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UNODC



Agenda:

Countering the surge of
synthetic drug production and
trafficking in Southeast Asia

Letter from the Executive Board

The Executive Board of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) extends its warmest regards to all participants. As experienced delegates who have attended numerous Model United Nations conferences, we recognize the importance of the background guide as a valuable tool for research. We believe that the purpose of the background guide is to aid in research rather than provide all the answers on a silver platter. While we acknowledge that the background guide can serve as a starting point or reference for your study, we encourage delegates to conduct further research and delve deeper into the topic at hand. We believe that MUN conferences are not just about acquiring knowledge, but also about expressing ideas, gaining a broader perspective, and comprehending the complex issues that our world faces today.

This comprehensive background guide aims to provide you with sufficient information to familiarise yourselves with the agenda

"Countering the surge of synthetic drug production and trafficking in Southeast Asia" However, it is crucial to understand that this guide is just the beginning of your research journey and should not be considered the final word on the subject. With that said, we emphasise the importance of conducting extensive research and preparing diligently to ensure meaningful discussions and productive debates during the conference. We encourage all delegates to approach the conference with an open mind, a spirit of diplomacy.

Thank you,

The Executive Board

Co-Chairperson: Priyanshu Biswas

Co-Chairperson: Aarav Sinha

Moderator - Leena Kalakala

Overview of the Committee

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is a specialized agency of the United Nations established in 1997, tasked with addressing global challenges related to drugs, crime, terrorism, and corruption. Headquartered in Vienna, Austria, and operating in over 150 countries, UNODC supports member states by providing technical assistance, policy advice, and capacity-building programs to strengthen law enforcement, judicial systems, and public health responses. The agency's work is organized around three main pillars: technical cooperation, research and analysis, and normative frameworks.

UNODC serves as the custodian of key international treaties, including the three major drug control conventions, the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and the UN Convention against Corruption. It also produces authoritative research such as the annual World Drug Report, which offers comprehensive data and insights on global drug trends. Its activities emphasize human rights, sustainable development, and inclusive approaches to protect communities from criminal exploitation and promote justice and security.

Covering a broad spectrum of issues from drug prevention and treatment to anti-corruption efforts, criminal justice reform, and counter-terrorism UNODC plays a vital role in helping countries develop effective, evidence-based strategies to combat complex transnational threats. Funded primarily through voluntary contributions from governments, UNODC remains the leading international agency dedicated to fostering safer, healthier, and more just societies worldwide.

Mandate of the UNODC

Mandate of the United Nations Office on
Drugs and Crime (UNODC):

1) Assist Member States in Combating Illicit Drugs, Crime, and Terrorism:

Support countries in addressing illicit drug trafficking and abuse, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism through coordinated and comprehensive responses.

2) Promote Alternative Development and Public Health:

- a. Support alternative livelihoods to reduce dependence on illicit crop cultivation.
- b. Promote evidence-based approaches to drug use prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation, and address HIV/AIDS among drug users in partnership with organizations like WHO and UNAIDS.

3) Implement and Promote International Legal Instruments:

Guide and assist countries in ratifying and implementing key conventions and treaties, including:

- United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)
- United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC)
- 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs
- 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances
- 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances
- International legal instruments against terrorism.

4) Advance Sustainable Development and Human Rights:

- a. Integrate gender perspectives and human rights into all programs.
- b. Contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to peace, justice, strong institutions, gender equality, and safe, inclusive societies.

5) Three Core Pillars of Work:

- a. Technical Cooperation: Develop and implement field-based projects to build national capacity in law enforcement, criminal justice, drug prevention, and health systems.
- b. Research and Analytical Work: Conduct research, collect data, and publish reports (e.g., the World Drug Report) to inform policy and operational decisions and monitor global trends in drugs and crime.
- c. Normative Work: Provide guidance, legislative models, and technical assistance to help countries adopt and implement international standards and develop domestic legislation on drugs, crime, and terrorism.

6) Enhance International Cooperation and Information Exchange:

Foster collaboration among countries and with international bodies to counter transnational threats, share intelligence, and coordinate responses to organized crime, terrorism, and drug trafficking.

7) Develop Standards and Norms:

- a. Serve as the guardian of major international conventions and provide secretariat services to treaty-based bodies.
- b. Develop and disseminate norms and standards, especially in criminal justice and crime prevention.

