

INDIAN COLD PILLS FUEL MYANMAR NARCOTICS BOOM

METHAMPHETAMINE IS ASIA'S 'NUMBER ONE DRUG THREAT'

TAMU: Five years ago, when cold pills first trickled across Myanmar's untamed border with India, many local officials were baffled. Where was this medicine going, and why were smugglers so interested in it? Today, the cross-border trickle has become a torrent and everyone knows why the Indian-made pills are so valuable: They are bound for secret laboratories in lawless eastern Myanmar that churn out most of mainland Southeast Asia's methamphetamine, or "meth".

Cold pills contain pseudoephedrine, the main ingredient of meth, a highly addictive drug whose ever-soaring popularity is rattling governments across Asia. In recent months the Philippines has elected a president on a platform of harsh action against drug dealers, Indonesia has resumed executions of drug traffickers after a year-long hiatus and Thailand is wrestling with a soaring prison population. Myanmar's current boom in meth production would be impossible without a recent surge in pseudoephedrine smuggled from India's huge and ill-regulated pharmaceuticals sector, say police and narcotics experts.

The uninterrupted flow of the drug is highlighting a disconnect between countries in tackling a meth epidemic that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) calls Asia's "number one drug threat." "It's big, big business," said Ye Htut, a former advisor to Myanmar's ex-President Thein Sein. He attributed a property boom in Kalay, the largest town in this otherwise impoverished region, to the profits made from smuggling pseudoephedrine.

Meth is sold in pill form as "ya ba", a Thai name meaning "crazy medicine", or as a more potent, crystalline substance known as "crystal meth", "ice" or "shabu". Each Indian cold pill can make one "ya ba" and costs only a few

cents to produce. By the time it has crossed the border and reached Mandalay - Myanmar's northern capital and a major smuggling hub - the pill's value has increased roughly tenfold. Across mainland Southeast Asia, the UNODC estimates the meth trade was worth about \$15 billion in 2013.

Cross-border route

The rugged and ethnically diverse region straddling the Indian border ranks among Myanmar's poorest, with no industry and modest infrastructure. Its main road is a two-lane highway linked by rickety bridges and plied by ox carts. It is here that Myanmar police have been finding thousands of the cold pills, hidden in rice sacks, packed into truck chassis or spilling from the luggage of cross-border bus passengers. In one bust here in mid-June, police intercepted a car carrying more than 60 kg (130 lbs) of Indian pseudoephedrine - enough to make more than a million "ya ba" pills.

Global demand for methamphetamine has created "new precursor chemical entrepreneurs in India," said the US State Department in a 2015 report. Experts believe many criminals who once smuggled drugs now prefer precursors, which offer high profits but much lighter penalties. Myanmar police say China is also a major supplier of pseudoephedrine. But with tighter controls there, and with greater demand for the chemical as meth use booms, drug producers have increasingly turned to India.

Pseudoephedrine is a controlled substance in India requiring all handlers to register with the authorities. In practice, the trade is poorly monitored, with Indian officials complaining of weak intelligence-sharing between government agencies and



LAHAL, Myanmar: Naga tribes people gather in Lahal township in the remote Sagaing region nearly two years before the town and nearby areas were hit by disease that left many children dead. — AFP

rare prosecutions of offenders. Raw pseudoephedrine is made in a handful of Indian factories, then moved through a network of wholesalers, drug makers, distributors and drugstores. It gets pilfered at every point along the way, say experts.

In a statement to Reuters, India's Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) said seizures had dropped after the country's narcotics laws were changed in 2013 to define pseudoephedrine as controlled. And indeed, police in Kalay and Tamu, Myanmar's two main districts bordering India, seized only 400 kg of pseudoephedrine last year, down from more than 3.5 tons in 2013. But that may well be because smugglers have found novel ways

to avoid detection. "It's highly likely that traffickers have just shifted approach," said Jeremy Douglas, the UNODC's Asia-Pacific head. Tamu district alone had more than 80 unofficial crossing points along its 125-km border with India, said Douglas, making it almost impossible to monitor. The Indian Embassy in Yangon did not respond to a request for comment on the problem.

