



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF DRUGS AND CRIME

BCNMUN 2024

Identity and Conflict

Table of Contents

Table of Contents..... 2

Introduction.....4

Definition of Key Terms.....5

Background Information.....7

Major Countries and Organizations Involved.....8

Timeline of Events..... 11

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions..... 12

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue..... 14

Possible Solutions..... 15

Bibliography..... 16

Topic: Implementing extreme measures to dismantle international drug mules.

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Introduction

Drug mules refer to individuals who smuggle drugs across borders by carrying them in or around their bodies (oftentimes swallowing them or in their personal belongings). The global consumption of illicit drugs has been steadily increasing, with an estimated rise of 240 million users in 2011 to 296 million in 2021. As the demand for drugs grows, so does the scale of drug trafficking, making the role of drug mules essential for the transportation of illegal substances. Traffickers typically rely on drug mules to smuggle illicit substances across international borders with minimal detection, making use of the human body's ability to resist advanced detecting methods. This method of trafficking is not only critical to the drug trade but also includes dangerous and possibly deadly acts from the individuals involved.

The involvement of drug mules presents a grave global concern, reverberating across communities and impacting societies worldwide. Additionally, at United States borders, drug mules are responsible for an estimated 15% to 25% of drug trafficking arrests, amounting to approximately three thousand people yearly. These operations, which are coordinated by highly skilled criminal organizations across multiple countries, add to the global spread of illegal substances. The smuggling of drugs with the use of 'mules' not only affects the increase in the global drug crisis, but also poses immense obstacles to border security. Due to the rising prominence of this issue on a global scale, each member state should respond in a comprehensive and collaborative manner.

The exploitation of drug mules is closely linked to human trafficking, resulting in severe physical and psychological consequences for the victims. Many drug mules are forced into this labor

under threats of violence or false promises of rewards. The individuals involved often suffer from severe physical pain and abuse due to the acts that they are forced to commit or as a consequence of resistance and not following orders. Internal drug consumption, the intake of substances through ingestion, absorption, or inhalation into the body, can have physical consequences such as overdoses, intestinal blockages, and other serious or potentially fatal health problems. Additionally, these individuals frequently face severe stress or anxiety, which can lead to major mental trauma. Due to this high level of exploitation and rights violations, many compare this current issue to other historical ones, such as slavery.

Definition of Key Terms

Drug mule

A drug mule is a person who smuggles illegal drugs across borders or security checkpoints, typically by concealing them on or inside their body, in luggage, or in vehicles. Often exploited by criminal organizations, drug mules face severe legal consequences and health risks if caught or if the drugs rupture internally. They are usually recruited from vulnerable populations, either through coercion or the promise of quick money, and play a crucial role in the drug trafficking network.

Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking or also known as drug distribution is the illegal production, selling, and transportation of illicit substances. Drug trafficking is a market that runs on complex networks and often involves organized crime groups which are criminalized by both federal and state laws.

Illicit drugs

Illicit drugs are substances that are prohibited by law to either be produced, transported or consumed. Because of their potential for addiction and harm to both individuals and society as a whole, these drugs are typically regulated by both national and international drug laws and treaties. Some examples are cocaine, opioids, amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), sedatives and tranquilizers, and solvents and inhalants.

Human trafficking

Human trafficking is the illegal trade of people for exploitation, typically through forced labor, sexual slavery, or commercial sexual exploitation. Traffickers use coercion, deception, or force to recruit and control victims, often targeting vulnerable populations. Victims may be transported across borders or within a country, and are frequently exploited in various industries, including agriculture, construction, domestic work, or the sex trade. Human trafficking is a severe violation of human rights and a global crime that affects millions of people, with traffickers profiting from the exploitation of their victims.

Body packing

Body packing is the act of transporting drugs across borders or through security checkpoints by hiding them inside the body. This is usually done by swallowing drug-filled packets made of condoms or other rubber, or by inserting them into body cavities. This method is used to evade detection and can lead to severe health risks if the packets rupture.