8) Monitor, Evaluate, and Report:

Track progress, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and report on global trends and emerging threats through flagship publications and specialized assessments.

9) Support Legislative and Policy Development:

Assist countries in drafting and enacting laws and policies that align with international obligations and best practices in crime prevention, drug control, and counter-terrorism.

10) Mobilize Resources:

Rely on voluntary contributions from governments and partners to fund operations and expand the reach of technical assistance and capacity-building initiatives

Nature and Proof of Evidence

Documents from the following sources will be considered as credible proof for any allegations made in committee or statements that require verification:

- 1) Reuters: Appropriate documents and articles from the Reuters News agency will be used to corroborate or refute controversial statements made by the committee.
- 2) UN Documents: Documents by all UN agencies will be considered sufficient proof. Reports from all UN bodies including treaty-based bodies will also be accepted.

3) National Government Reports: Government Reports of a given country used to corroborate an allegation on the same aforementioned country will be accepted as proof. The documents stated above will hold a binding nature of establishment.

NOTE:

Other sources like Wikipedia, Amnesty International, or newspapers like the Guardian, and so on and so forth will not be accepted as credible proof; but may be used for a better understanding of any issue and even be brought up in debate, if the information given in such sources is in line with the beliefs of a government or a delegate. The background guide cannot be used or cited as a valid source for credible proof.

Introduction

The surge of synthetic drug production and trafficking in Southeast Asia has evolved into a crisis of unprecedented scale, fundamentally reshaping the region's illicit drug markets and presenting grave threats to public health, security, and governance. The Golden Triangle where Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos converge remains the epicenter of this illicit industry, but production and trafficking networks are rapidly expanding into neighboring countries, exploiting regional vulnerabilities and gaps in law enforcement. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2024 saw a record 236 tons of methamphetamine seized in East and Southeast Asia, a 24 percent increase from the previous year, yet this only represents a fraction of the actual volume reaching the market. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has warned that this explosive growth in synthetic drugs is not only a public health emergency but is also transforming the very structure of the global drug trade, as synthetic substances overtake traditional plant-based narcotics in prevalence and impact.

Expansion of Production

The rapid expansion of synthetic drug production is driven by the sophistication and adaptability of transnational organized crime groups. These syndicates have dramatically scaled up operations, shifting from small-scale laboratories to industrial-scale production facilities, particularly in Myanmar's Shan State. The ongoing conflict and fractured governance in this region provide a permissive environment for criminal enterprises to flourish. These groups are increasingly using non-controlled chemicals and "designer precursors" to manufacture methamphetamine and other substances, making it difficult for authorities to regulate and disrupt supply chains. The wholesale price of methamphetamine has dropped to as low as \$400 per kilogram in some production zones, reflecting both the scale of production and the strong supply saturating the market. The expansion is not limited to methamphetamine; new synthetic products such as "happy water" sachets and "party lollipops," which often contain a dangerous

mix of substances like ketamine, MDMA, and benzodiazepines, are being aggressively marketed to young people, raising new concerns about public safety and the potential for irreparable harm.

Trafficking Networks

Trafficking routes have become increasingly complex and diversified. Organized crime groups are leveraging Southeast Asia's extensive trade infrastructure, linking land-based corridors with maritime routes to move large shipments efficiently and evade detection. The Gulf of Thailand and lower Mekong region have emerged as major trafficking corridors, with multi-ton shipments of methamphetamine and ketamine now routine. The illicit manufacture and transit of synthetic drugs are also expanding into neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia, taking advantage of porous borders and limited enforcement capacity. This regionalization of production and trafficking not only complicates interdiction efforts but also increases the risk of these drugs reaching new markets and user populations.

Public Health and Social Consequences

The proliferation of synthetic drugs has resulted in severe public health and social consequences. Methamphetamine has become the primary drug of concern in nearly every country in East and Southeast Asia, with treatment centers reporting surges in admissions for methamphetamine-related disorders. The emergence of potent synthetic opioids like fentanyl further exacerbates the crisis, raising the risk of fatal overdoses and overwhelming already strained health systems. Environmental damage is another byproduct of this illicit industry, as the disposal of toxic chemical waste from clandestine laboratories contaminates local ecosystems and water supplies.