Drug problem

Already the world's second-largest producer, after Afghanistan, of opium and its derivative heroin, Myanmar is now also reporting record-breaking seizures of meth. In May, police intercepted a truck in northern Myanmar carrying 21 million ya ba pills

worth an estimated \$35 million. The booming drugs trade poses a challenge to the fledgling government of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Rapid urbanization in the commercial capital Yangon is creating the kind of slums that have fuelled the increase in meth abuse in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines. Health experts are braced for an explosion in domestic meth use. Meanwhile, police in Mandalay, a transit point between the western frontier with India and the rebel-dominated eastern borderlands, say they are still making record seizures of Indian-made pseudoephedrine.

Greater regional integration, aided by Indian and Myanmar road-building programs, promised to boost both trade and trafficking, said the UNODC's Douglas. "India and Myanmar are cooperating to some extent but they're not doing a lot of joint operations or intelligence-sharing," he said. Myanmar police said most large drug and precursor shipments were smuggled through Moreh, the Indian border town opposite Tamu. They have arrested scores of couriers or "mules", but said they needed India's help to arrest the ringleaders.

An Indian man suspected of arranging a large pseudoephedrine shipment in 2013 sought refuge on the other side of the border, said Tamu police Chief Major Soe Naing. "Cooperation with India is quite weak so we haven't been able to catch him," he said. The NCB said Myanmar had not presented evidence that smuggling kingpins were hiding in India, or even that the pseudoephedrine it had seized was Indian-made. "It is coming from other countries too," said a top NCB official, who asked not to be named because he wasn't authorized to speak to journalists. — Reuters



MANILA: Inmates sleep inside the Quezon City jail in Manila. — AFP photos



MANILA: Inmates cook their food inside the Quezon City jail in Manila.

PHILIPPINES GOVT TO OVERHAUL INHUMANE, OVERCROWDED JAILS

CONGESTION MADE WORSE BY PRESIDENT'S DRUG WAR

MANILA: Philippine officials said yesterday the government would build new jails to address severe congestion made worse by President Rodrigo Duterte's drug war, describing conditions as "inhumane" and "unacceptable". AFP photographs of Quezon City Jail, where thousands of inmates take turns to sleep on an open-air basketball court and a staircase, were an "eye-opener" for authorities to hasten the construction of a new facility, according to vice mayor Joy Belmonte.

Quezon City officials Monday signed an agreement to donate land to the national government for a new prison. The facility in the northern district of Manila would replace the jail built six decades ago for 800 inmates but now houses almost 4,000. "The photos are really unacceptable. Seeing inmates sleep on top of each other because of the lack of space, I feel it's a violation of human rights, an urgent matter that must be addressed," Belmonte said. "It's good that this is exposed before the international reading public as an eye-

opener," added the vice mayor, who said she had heard reports of overcrowding before but visited the facility for the first time in July with an AFP photographer.

Human Rights Watch criticized the conditions last week, saying it was "straight out of Dante's 'Purgatory'", referring to the 13th century Italian writer's description of the realm where souls await judgment. Interior Secretary Ismael Sueno said the government would allocate funds to build new jails, with 80 percent of new detainees accused of drug-related crimes resulting from Duterte's crackdown.

Duterte, who took office on June 30, ordered a bloody war on crime that has left 889 people dead since the May elections, according to the country's largest broadcaster ABS-CBN. Police have reported arresting more than 5,000 people for drugs offences as part of the campaign. Sueno said his department was also planning the construction of more rehabilitation centers. "(President Duterte) is really concerned not just about arrests but also the rehabilita-

tion of drug addicts," the minister said.

Even before Duterte's presidency, the Philippine penal system was ranked as the third most congested in the world, according to the University of London's Institute for Criminal Policy Research. In Quezon City, the government is working with the International Committee of the Red Cross to finalize the design for a new facility that can house 6,000 inmates by 2019. "It's a modern facility and we want it to be on par with other jails in Southeast Asia," Xavier Solda of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology said.

Top judge rebuffed

Meanwhile, President Rodrigo Duterte warned the Philippines' top judge yesterday to let him pursue a deadly anti-crime campaign that has left hundreds of suspects dead, suggesting otherwise he would impose "martial law". Supreme Court chief justice Lourdes Sereno criticized Monday Duterte's public shaming of seven lower court judges for alleged involvement in the

narcotics trade, adding that one of the judges was murdered eight years ago. "Go ahead and try to stop me. Would you rather that I declared martial law?" Duterte said in a speech to soldiers during a visit to a military camp in the southern Philippines.

