

# Drug Intelligence Brief



DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION  
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## VIETNAM: COUNTRY BRIEF

### Status in International Drug Trafficking



Since 1995, Vietnam has been designated as a major drug transit and production nation by the United States Department of State. Sitting astride the primary heroin trafficking route through southern China, Vietnam is regarded as a secondary transit area for the flow of Southeast Asian heroin to Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the United States. In addition to the ongoing problems with cannabis and opium poppy cultivation and usage, Vietnam is developing a synthetic drug problem—particularly with Ecstasy (methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, MDMA) and methamphetamine. Vietnam is also a significant source for sassafras oil, an essential oil in the production of safrole, a precursor chemical in the manufacture of MDMA by various criminal organizations.

### Cultivation and Processing

#### Cannabis

Cannabis is grown along the Mekong River delta and in the highland areas along the Laos and China borders. Most of the cannabis cultivated in these areas is used in the production of rope and in other legitimate hemp products. However, some of the cannabis is harvested for illicit marijuana consumption.

## ***Opium***

Vietnam produces approximately 10 to 15 tons of opium annually. Although this amount could yield approximately 1 metric ton of processed heroin, very little opium is converted to heroin. Like Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand, most of the opium poppy crop is cultivated by ethnic minorities for local use, particularly by the Hmong highlanders located in the northern provinces of Lai Chau, Son La, Nghe Anh, and other northwestern and central provinces that border Laos and China.

While it is agreed that the harvest ranges between 10 and 15 metric tons of opium, the number of hectares under cultivation is currently under debate. The Vietnam Standing Office of Drug Control estimates that there are only 315 hectares of opium poppy under cultivation. Even though the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) believes the figure to be higher, it still does not exceed 1,000 hectares. U.S. Government estimates place the figure at approximately 2,300 hectares.

The Vietnamese Government, however, continues its efforts to reduce opium cultivation through education, eradication, and a crop substitution program. Eradication and crop substitution efforts have reduced the number of hectares being used for opium poppy cultivation from 12,900 in 1993 to an estimated 2,300 in 2002 (using the highest figure available). Vietnam established a joint project with UNODC to eradicate opium poppy cultivation in Nghe Anh province, along with a successful crop substitution program in Nghe Anh and Son La provinces.

## **Trafficking**

### ***Heroin***

Vietnam is becoming an increasingly important transit country for heroin from Burma, Laos, and Thailand. Vietnamese counterdrug officials report that refined heroin from laboratories in Burma and Laos is being smuggled into Vietnam from Thailand and Laos for onward shipment to international drug markets. Heroin enters Vietnam by overland routes from Laos; by boats on the Mekong River from Laos through Cambodia; or by boats from the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea. It is then transported along primary road networks to major port cities, such as Ho Chi Minh City, or in Vietnamese territorial waters where it is loaded primarily for transport to Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan. While Vietnamese officials believe that the overland route through Laos remains the most popular route, they note the increasing importance of the route along the Mekong River through Cambodia.

### ***Marijuana***

Vietnam is a transit country for marijuana from Cambodia that is shipped to international drug markets. The marijuana produced in Cambodia is transported to Ho Chi Minh City where it is placed on trucks and shipped to the northern provinces of Vietnam. The marijuana is then smuggled into China, and ultimately destined for international markets.

## ***Synthetic Drugs***

Vietnam is becoming a significant consumer of amphetamine-type stimulants (primarily methamphetamine tablets from Burma). Vietnamese counterdrug officials report that these tablets originate from laboratories in Burma and are smuggled through China, Laos, and Cambodia. Once inside Vietnam, the most prominent destination for the tablets is Ho Chi Minh City.

## ***Precursor Chemical Production and Diversion***

Vietnam poses a significant drug threat by illicitly producing and trafficking in sassafras oil—an essential oil in the production of safrole (a precursor chemical for MDMA). Despite the Vietnamese Government's 1999 ban on the export of sassafras oil, DEA information indicates that a significant amount of illegal harvesting of sassafras trees for their oil is continuing.