Opioids

Opioids are a group of drugs used primarily for relieving pain. They function by attaching to opioid receptors in the brain and spinal cord, which reduces pain perception. Opioids can be either natural (morphine and codeine) or synthetic (oxycodone, hydrocodone, and fentanyl). While opioids are highly effective in treating moderate to severe pain, their ability to create exhilaration raises the risk of addiction, dependence, and overdose. This has resulted in a worldwide opioid crisis, with many people becoming addicted to both prescription opioids and illicit ones such as heroin.

Background Information

For hundreds of years, the term 'mule' has been associated with the transportation of large loads, in particular illicit drugs. Drug traffickers have long used animal mules, which are the offspring of donkeys and horses, to carry drugs in rough terrain due to their strength. In the 20th century, drug traffickers commonly used mules or mule trains to transport opium (a highly addictive narcotic coming from poppy plants) between Burma and Thailand. These animals were equipped with bells and bridles which were made to carry heavy packages of narcotics.

Today, the use of human mules is a major part of the world drug trade. These individuals frequently commit potentially deadly crimes in order to transport drugs over international borders. The history of using human and animal mules displays the ongoing challenges in stopping drug trafficking. To successfully dismantle these illicit activities and reduce their negative effects on society, it is necessary to comprehend this evolution.

The 2005 "Bali Nine" case was an important event that revealed the usage of drug mules. This party of nine Australians was captured trying to import heroin from Indonesia to Australia. The case attracted international attention and resulted in severe punishments, including death sentences for the ringleaders. This event highlighted the reality and dangers faced by drug mules, as well as some countries' harsh tactics to combat drug trafficking.

Large drug corporations have depended heavily on mules to transport their drugs. The Medellín Cartel, led by Pablo Escobar, developed the use of human mules to transport cocaine from Colombia to the US and Europe. They hired a large number of people to take drug-filled packets, a method known as "body packing" that gained popularity in the 1980s. More recently, the Sinaloa Cartel has been known to use a varied array of mules, including airline pilots and submarine operators, showing the increasing difficulty of these operations.

The selection of drug mules is a well planned process by drug traffickers. They frequently target those in delicate economic or personal situations, exploiting their vulnerabilities. Young women, especially those with children, are commonly targeted since they are considered as less likely to be carefully inspected at border crossings. Individuals with debts from gambling or drug addictions are also targeted by drug cartels, who force them into becoming mules in order to repay their obligations. The recruitment process frequently uses a combination of fear and persuasion, with offers of quick money and promises of a safe passage.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Mexico

Mexico plays an important role in the global drug trafficking network as a major country for both production and transit. It is a significant producer of illegal narcotics like cocaine, much of which are brought into the US through smuggling. Particularly, there has been an increase in the smuggling of fentanyl, the majority of which enters the country through the southern border and mostly through points of entry (POEs). In California alone, 68,000 pounds of illicit substances were found at POEs in 2023. The employment of "blind mules," or drug traffickers who discreetly bring drugs over the border by applying drugs to innocent items owned by others, is an alarming trend in Mexico. Fentanyl's small form makes it easy to conceal in small doses, which facilitates its transportation and raises the need for unintended carriers. The increase in fentanyl smuggling shows the continued challenges Mexico has in stopping trafficking networks.

United States of America

Drug smuggling is a major concern for the United States, especially near its southern border with Mexico. Along this border, the U.S captured 241,000 pounds of illegal drugs in total in 2023. A significant number of these seizures involved the synthetic painkiller fentanyl, whose smuggling rose by 480% in 2023. The majority of these drugs are shipped via ports of entry (POEs), where traffickers hide drugs in cargo and vehicles. Illegal drug use in the United States is significant; in 2010, consumers spent around \$100 billion on heroin, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine. Due to this need, the majority of drugs that enter the United States through international drug smuggling come from Mexico.