Regional and International Responses

In response, regional and international cooperation has intensified. Countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region including Laos, Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam have reaffirmed their commitment to joint action through platforms such as the Senior Officials Committee Meeting of the Signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control.

These efforts focus on intelligence sharing, coordinated law enforcement operations, and the implementation of sub-regional action plans to disrupt trafficking networks. The UNODC and INCB are providing technical assistance, capacity building, and support for regulatory reforms, emphasizing the need for stronger monitoring of chemical trade, enhanced enforcement capabilities, and the development of early warning systems to detect emerging threats.

Ongoing Challenges and Recommendations

The use of non-controlled chemicals and the constant evolution of trafficking methods make regulatory and enforcement responses difficult to sustain. Experts and international organizations underscore the urgent need for countries to invest in forensic and technological capabilities, strengthen cross-border cooperation, and expand prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation programs to address the growing demand for synthetic drugs. Addressing corruption and governance weaknesses that allow organized crime to thrive is equally critical. The crisis demands a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that integrates law enforcement, regulatory reform, public health strategies, and international collaboration. Only through unified and sustained action can Southeast Asia hope to stem the tide of synthetic drug production and trafficking and protect its communities from the escalating harms of this evolving threat.

Conventions/

International law

1) Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961 (as amended in 1972)

- Art. 4(c): Restricts drug activities to medical and scientific use.
- Art. 12: Controls manufacture and distribution with mandatory records to prevent diversion.
- Arts. 19 & 20: Require annual estimates and statistics to monitor licit activities.
- Art. 36: Obligates states to criminalize illicit drug activities.

2) Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971

- Art. 2: Sets international control for psychotropic substances via scheduling.
- Art. 7: Limits Schedule I substances to medical/scientific use.
- Art. 13: Requires trade monitoring and record-keeping to prevent misuse.

3) UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988

- Art. 3: Criminalizes all stages of illicit drug production and trafficking.
- Art. 12: Controls precursor chemicals, mandates monitoring and international cooperation.
- Art. 13: Targets eradication of illicit crops and demand reduction.

4) UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000 (Palermo)

- Art. 5: Criminalizes involvement in organized criminal groups.
- Art. 6-7: Mandate action against money laundering and require financial oversight.
- Art. 10-11: Ensure liability of legal persons and proper penalties.
- Arts. 16-18: Provide for extradition, legal aid, and law enforcement cooperation.

5) UN Convention Against Corruption, 2003 (UNCAC)

- Art. 1: Aims to strengthen anti-corruption measures.
- Arts. 5-14: Promote transparency and preventive frameworks.
- Arts. 15-44: Require criminalization of corruption and enhance international cooperation.

Case Law

1) Thailand Supreme Court Decision No. 190/2023: Evidentiary Standards in Narcotics Cases

A significant domestic case, Supreme Court Decision No. 190/2023, involved multiple defendants accused of methamphetamine trafficking and use. The court examined the chain of evidence, the credibility of witness testimony, and the application of both the Narcotics Code and the Road Traffic Act. The court reaffirmed that the use and trafficking of methamphetamine remain criminal offenses under Thai law, with penalties ranging from imprisonment to substantial fines. This case highlights the importance of rigorous evidentiary standards in narcotics prosecutions and demonstrates how domestic courts interpret and apply evolving national drug laws in line with international obligations.

2. INTERPOL's 2024 International Crackdown on Synthetic Drugs

In July–August 2024, INTERPOL coordinated a landmark multinational operation targeting synthetic drug trafficking networks in Southeast Asia, involving law enforcement agencies from Australia, Cambodia, Korea, Myanmar, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam. This operation led to the seizure of synthetic drugs valued at approximately USD 1.05 billion, a figure that underscores the immense scale and profitability of the regional synthetic drug trade. Notably, one seizure involved nearly 900 kg of crystal methamphetamine in Sydney, which was traced back to the United States, revealing the global reach and the complexity of trafficking routes. The operation demonstrated the necessity of real-time intelligence sharing, coordinated investigations, and the use of mutual legal assistance frameworks to pursue transnational criminal networks. Such coordinated actions are grounded in international conventions, including the 1988 Vienna Convention and the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which provide the legal basis for cross-border investigations and prosecutions.

