

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

India stepping up anti-drug efforts

A national seminar and increased media attention have put new emphasis on the problem.

A "Smugglers Forfeiture of Property Act" is under consideration by the government for the winter session of Parliament, the Narcotics Commissioner of India told a two-day national seminar on drug abuse recently. The legislation is aimed at raising the stakes against drug traffickers; a year ago the government overhauled the country's archaic drug laws to provide wide powers to law-enforcement officers and mandated a minimum 10-year sentence just for pushing.

The "Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1985" also provides government power to establish centers for identification, treatment, education, rehabilitation, and social re-integration of addicts.

Union Welfare Minister Dr. Rajendra Kumari Bajpai presented the integrated plan drawn up recently by the government. "The urgency and importance of these measures is because we are keen to nip the problem in the bud," Dr. Bajpai said. According to press reports the prod had come directly from the Prime Minister's office. A shortage of trained psychiatric and other medical personnel and equipment will, however, limit the program to Delhi for the time being.

The scope of the problem can be seen in the record of arrests and drug seizures during 1986. According to the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, under whose wing a new "Narcotics Control Bureau" has been set up in the finance ministry, seizures of heroin exceeded 2,400 kg. as of mid-Sep-

tember compared to 761 kg. for the whole of 1985, and 203 kg. in 1984. More than 15 tons of hashish have been confiscated, compared to 10.3 and 4.3 tons in 1985 and 1984, respectively.

Though there have been reports of judges ignoring the penalty provisions of the new law, the law itself has clearly inspired more activity on the part of enforcement personnel. An upward revision of the rewards the government offered as an incentive to informers and officials who help in narcotics seizures gave a further boost. In the past eight months, the two largest seizures of heroin and hashish in the world occurred in the Bombay area.

An increasing number of news reports on anti-drug campaigns and exposés of drug problems are coming in from different parts of the country.

Recently, reports from West Bengal, for instance, say that an estimated 60 kg. of "brown sugar," or unrefined heroin, is sold on Calcutta streets every day, where drug abuse has shot up alarmingly in the last two years. (One gram of "brown sugar" can provide about 20 doses, each selling for the equivalent of \$5.) There are more than 50,000 addicts belonging mainly to the middle and lower classes throughout the state, with an estimated 300 new addicts being created every day.

A public anti-drug campaign launched by the Indian Chamber of Commerce and various student and citizen groups in Calcutta recently, have forced officials to act, though according to the press reports to date,

not one of the half-dozen well-known "kingpins" of the deadly racket have been booked.

In another report, from the north-eastern state of Manipur, whose border with Burma falls within the "Golden Triangle" drug-production zone, citizens have taken the soaring drug problem into their own hands. In the face of local police and political corruption, many villages have set up their own anti-drug organizations to go after both addicts and peddlers. "Sometimes," according to one report, "women's organizations destroy shops of these peddlers, who are then publicly paraded with their heads tonsured and accompanied by a jeering crowd."

The government is actively seeking international cooperation in the anti-drug fight. The first meeting of the Indo-U.S. working group on narcotics in September produced an agreement that the United States would share all its general and operational intelligence about drug trafficking, particularly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Burma. Also discussed was India's request to share U.S. experience in the rehabilitation and education aspects of the problem. The United States reportedly suggested that India impose curbs on the production and movement of acetic anhydride.

It is also reported, unofficially, that discussions have been initiated with India to enlarge the scope of the extradition treaty between the two countries to include drug offenses.

In a related development, it was reported here that the dispute that erupted over the posting of two British customs officers in India on anti-drug duty is based on Delhi's insistence that the scope of information they are bound to share, includes information about the British bank accounts of known drug smugglers.