

MAJOR BUSTS SHED LIGHT ON DRUG TRADE

BEIRUT: A string of major drug busts in Syria and Lebanon has drawn new attention to the trade in captagon, an illegal substance that has flourished in the chaos of Syria's war. Security forces in both countries have clamped down in recent months on exports of the psychostimulant, produced in swathes of Syrian and Lebanese territory where government oversight is lax or non-existent. "When the Syrian crisis started, Lebanon and Syria were transformed into a gateway to smuggle captagon," a Lebanese security source told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"The substance wasn't invented in the past five years - but that's when smuggling operations flourished, so Lebanon became an exporting country," he said. Captagon is classified by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime as an "amphetamine-type stimulant" and usually blends amphetamines, caffeine and other substances. On Dec 30, Lebanese authorities said they, in coordination with Saudi Arabia, had seized 12 million captagon capsules and arrested the "mastermind" of a cell exporting them to the Gulf. And in October, Lebanon arrested a Saudi prince and four other Saudi nationals for attempting to smuggle out nearly two tonnes of captagon via Beirut airport, in one of the country's largest busts.

General Maamun Ammuri, head of Syria's Drug Enforcement Agency, said authorities had seized shipments amounting to 24 million captagon capsules in 2015 alone. Some five million capsules were discovered en route from Syria's Mediterranean port of Tartus to Kuwait, and other "large amounts" were confiscated along the Lebanese and Turkish borders, Ammuri said. In war-torn Syria, authorities say captagon production occurs largely in areas outside government control, including northern Aleppo and on the outskirts of the capital.

"Our documents indicate that drug traffickers are terrorist groups with two goals: First, to spread this poison in areas under the control of the Islamic State group to fund themselves and buy weapons," said Ammuri. "And second, for its fighters to use so that they become numb to their own criminal activities, like beheadings and executions," he added. A former opposition fighter who is now in Lebanon as a refugee said he used to take captagon with his fellow fighters "to eliminate fatigue and fear so we could stay up longer". "It made us brave and gave us extraordinary energy," he told AFP. Another Syrian rebel said that "IS and (Al-Qaeda affiliate) Al-Nusra Front, as well as Islamist groups, forbid the use of these drugs because they're against Islamic law." A third admitted that opposition



DAMASCUS: Syrian police show seized drugs and captagon pills at the Drug Enforcement Administration in the capital on Jan 4, 2016. — AFP

factions produce captagon, but said it was strictly to generate funds for rebel groups and members were banned from partaking.

\$5-10 a Pop

In Lebanon, factories churning out captagon are largely based along the restive border with

Syria, including the towns of Arsal, Flita, and Brital in the east and Wadi Khaled in the north, the security source said. "Captagon factories don't need a lot of space. You could produce millions of capsules in a minivan without making any noise," a second security source in Lebanon said. — AFP



SABRATHA, Libya: Italians Gino Pollicardo (left), 55, and Filippo Calcagno, 65, are seen following their release yesterday in this Libyan city. — AFP

ITALIAN HOSTAGES FREED IN LIBYA

TRIPOLI: Two Italians kidnapped last July in Libya were freed yesterday in a raid on Islamic State group hideouts in a city near the capital, officials in Libya and Rome said. The announcement came a day after Italy said that two other nationals abducted at the same time had probably been killed in clashes between jihadists and local militiamen. "Two Italian hostages were released... in Sabratha after an operation targeting several houses after information reached security forces that Daesh elements were there," the city's mayor Hussein al-Dawadi said, using an Arabic acronym for IS. "They are now at a police station in Sabratha," 70 km east of Tripoli, he added.

Gino Pollicardo, 55, and Filippo Calcagno, 65, said in a statement released by the Sabratha municipality: "We are free and are relatively well physically but are psychologically exhausted. We urgently need to return to Italy." In a video posted on the municipality's Facebook page, the pair were seen wearing tracksuits, with long beards and dishevelled hair. Pollicardo's tearful wife told Italian media: "It's over. I spoke to him on the phone."