Myanmar

In 2023, Myanmar ranked as the leading producer of opium, a highly addictive drug derived from poppy plants, with an output of 1,080 tonnes. For neighboring countries, this large production poses considerable issues as it plays a big role in international drug smuggling. Due to the close proximity to Myanmar, drug smugglers and mules pose a greater threat to India's security. The serious human trafficking issue in Myanmar, which makes it easier for vulnerable groups,

particularly children, to be used and manipulated, worsens the situation. Children often work as drug mules in the Indian state of Mizoram to smuggle illegal substances across the border, which shows the serious security and humanitarian risks posed by Myanmar's drug production and trafficking activities.

Colombia

Colombia is one of the top nations of drug trafficking, especially when it comes to cocaine (a strong stimulant made from coca leaves). Major developments of drug smuggling have been seen in the nation such as illegal narcotics being sometimes concealed in fruit or coal containers, as well as in individuals. This is a common practice throughout Latin America, where a great number of men and women are recruited to smuggle drugs across international borders. Colombia is a major player in the international drug trade due to its widespread coca cultivation and cocaine manufacture, which makes it necessary to take strong action against drug trafficking and the use of people as human mules.

Spain

Due to its favorable location as a port of entry from Asia, Africa, and South America, Spain remains a vital entrance point for narcotics into Europe. When compared to 2022, Spain's overall cocaine seizures (the police seizure and confiscation of illicit drugs) doubled in 2023. Drug mules from South America, where people are forced to keep illegal substances inside their bodies, have been documented in a number of cases. Due to its location and strong port infrastructure, Spain serves as an entry point for global drug trafficking networks. As a result, greater monitoring and law enforcement actions are required to counter this issue.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been a major supplier of illicit drugs, especially opioids. Until recently, Afghanistan controlled worldwide illicit opium production, making up 80% of the total supply in 2022 (an estimated 6,200 tonnes out of 7,800 tonnes worldwide). While data on drug mules in Afghanistan is lacking, the enormous amount of drug manufacture shows that drug mules play an important role in the trafficking process, even if they are not widely recognized. Afghanistan's opium market provides an opportunity for drug mules to move narcotics across borders, potentially exploiting the

country's weak frontiers. Although the Taliban executed an opium developing ban in April 2022, resulting in a 95% decline in production to 333 tons in 2023, the widespread drug trade infrastructure may still use drug mules for smaller-scale trafficking operations.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1729-1794 banning of opium in the Qing Dynasty	The Yongzheng Emperor (third emperor of the Qing dynasty) prohibited the sale and smoking of opium due to severe addiction problems among citizens. Still, this measure failed to stop the trade. The Jiaqing Emperor (fifth emperor of the Qing dynasty) banned the importation and cultivation of opium in an attempt to address the addiction crisis in 1794.
1839-1860 Opium wars	After learning that it was possible to smuggle opium from India to China illegally, British merchants launched an efficient but illegal drug trade that harmed China's economy and public health.
1970	The Medellín Cartel began operations in Colombia, smuggling small quantities of cocaine into the United States. Led by Pablo Escobar, this cartel became one of the most powerful drug trafficking organizations, making great use of drug mules and even purchasing an island in the Caribbean for refueling aircraft.
1980s	Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán led the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico, which grew to importance and is still active today. This cartel was an important stakeholder in the ongoing drug war in Mexico, resulting in thousands of deaths and high levels of violence. Drug mules were frequently used to smuggle narcotics.
1988	The United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic

	Substances was established.
2017	The opioid crisis intensified in the U.S., with a sharp increase in fentanyl smuggling.
2020	Due to border closures and increased law enforcement presence, the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected drug trafficking activities by limiting typical trafficking routes.
2024	INTERPOL's Operation Lionfish Hurricane resulted in record seizures of illicit narcotics and chemical precursors totaling USD 1.6 billion in 31 countries. The investigation resulted in 206 arrests and showed the growing complexity of drug trafficking networks, such as the usage of handmade 'narco-sub' and a variety of criminal businesses.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

[20 December, 1988 - United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.](#)

The 20th December, 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances extended international regulation to include not only narcotic drugs but also psychotropic substances and synthetic drugs. It strengthened global efforts against drug trafficking by addressing issues such as money laundering, precursor chemicals, and the diversion of legal substances for illicit drug production. The convention also enhanced international cooperation in law enforcement, established measures for the extradition of drug traffickers, and facilitated the seizure and confiscation of drug-related assets, making it a crucial tool in the global fight against drug trafficking.

