



News release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

EU4MONITORING DRUGS PROJECT: SPECIAL REPORT AFGHANISTAN

Emerging methamphetamine industry in Afghanistan ‘worrying’, says new EMCDDA study

(24.11.2020, LISBON) There are signs that a methamphetamine industry is taking hold in Afghanistan, according to a new report published today by the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)**. The paper — *Emerging evidence of Afghanistan’s role as a producer and supplier of ephedrine and methamphetamine* — explores whether the country, renowned for being the world’s leading opium producer, has the potential to become a significant producer of methamphetamine. The report is the result of research conducted under the **EU4Monitoring Drugs (EU4MD) project**, funded by the **European Commission**.

Today’s findings, although preliminary, are ‘worrying’, states the report. New data suggest that relatively large quantities of low-cost ephedrine ⁽¹⁾ and methamphetamine are now produced in Afghanistan, and outputs may have the potential, in the long term, to rival the country’s production of opiates (opium, morphine, heroin).

The study is based on interviews with ephedrine and methamphetamine ‘cooks’, and other key informants, in the district of Bakwa (Farah province, south-west Afghanistan) in August 2020, as well as on documentary sources and the analysis of high-resolution satellite images.

Innovation, diversification and a move to plant-based production

The report describes how Afghan farmers have adapted to survive in the face of environmental and other challenges. It notes the important innovation, in the last three years, by some rural households in the south-west, to diversify into the production and processing of ‘significant quantities of ephedrine and methamphetamine’.

The emergence of this ‘new, and rapidly expanding, industry’ follows the realisation by Afghan drug traders that the *oman* (ephedra) plants — which have grown wild in the country’s central highlands for centuries — are a source of ephedrine, a precursor chemical used to make methamphetamine. Although methamphetamine production was occurring in the country between 2013 and 2017, it was relatively uncommon, low-scale and based on ephedrine extracted from medicines (e.g. cough syrups), in a costly process requiring specialised chemists.

‘The move to plant-based production in Bakwa appears to have changed this,’ says the report. It describes a two-tier system involving two types of laboratory: the first where ephedrine is extracted from ephedra plants by semi-skilled workers, and the second where methamphetamine is made from ephedrine by specialist ‘cooks’.

Many in Bakwa have now become involved in the new ‘cottage industry’ of extracting ephedrine from ephedra plants to supplement their income. As one ‘ephedrine cook’ put it: ‘This is easy, everyone can learn it’.

It is estimated that, at the time of the research, there were around 330 suspected ephedrine extraction sites, ranging from small household operations to larger factories, often run by local ephedrine traders (some of whom may also be involved in the opium trade). Once produced, the ephedrine is sold to traders from other provinces or directly to local methamphetamine production facilities, where skilled ‘methamphetamine cooks’ take over.

Potential scale of production ‘considerable’

Although the total amount of methamphetamine produced in Afghanistan is difficult to estimate, and the scope of this research is limited to Bakwa, this analysis suggests that the potential scale of methamphetamine production is ‘considerable’. It is estimated that the existing ephedrine extraction sites in Bakwa would have the capacity to produce around 98 tonnes of ephedrine per month (from 3 000 tonnes of dried ephedra), which could generate around 65 tonnes of crystal methamphetamine a month. Around 500 methamphetamine laboratories would be needed to process this amount of the drug. It is unlikely that there are this many methamphetamine laboratories in Bakwa itself, and reports of ephedrine being shipped to other provinces, or being seized on the Afghan-Iranian border, suggest that production may be taking place in other parts of Afghanistan or in neighbouring countries.

Among the destinations of Afghan methamphetamine cited in the report are neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. There are also increasing reports of methamphetamine connected with Afghanistan being seized further afield (e.g. Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Australia and countries in Africa).

A burgeoning Afghan synthetic drug economy

The growing synthetic ⁽²⁾ drug industry in Bakwa appears to be making a significant economic impact in the area, potentially providing up to EUR 46.8 million to the local economy in wages. If the potential amount of ephedrine produced in Bakwa were converted into methamphetamine locally, the industry could be worth an estimated EUR 203 million in Bakwa alone. Increasing reports of further ephedrine and methamphetamine processing in other Afghan provinces (Nimroz, Herat, Nangarhar), raises concern that the output of the country’s methamphetamine industry could one day potentially rival its sizeable opiate economy.

The report notes that there is considerable scope for ephedra crop cultivation in Afghanistan. With 192 000 km² of land higher than 2 500 metres — the altitude where ephedra reportedly grows best — the potential exists for increasing production of this crop.

EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel says: ‘This new analysis of the scale of Afghan ephedrine and methamphetamine production, the income it generates and the speed at which it has emerged, are both surprising and worrying. The degree to which producers in a small corner of the country have adopted new technologies, and established methamphetamine production with a potential global impact, serves as a reminder of how dramatically drug markets can change over short periods of time. We are now starting to see signs that methamphetamine produced in Afghanistan is beginning to appear on the international market. Given the regular heroin traffic and well-established trafficking routes between south-west Asia and Europe, there is an urgent need to learn more about this phenomenon. I think a clear need exists now to consider how we respond to the threat posed by increasing methamphetamine production in Afghanistan, both to the country itself and to the international community’.

Notes

(1) Ephedrine is one of the precursor chemicals used to make methamphetamine. For more on other methamphetamine precursors, see the EMCDDA [Methamphetamine drug profile](#).

(2) In this report, methamphetamine is described as a synthetic drug. However, when produced from ephedrine that has been extracted from plants, it is technically more precise to describe this as a semi-synthetic substance.