"Let's not kid each other ma'am, and do not force the issue," Duterte warned Sereno. "You do not warn me. I warn you. I can order everyone in the executive department not to honor you," he added. "Please do not create a confrontation, a constitutional war. We will all lose," the president added. Sereno had told Duterte in a letter that it was her sole responsibility to impose punishment on judicial "misfits", and that publicly naming them, even without charges filed against them, had put their lives in danger. "To safeguard the role of the judges as the protector of constitutional rights, I would caution them very strongly against 'surrendering' or making themselves physically accountable to any police officer in the absence of any... warrant of arrest," she added. — Agencies

FOREIGN FACEBOOK LOVE REVIVES CAMBODIA PM 'CLICK FARM' ROW

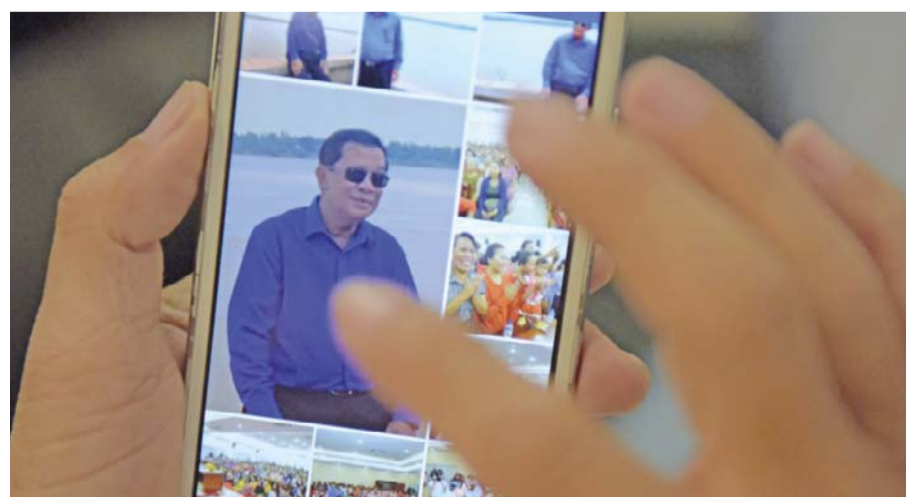
PHNOM PENH: With its regular live broadcasts, routine tirades and daily-often curiously intimate-photo posts, the Facebook page of Cambodian strongman Hun Sen has won a remarkable five million fans. But a surge of "likes" from countries including India and the Philippines has reignited allegations that his digital adoration is purchased from so-called "click farms". The 64-year-old prime minister, a once self-confessed tech dinosaur who tolerates little dissent, has embraced Facebook with gusto in the last year after opponents used the platform to reach out to younger voters.

He has vowed to remain prime minister until he is 74 with the next elections due in 2018. To do so he will need the support of Cambodia's youth-a huge, tech-savvy demographic who voted in droves for the opposition at the last polls, wearied by the endemic corruption, rights abuses and political repression seen as the hallmarks of Hun Sen's rule. With loyalists controlling nearly all of Cambodia's mainstream media outlets, Hun Sen was initially wary of social media. But in the last year he has embraced the digital sphere-while ramping up prosecutions against people for online comments.

His slick page now documents everything from live broadcasts of speeches and meetings with villagers, to more personal moments like the premier kicking back in a white bathrobe or sporting a wet, see-through singlet at the beach. But that success has been dogged by allegations that a significant chunk of fans come from "click farms"-networks of fake and real users controlled by digital middlemen who sell likes. In recent months, opposition groups, local media, analysts and even many of Hun Sen's own Facebook followers have all remarked on the unusual and erratic surges in likes his page receives.

Nearly half of likes foreign

An AFP analysis of Hun Sen's Facebook followers over the last six months using data from SocialBakers.com shows two periods when overseas likes have dramatically spiked-the most recent in the last three weeks. Only 55 percent of Hun Sen's five million Facebook followers now come from inside Cambodia. Many of the likes originate in countries notorious for hosting click farms such as India, Indonesia and the Philippines.