21 June, 1991 - Resolution adopted by the General Assembly: International action to combat drug abuse and illicit production and trafficking.

The 21 June 1991 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on International action to combat drug abuse and illicit production and trafficking called for enhanced global efforts to address the growing problem of drug abuse and illegal drug trade. It emphasized the need for comprehensive strategies that included prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation for drug abuse, while also strengthening law enforcement against illicit production and trafficking. The resolution promoted international cooperation, encouraging countries to share information, resources, and best practices, as well as urged the integration of drug control measures into national policies to effectively combat the global drug crisis.

18 December, 2008 - Resolution adopted by the General Assembly: International cooperation against the world drug problem.

The 18 December 2008 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on International Cooperation against the world drug problem emphasized the importance of strengthening state capacity to address drug-related challenges through assistance and resource-building programs. It highlighted the critical role of international cooperation in combating drug trafficking and called for enhanced collaboration among countries to share intelligence, technology, and resources. The resolution also stressed the need for comprehensive strategies that include prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation, alongside robust law enforcement efforts, to effectively tackle the global drug problem.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Global Programme Against Money Laundering Proceeds of Crime and the Financing of Terrorism (GPML)

The Global Programme against Money Laundering, Proceeds of Crime and the Financing of Terrorism (GPML), created by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) aims to combat financial crimes and money laundering by promoting global collaboration and raising public

awareness. However, the GPML has faced challenges in significantly reducing drug trafficking, as trafficking networks remain highly adaptable, continuously finding ways to go around the legal frameworks and evade detection.

Andean Counterdrug Initiative

The Andean Counterdrug Initiative was a U.S.-led program aimed at reducing drug production and trafficking in the Andean region, particularly in countries like Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. It focused on eradication of coca crops, alternative development programs to provide farmers with legal income sources, and strengthening local law enforcement and military capabilities. Despite its efforts, the initiative faced criticism for its limited impact on long-term drug production and for contributing to social and environmental issues, as drug traffickers adapted by shifting cultivation to other areas and methods.

Possible Solutions

Police Training

Police departments require specialized training in order to effectively address the issue of drug mules. Police officers frequently face drug mules at various entrance points, such as airports and borders, where they must detect suspicious behavior and hidden substances. Improved training programs can provide police with the knowledge they need to spot suspected mules by using behavioral analysis and recognizing indicators of pressure manipulation. For example, training might involve realistic scenarios involving drug mules, allowing officers to improve their skills in a controlled environment. Many drug mules come from different cultures and may be vulnerable due to economic concerns, therefore training should emphasize cultural sensitivity and understanding. Understanding the reasoning behind why people become mules (often due to financial desperation or force) allows officers to approach situations with empathy while continuing to do their job by carrying out the law. According to a study made by Power DMS, 80% of law enforcement leaders understood an increased demand for training in narcotics restriction, while only 34% believed their agencies had appropriate money for such projects. Investing in training programs can lead to increased detection rates of drug mules, eventually decreasing the trafficking networks.

Improved border security

Strengthening border security is another possible solution for the drug mule issue. This can be achieved with a strategy that combines improved technology with enhanced staff at key entry points. Implementing advanced scanning technologies at airports and land borders, for example, can improve the detection of concealed drugs in luggage or on individuals. These technologies may include X-ray machines or body scanners that identify anomalies and patterns in scans. Increasing the number of trained officers at border crossings enables more inspections and random checks on travelers accused of carrying drugs. Cooperation between countries is particularly important because sharing intelligence about trafficking routes and known drug mule tactics allows law enforcement to better predict and fight smuggling operations.

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