3) Indonesia's Largest Methamphetamine Bust (2025)

In May 2025, Indonesian authorities conducted the country's largest-ever methamphetamine seizure, intercepting around two tons of the drug hidden in tea packets aboard an Indonesian-flagged vessel near the Riau islands. The operation was triggered by a tip-off from Thai authorities, reflecting the importance of regional collaboration. Four Indonesians and two Thai nationals were apprehended, and the drugs were traced to a syndicate operating out of the Golden Triangle, a notorious hub for narcotics production. The case illustrates how Southeast Asian law enforcement agencies leverage international notifications, maritime surveillance, and joint operations to disrupt major trafficking syndicates. Legal proceedings in Indonesia invoke strict anti-narcotics laws, often with severe penalties, and are informed by the country's obligations under the 1988 Vienna Convention to criminalize trafficking and dismantle organized crime groups.

4) The Mary Jane Veloso Case: Transnational legal and Human Rights Challenges

Mary Jane Veloso, a Filipino national, was convicted of drug trafficking in Indonesia in 2010 after heroin was found in her suitcase. Her trial and subsequent death sentence became a focal point for international human rights advocacy, as Veloso maintained she had been duped into acting as a drug mule. The case was complicated by language barriers, questions about legal representation, and claims of coercion. After years of advocacy and diplomatic negotiations, Veloso was repatriated to the Philippines in December 2024. Her case illustrates the complex intersection of transnational drug law enforcement, human rights, and the treatment of vulnerable individuals caught in trafficking networks. It also underscores the necessity for regional legal frameworks and cooperation, as well as the importance of fair trial standards and the protection

3) Regional and Community-Based Enforcement Initiatives

Beyond individual prosecutions, Southeast Asia has developed regional mechanisms to combat synthetic drug trafficking. ASEAN's Narcotics Cooperation Center and Drug Monitoring Network facilitate information exchange and joint operations among member states. These platforms help coordinate responses to new trafficking methods, such as the use of digital technology and encrypted communications by criminal syndicates. Community-based enforcement, such as village security units in border regions, plays a crucial role in early detection and reporting, complementing formal law enforcement and embodying the preventive measures encouraged by international convention.

Conclusion

The surge of synthetic drug production and trafficking in Southeast Asia poses a grave and rapidly evolving threat to the region's security, public health, and social stability. Despite record seizures and intensified law enforcement efforts, the adaptability of transnational criminal networks, the proliferation of new trafficking routes, and the use of diverse precursor chemicals have outpaced current responses. The crisis is compounded by weak governance, corruption, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities, leading to rising addiction rates, strained public health systems, and significant environmental and social harm. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive, unified approach that combines robust cross-border cooperation, strengthened legal and regulatory frameworks, intelligence sharing, and integrated public health strategies. Only through sustained regional and international collaboration, supported by strong political will and community engagement,

can Southeast Asia hope to disrupt the synthetic drug trade, protect its communities, and restore safety and resilience across the region.

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QARMA

- What are the primary political, economic, and logistical factors driving the exponential rise in synthetic drug production in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Golden Triangle region?
- How have drug trafficking networks adapted their smuggling routes, embraced new technologies like darknet markets, and exploited border corruption in response to intensified border controls and surveillance?
- What specific structural and political obstacles do organizations such as ASEAN face in establishing unified, enforceable, and collaborative cross-border drug control policies?
- How has the increasing variety of synthetic drugs, especially new psychoactive substances (NPS), strained public health systems and exceeded the capacity of regional law enforcement agencies to respond effectively?
- Which data-driven strategies, including regional early warning systems and intelligence-sharing frameworks, have proven most effective in intercepting synthetic drug flows and should be scaled across Southeast Asia?

- How can countries in the region implement stricter controls over precursor chemicals while ensuring these regulations do not hinder legitimate industrial and pharmaceutical supply chains?
- What legal, institutional, and judicial reforms are needed to ensure stronger prosecution of major drug traffickers and to dismantle transnational criminal networks operating in the synthetic drug trade?
- In what ways can civil society, educational institutions, and local communities contribute to reducing demand for synthetic drugs and preventing youth involvement in trafficking networks?
- How can anti-corruption initiatives be integrated into broader drug control strategies to address internal collusion within law enforcement and border security agencies?
- What sustainable regional and international funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships and ASEAN-led initiatives, can be developed to support long-term anti-drug efforts and capacity-building in Southeast Asia?