PHNOM PENH: A Cambodian man browses through his smartphone displaying photos of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen on the leader's Facebook page. — AFP

In contrast, 82 percent of followers for Sam Rainsy-the country's most prominent opposition politician-are Cambodian. That has led Rainsy, who currently lives in self-exile in France, to accuse Hun Sen of buying friends. "In his deceitful but childish logic, Hun Sen needs to push his popularity on Facebook in order to justify his repressive policies," he said by email. India now accounts for the largest chunk of overseas love for Hun Sen's page-some 562,000 fans,

or 11.4 percent, dwarfing even neighboring Thailand where there is a huge diaspora of Cambodian workers.

In March and April, Indian likes tripled from 175,000 to 517,000. Then from early May the rate of likes dipped slightly, only to once more rebound between July 4 and August 1 taking the number from 512,000 to 560,000. Similar patterns have taken place this year with fans from the Philippines and Indonesia. — AFP

News

in brief

ID mix-up leaves a dead man walking

BEIJING: A Chinese man applying for a certificate of no criminal record had his request denied when police told him he was in fact dead, having been executed a decade ago for kidnapping, a report said. The man, a resident of the southern metropolis of Guangzhou surnamed Chen, requested the document to apply for a job. "The police told me that... I had already committed the crime of kidnapping and the death sentence penalty had already been carried out, so I was technically speaking already dead," he said, according to Guangdong Radio and Television's verified social media account. The mix-up was the result of his having the same name and identification card number as a criminal executed in 2006. Chen, 45, said that he had lived a perfectly normal life until he applied for the background check, even receiving entry-exit permits for Hong Kong and Macau without any trouble. Police called him last week to explain the unusual situation, and finally issued him with his certificate last Friday.

Woman charged with biting off officer's ear

SALEM: A Massachusetts woman charged with biting off a portion of a rookie police officer's ear during her arrest outside a Salem bar has been held without bail. Emma Wiley pleaded not guilty Monday in to charges including mayhem, assault and battery causing serious bodily injury, assault and battery on a police officer and resisting arrest. Prosecutors say Patrolwoman Jessica Rondinelli responded to reports of a fight outside a city bar at about 1 am Sunday. The police report says while Rondinelli was putting the 19-year-old Wiley in a cruiser, Wiley bit off a piece of the officer's ear. Doctors were unable to re-attach it. Wiley's attorney said his client is a Salem State University student who suffers from depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Rondinelli's first police shift was July 1.

Chinese tourist kills woman at luxury Kenya safari lodge

NAIROBI: A Chinese tourist stabbed a woman to death and seriously wounded her husband after demanding they vacate a table at a luxury Kenyan safari lodge, police said yesterday. The incident occurred at Keekorok Lodge in Masai Mara, a large game reserve in southwestern Kenya, where the couple-also Chinese-were having dinner. The assailant, identified as Lee Changqin, is said to have demanded that they leave their table, prompting an argument, before he stabbed them both in the chest. Rift Valley county police Chief Gideon Kibunjah said the tourist was arrested and undergoing interrogation before being arraigned in court. "The woman died while undergoing treatment in hospital while her husband is still in hospital," Kibunjah said by telephone. "The man is in custody."

An intruder tried to climb Buckingham Palace fence

LONDON: London police say an intruder tried to climb a security fence at Buckingham Palace, but did not gain access to landmark building. The Metropolitan Police say officers monitoring CCTV cameras saw the 22-year-old from Croydon and arrested him yesterday inside a security perimeter on suspicion of trespassing on a protected site. Police say he had been drinking, was not armed and was detained without using stun guns. The breach is not believed to be terrorism related. Several intruders have breached security at the queen's London residence over the years - including a man convicted of murder who climbed a wall in May while Queen Elizabeth II was at home. Buckingham Palace declined to comment on the intruder, but the royal family was not there at the time.

Octogenarian Polish temptress drugged and swindled suitors

WARSAW: Polish authorities have arrested an 80-year-old woman who allegedly drugged and then robbed a string of senior citizen suitors she met through newspaper lonely hearts adverts. During dinner, the predatory pensioner sprinkled lorazepam-a drug prescribed to treat anxiety but which induces sleep-onto her victim's food, a regional court in Brzesko, southern Poland, heard. In one case, she stole 8,000 zloty (1,800 euros, \$2,000) in jewelry, electronics and cash from a 78-year-old who had invited her to his home in the nearby village of Szczurow, the online edition of the Polska Times reported yesterday.