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Rising demand in Thailand for ketum fuels smuggling

SUNGAI GOLOK

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RANTAU PANJANG: Local ketum juice has found a big market across the border in Sungai Golok town as it is cheap, widely available and easy to smuggle from here, Thai police said.

Sungai Golok police chief Colonel Prayut Phongsanti said the consumption of the illegal juice was now a trend among Thai teenagers as young as 14.

"Many choose ketum juice as it

is much cheaper than other drugs," he told the *New Straits Times*.

Prayut said Sungai Golok police had identified the problem following a series of seizures of ketum leaves recently, mostly at Thailand's border with Kelantan.

He said most of the leaves were seized shortly after they were smuggled into Sungai Golok town via the river.

"Ketum from Malaysia is in high demand among Thai drug traffickers, who will process the leaves into juice, which they sell for as low as RM2 per packet."

Prayut said records showed that many teenagers were attracted to ketum juice as it was easy to obtain in Sungai Golok.

"Smugglers can bring in ketum leaves, which they get from northern states in Malaysia, and

ferry it across the river anytime Thai drug dealers want it.

"Smugglers will unload the contraband on the river bank for Thai drug suppliers to pick up."

On whether ketum trees were planted in Thailand, Prayut said local drug traffickers knew that it was an offence to grow the trees.

Prayut admitted that smuggling of ketum leaves was ram-

panant along the border, but this would not hamper police from tackling the problem.

It is learnt that in Malaysia, Kedah is among the states with the most number of ketum trees.

Based on records last year, there were 81 ketum operators in Kedah, with the most in Padang Terap (40), Kubang Pasu (17), Kota Setar and Pokok Sena (13), Baling (10) and one in Sik.