



End North Korea's Drug Trade

by Ah-Young Kim

The recent seizure of the ship Pong Su off Australian waters and its cargo of more than \$144 million of heroin has put North Korea's drug trafficking in the international spotlight. The attention is long overdue. North Korea has for many years been deeply involved in the drug trade, and unlike other North Korean misdeeds, there is little debate over or sympathy for its actions. There must be a strong response by the international community and concerted efforts to halt North Korean drug trafficking. The upcoming ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Cambodia provides a ready platform to begin this anti-drug effort.

North Korea's illegal drug production is not new, nor is it an ad hoc operation. South Korean intelligence believes North Korean farmers, under direct instructions from the leadership in Pyongyang, developed numerous poppy farms since the late 1970s. They estimate that cultivation areas expanded from 1.3 million pyung (1 pyung is approximately 36 square feet) in 1992 to 12.8 million pyung in 1993, and 21.8 million pyung (or approximately 65 million square feet) in 1994. Government factories reportedly process the cultivated opium into heroin, and then companies and diplomatic economic departments distribute it. Those sources believe that Aesung Chongguk (under office No. 39 of the North Korean Worker's Party) is in charge of selling opium overseas while Daesung Chongguk coordinates opium trafficking through its trading corporation Daesung Sangsa, which has 20 overseas branches. North Korea is thought to produce more than 40 tons of opium a year; estimates of revenue earned range from a low of \$48 million to as much as \$1 billion annually (if all illegal drugs, such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines are included). A recent study by U.S. Forces Korea and South Korea's 21st Century Military Research Institute concludes that North Korea exports \$500 million of narcotics annually, making it the world's third largest opium exporter and the sixth largest heroin exporter.

North Korea's location facilitates drug smuggling and makes it a real concern for its neighbors. William Bach, director of the Office of African, Asian, and European Affairs within the State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, testified that since 1976, there have been at least 50 arrests and/or drug seizures involving North Koreans in more than 20 countries. Japanese officials claim that nearly 50 percent of illegal drug imports into Japan originate from North Korea. Last year, Japanese authorities caught a shipment of 150 kg of methamphetamines. It is believed that the North Korean spy boat chased and sunk last year was running drugs. Other witness accounts link North Korean drug smuggling with the Russian Mafia, the Japanese Yakuza, and other international criminal organizations in Europe and Southeast Asia. While defectors' stories deserve

some skepticism, the arrests and the consistency of the tales suggest there is truth to the claims that North Korea has systematically developed its drug production and trafficking capabilities.

That trade is now a focus of international concern as the U.S. attempts to build consensus on measures to tighten the economic noose around the North. Drug trafficking is an easy target: there are no doubts about the existence of the program, nor are there debates about its moral content or purposes. The networks that smuggle the drugs can also be used for other contraband (such as plutonium). Finally, cutting the flow of drugs means cutting the flow of drug money - a vital source of income - which could help push the North to the negotiating table.

Combating the drug trade will require a multifaceted, international strategy that demands close cooperation from all nations of Northeast Asia. That strategy should include:

- Encouraging active U.N. International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) participation. The INCB monitors and evaluates whether international treaties are being enforced by member nations. The INCB should conduct further research on North Korea's situation and report the results to both the United Nations Security Council and other international control regimes.
- Coordinating South Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and American efforts on port security and sea-based interdiction. The nature of the drug trade requires active communication and coordination by various police and maritime forces. This activity could provide a foundation for efforts to deal with other security issues ranging from terrorism to refugees that do not require a military response
- Strengthening cooperation among organized crime units in national police forces. The North Korean drug trade relies heavily on partners, usually organized crime groups. Increased intelligence sharing and coordination of law enforcement efforts will be critical to the success of any program to fight drug trafficking. Collaboration should be encouraged through funding, public forums, and training.

In early June, Japan, Australia, and the U.S. held trilateral consultations in Tokyo regarding North Korea's drug trafficking, and continued this discussion in Madrid the following week, which added EU nations such as Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. On June 14, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea issued a joint communiqué after their Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting in Honolulu, that expressed "concern about illegal activities by North Korean entities, including drug-running and

counterfeiting, and discussed means of cooperating among themselves with other countries and international organizations to stop such activities."

Meetings in Phnom Penh, Cambodia provide the backdrop for such follow-on discussions. South Korean, Japanese, and Chinese officials will meet separately along the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting to discuss North Korea's illegal activities. A strong statement from all the assembled ministers (North Korea's foreign minister has chosen not to attend) condemning North Korea's drug trafficking and calling for concerted action to halt the flow of illegal drugs will send a clear signal to North Korea that the international community will not tolerate bad behavior. The world has too long turned a blind eye to North Korea's illegal activities. It is time North Korea ended its addiction to the illegal drug trade.

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