During 2002, Vietnamese companies were involved in sassafras oil production in Laos and Cambodia. The oil was shipped through Vietnam to international markets. Much of this illegal sassafras oil is bound for European countries such as England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, which is the major production zone for MDMA in the world. Many of the sassafras oil transactions for this area are initiated over the Internet.

Other precursor chemicals that originate in or transit through Vietnam include ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, hydrochloric acid, acetone, toluene, potassium permanganate, methylethylketone (MEK), piperonylmethylketone (PMK), and phenyl-2-propanone (P2P). In 2001, the Vietnamese Government created a precursor chemical control unit with the mandate to control the diversion of chemicals originating in Vietnam or transiting through Vietnam. Vietnamese authorities claim there has been no significant diversion of these chemicals within Vietnam.

## ***Drug-Related Money Laundering***

Vietnam is not a major economic, financial, or money laundering center. The Vietnamese Government controls the banking system, which few Vietnamese use or trust. To date, the Vietnamese Government has not developed any significant money laundering legislation. The new counterdrug laws that went into effect on June 1, 2001, fail to address any significant money laundering issues and are not yet implemented. The police in Vietnam have little or no experience in money laundering investigations because proceeds from drug sales in Vietnam are usually converted immediately into cash (usually U.S. dollars) or gold.

## **Drug Abuse and Treatment**

### ***Drugs of Choice***

Opium abuse predominates in the northwest mountain regions of Vietnam, while heroin is the drug of choice in the major population centers. Heroin is generally used in an injectable form. Other drugs that are abused include marijuana, MDMA, and methamphetamine. The

use of MDMA and methamphetamine is increasing throughout Vietnam. Vietnamese authorities recently acknowledged that MDMA and methamphetamine abuse have expanded into the general population, as opposed to being a phenomenon confined to young adults in large population centers such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Officials state that these substances are now being encountered in 53 of Vietnam's 61 provinces.

## **Addict Population**

The Ministry of Public Health officially registered 142,001 drug addicts in Vietnam in 2002. The Vietnam Ministry of Public Security places the number of drug addicts at 131,000 for 2002. However, unofficial estimates by other organizations place the figure at somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000 addicts. These numbers vary due to different definitions of an addict and different reporting requirements within the various organizations.

### **Ministry of Public Health Addiction Statistics (from International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, INCSR)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Addicts</b>
2002	142,001
2001	113,669
2000	100,293
1999	97,000
1998	89,034
1997	69,780

### ***Treatment and Demand Reduction Programs***

The increasing availability of drugs passing through Vietnam and the corresponding increase in addiction has resulted in an augmented prevention campaign in schools, workplaces, and media, warning of the dangers of drug abuse. Vietnam has 73 drug treatment centers nationwide that offer patients a choice of institution-based or community-based treatments. Each center has the capacity to treat between 100 and 3000 addicts at any given time. The treatment programs use both traditional medicine and counseling therapies in treating drug addicts. However, the effectiveness of these programs is low with a relapse rate of between 80 and 90 percent.

## **Drug Law Enforcement Agencies and Legislation**

Vietnam has several agencies in the field of drug law enforcement. These agencies are:

1. The Standing Office of Drug Control – sets drug policy for the Vietnam General Department of Police (established in 1997). It was formerly known as the Vietnam National Drug Coordination Committee.
2. Counter-Narcotics Department – drug enforcement arm of the General Department of Police (established in 1997).
3. Vietnam Customs Department, Narcotics Suppression Unit – drug investigations at airports, seaports, and border crossing points.

4. Civil Aviation Administration Security Department – responsible for law enforcement at Vietnam’s airports.
5. Border Defense Force – military units specially designated to interdict drug smuggling into Vietnam.