The foreign ministry in Rome confirmed the releases, saying that the two "are no longer in the hands of their captors". "They are now under the protection of the Sabratha military council and are in good health," a statement added. The men were among four employees of Italian construction company Bonatti who were kidnapped in July 2015 in the Mellitah region west of Tripoli. — AFP

AKP FORMS PLANS FOR STRONGER PRESIDENCY

PROPOSALS WOULD HAND ERDOGAN EXECUTIVE POWERS

ANKARA: Changes to Turkey's constitution envisaged by the ruling AK Party could hand President Tayyip Erdogan new powers to draft legislation directly and pick ministers, senior officials said, moves opponents fear could entrench authoritarian rule. A cross-party commission charged with drafting a new constitution collapsed last month after the main opposition pulled out over attempts by the AKP, founded by Erdogan more than a decade ago, to change Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system.

Erdogan won Turkey's first popular presidential election in August 2014 and has made no secret of his ambition to imbue the largely ceremonial post with more powers. Previous heads of state had been elected by parliament. The debate over the constitution has profound implications for Turkey, a NATO member state of 79 million people with aspirations to join the European Union. The outcome could change the way Turkey is ruled and redefine issues ranging from Turkish citizenship to the protection of religious freedoms. Erdogan's supporters say an executive presidency is vital if Turkey is to have the powerful leadership it needs to take a bigger role on the world stage. They reject suggestions it is about the personal ambition of one man. His opponents say it will consolidate too much power in the hands of a leader, whose grip over the media, the judiciary and police has tightened in recent years. They fear Erdogan's roots in conservative Islamist politics will take Turkey ever further from Western standards on free speech.

Erdogan has urged parliament to take the issue to a referendum, saying he believes Turks will accept a new charter and stronger powers for the head of state. Amid opposition dissent, the AKP is readying its own draft proposals. "If it emerges that the constitutional commission cannot work, the AKP will begin work on a constitution including the presidential system and will rapidly complete it," said Mustafa Sen, a chief adviser to Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. "A decision (on the AKP draft) could be reached before the summer ... We are not writing a 10-volume novel. It must not be a text of more than 60-70 articles," he told Reuters.

Several other senior AKP officials said the party's proposals, which would need the support of 14 opposition members

of parliament to be put to a national vote, were already under discussion. The plans would allow the president to dissolve parliament, officials familiar with the discussions said. Such a move would also end the president's term and trigger parliamentary and presidential elections to ensure checks and balances, they added.

Two senior AKP officials involved in the deliberations said the president would be able to issue decrees to enact legislation without consulting parliament. "The president in our proposal would be more powerful than under the US system," one of the officials said, declining to be identified because the plans have not yet been finalized. The head of state would also appoint the cabinet as well as senior figures including ambassadors and some members of the judiciary.

'Secretaries, Not Ministers'

The AKP has broad cross-party support for overhauling the constitution, which dates back to an era of military coups and has been repeatedly revised. But there are wide divergences over what a new charter should look like. Opposition parties want it to focus primarily on protecting minority rights and democratic freedoms. "The current system is already pretty much like a semi-presidential system ... Even if there are shortcomings, a 200-year-old parliamentary system must not be sacrificed to the ambitions of one person," said Omer Suha Aldan, a deputy from the main opposition CHP. "The president would designate and unseat (cabinet members). They wouldn't be ministers, they'd be secretaries," he said.

Erdogan, who was prime minister for more than a decade, hoped after his election as head of state for swift constitutional reform to bolster his powers. But those plans have been impeded in part because of opposition fears of creeping authoritarianism. More than 1,800 court cases have been filed against people accused of insulting Erdogan since he became president, from students and a former Miss Turkey to journalists and academics, fuelling those fears. The looming trial of two prominent editors on terrorism charges, after their opposition newspaper Cumhuriyet published video of what it said were intelligence officials trucking arms to Syria, has also raised international concern. — Reuters