture thousands of kilogrammes of the potent drugs in one cycle for markets in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Putting these drug laboratories out of business and those behind it is not as easy as the Golden Triangle cartels run their illicit operation in the "shadows" and are highly secretive, unlike their Latin and Central American cousins.

"Here (in the Golden Triangle), we don't have any 'names' and 'faces' but what I can say is they straddle five or six countries at any one time," said the regional representative for the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Jeremy Douglas during a forum here.

Recent drug seizures in Thailand and Myanmar are proof of the super ability of these Golden Triangle drug labs.

Last week, Thai authorities seized 508kg of "ice" worth 1 billion baht (RM125 million) from an abandoned pick-up truck in Nakhon Ratchasima, where the investigators believed the shipment was en route to its transit point in southern Thailand and Malaysia later on.

Methamphetamine (meth) seizures in the hundreds of kilogrammes like last week's have become increasingly common in Thailand in recent years as more people are hooked to the drugs, driving prices up.

An abandoned pick-up truck found in Nakhon Ratchasima with some 500kg of 'ice' worth RM125 million, believed to be en route to a transit point in southern Thailand, then to Malaysia. — Picture by Bernama



In Myanmar last August, the authorities made one of the largest seizures when they busted a drug lab in Tachileik in Shan State, located near the northern Thai province of Mae Sot, and seized 30 million meth pills and 8kg of heroin, just in time before the drugs were smuggled into Thailand.

It is almost certain the seized drugs were destined for the region's market and others.

As meth overtakes opium-based drugs as the preferred "products" of the Golden Triangle's cartels, the region's drugs economy has also changed.

According to Douglas, drugs produced in the triangle's drug labs are not only to satisfy demand from within the region, but also exported to countries such as

Australia, Japan and New Zealand, where the price can be 10-fold higher.

The profit these cartels derive from the lucrative drug economy are huge, he said, adding "there is a lot of money moving through this region which can finance a lot of activities".

He did not elaborate what these "activities" are but drug syndicates have also known to be involved in other crimes and illegal activities.

"We are estimating in any given year, the generation of money from meth is about US\$30 billion to US\$35 billion (RM126 billion to RM147 billion) a year in the region. That is bigger than the Gross Domestic Product of several countries in the region," he said.

Douglas said the region's drug campaign is playing catch-up with these organised crime syndicates behind the drug trade, who are constantly several steps ahead of the authorities.

Countries in the region are presented with a massive challenge in their fight against drugs and their task is not made easier by the region's fragmented response to the problem.

"There is no regional strategy. The situation (in the region) is not good, it's dire. The challenge is massive and it's truly transnational. There is a need for a regional response," he said, adding the authorities seldom targeted the syndicates but concentrated on the street level instead. — Bernama

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