The Vietnamese legislature drafted a long-term counterdrug plan for the period from 2001 to 2010. The plan is part of a 14-point program designed to counter the current drug trends in Vietnam. This program covers a variety of drug-related topics, including law enforcement, prevention, education, treatment, and rehabilitation.

In December 2000, the Vietnamese National Assembly passed the country’s first comprehensive counterdrug law, which for the first time allows Vietnamese police to use commonly accepted law enforcement techniques, such as controlled deliveries, undercover investigations, the subpoena of financial records, and the use of confidential informants. This law went into effect on June 1, 2001. However, the Ministry of Public Security has not issued the implementing regulations to take advantage of this law. As a result, even though this law is on the books, it is not currently being enforced by the police.

### ***Treaties and Conventions***

Vietnam is a party to the 1988 United Nations (U.N.) Drug Convention; the 1961 U.N. Single Convention as amended by the 1972 Protocol; and the 1971 U.N. Convention on Psychotropic Substances. Vietnam signed the U.N. Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime in December 2000. Vietnam has signed counterdrug agreements with the following countries: Burma, Cambodia, Hungary, Laos, Russia, and Thailand. Vietnam also has regional Memoranda of Understanding with the following countries: Burma, Cambodia, China, Laos, and Thailand. Vietnam has no current treaties or agreements with the United States on matters relating to subjects such as mutual legal assistance or extradition. A bilateral counterdrug agreement has been in discussion for the past 5 years, but there has been no indication as to when it will be signed.

### ***Statistical Tables***

#### **Prices (As of December 2002) (from the Hanoi Country Office 2002 Foreign Situation Report)**

<b>Drug</b>	<b>Dosage Unit</b>	<b>Vietnamese (Dong) Dollars</b>	<b>U.S. Dollars</b>
Heroin	Gram	30,000 - 50,000 VND	\$2.00 - \$3.30
MDMA (low quality)	Tablet	50,000 VND	\$3.30
MDMA (high quality)	Tablet	300,000 VND	\$20.00
Methamphetamine	Tablet	25,000 - 80,000 VND	\$1.67 - \$5.50

## Arrests

Year	Cases	Arrests
2002	14,167	23,199
2001	12,811	21,103
2000	8,925	16,276
1999	9,286	19,286
1998	9,000	18,000
1997	7,205	14,226

Source: INCSR

## Seizures

Year	MDMA (tablets)	Heroin (powder/kg)	Opium (kg)	Marijuana (kg)	Synthetics* (tablets)
2002	62,784	57.4	612.6	243	47,852
2001	49,369	40.33	589.4	1,272.5	43,160
2000	66,192	50.46	567	2,071	6,783
1999	NA	51.8	314	369	NA
1998	NA	55	900	400	NA
1997	NA	25	919	7,986	NA
1996	NA	54.75	839	581.1	NA
1995	NA	20.5	NA	578.7	NA

\* Reported in the INCSR as amphetamine-type stimulants

## Key Judgments

- Vietnam remains an important transit route for Southeast Asian heroin smuggled to Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the United States. Opium poppy is cultivated in Vietnam, but the total annual opium production is in question and very little of the opium is converted into heroin.
- Even though Vietnam has banned the export of sassafras oil, the illicit harvesting of the sassafras tree and trafficking of the oil continue by various Vietnamese criminal and business enterprises. Much of the sassafras oil is bound for Europe, including the Netherlands, the world's primary source of MDMA.
- The number of drug addicts has doubled since 1997, fueled by the increasing availability of drugs, such as heroin and methamphetamine, passing through Vietnam. In 2002, the Vietnamese Government estimated that almost US\$133 million is spent annually for illegal drugs.

This report was prepared by the Europe, Asia, Africa Strategic Intelligence Unit of the Office of Strategic Intelligence. This report reflects information received through July 31, 2003. Comments and requests for copies are welcome and may be faxed to the Intelligence Production Unit, Intelligence Division, DEA Headquarters, at (202) 307-8726.