

Combating the drug menace together

Even as Colombo steps up efforts to combat drug peddling in the country, authorities have turned to India for help to address what has become a shared concern for the neighbours.

Sri Lanka police's narcotics bureau, amid frequent hauls and arrests, is under visible pressure to tackle the growing drug menace. President Maithripala Sirisena, who controversially spoke of executing drug convicts, has also taken efforts to empower the tri-forces to complement the police's efforts to address the problem. Further, recognising that drugs are smuggled by air and sea from other countries, Sri Lanka is now considering a larger regional operation, with Indian assistance.

"We intend to initiate dialogue with the Indian authorities to get their assistance. We need their help in identifying witnesses needed in our local investigations into smuggling activities," Law and Order Minister Ranjith Madduma Bandara told local media recently.

India's role, top officials here say, will be "crucial". The conversation between the two countries has been going on for some time now, after the neighbours signed an agreement on Combating International Terrorism and Illicit Drug Trafficking in 2013, but the problem has grown since. Appreciating the urgency of the matter, top cops from the narcotics control bureaus of India and Sri Lanka, who met in New Delhi in May, decided to enhance cooperation to combat drug crimes.

Following up, Colombo has sought New Delhi's assistance to trace two underworld drug kingpins, believed to be in hiding in India, according to narcotics bureau chief DIG Sajeewa Medawatta. "We are in close contact with both the NCB and the Home Ministry," he told *The Hindu*.

'Kerala ganja'

India's help is valued not only because of the over three decades' experience that the NCB has in tackling this crime. A considerable amount of the drugs that enter Sri Lanka, in fact, come from India. Especially cannabis, which is popularly known as 'Kerala ganja'.

According to official statistics, over 51,000 kg of this drug has been seized in the island since 2010. It is frequently seized in the Northern Province, where drug peddling has emerged as a serious social challenge.

Unlike heroin and cocaine, often carried by those travelling by air, 'Kerala ganja' is said to be smuggled in through the sea, using fishermen, at times even without their knowledge. "The drug issue is also rampant in the Western Province [which is home to the capital] and in the beach towns along the southern coast, where many foreigners visit," Mr. Medawatta said.

Around 1,600 kg of heroin and 1,800 kg of cocaine were seized in the same period, from 2010 till date. Heroin is brought in mostly from Pakistan and Afghanistan, according to officials involved in related investigations.

Suspects of drug trafficking are periodically picked up not just in Sri Lanka, but also in India. Official data shows that nearly 270 Indians are currently in Sri Lankan prisons on charges of drug trafficking, while over 130 Sri Lankans are in jail in India for similar offences.

At times, peddlers are caught while transiting from Sri Lanka to their destination in India, as was in the case of a suspect's arrest here in December 2016. He was carrying cocaine to India, according to officials.

“When you are an island, many good things can come in from outside. At the same time, some bad things too make their way into the country. That is the challenge,” Mr. Medawatta said.

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