

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Demand death for drug traffickers

The Congress-I youth organization campaigns for an anti-drug amendment, as the addiction problem grows.

On Sept. 16, the youth wing of the Congress-I Party launched a nationwide campaign demanding the death penalty for drug trafficking, at a day-long rally in the capital.

Haroon Yusuf, chairman of the youth Congress Anti-Narcotics Cell, appealed to the government to amend the tough anti-narcotics laws adopted in 1985 to include capital punishment. Without such a rigorous step, he told the press, it would be impossible to eradicate drug trafficking in India.

Though there are no definitive national surveys known to this writer, estimates of the number of drug addicts in India range from 500,000 to 2 million—concentrated in Bombay, New Delhi, Calcutta, and other major cities, as well as in the northeast along the border with Burma. Official estimates of heroin addicts alone are 500-700,000.

Limited surveys do indicate plainly that the drug trade has spread out from the confines of the wealthy jet-set, to engulf the lower and middle classes generally, and that the users' age group has shifted from 31-40 years to 21-30 years. The problem is now acute on many college campuses in particular. According to a recent study by the Indian Council of Medical Research, 25% of the students in large cities experiment with drugs. New Delhi tops the list with 35%.

It is these realities which are Yusuf's main concern. He will tour the country and bring his message directly to the people during the next two

months, to mobilize support for moving the death penalty legislation in the next session of parliament, which begins Nov. 29.

The Narcotic Drug and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1985 replaced the archaic three-year maximum sentences for trafficking with a minimum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment, and a stiff fine, and set up the Narcotics Control Bureau to coordinate a nationwide enforcement drive, but legal loopholes and jurisdictional problems have hobbled the effort, as is reflected in statistics from Delhi. Only 932 of the 4,931 cases brought before the courts in Delhi under the law from November 1985 to May 1988 were ever decided, and of these, there were only 195 convictions.

The government has already taken several steps to strengthen law enforcement. In July, an ordinance was promulgated providing for preventive detention of suspected traffickers and their accomplices—including those who safehouse and launder the drug money—for up to two years. So far, some 200 individuals have been apprehended under the new regulations.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who is known to view the drug menace as an urgent national security concern, established a special cabinet subcommittee under the Home Minister to coordinate the anti-drug work of the different ministries. Gandhi outlined a 14-point agenda for the subcommittee that included ensuring quick destruction of seized drugs,

special police training and laboratory facilities, and ensuring the destruction of illegal opium production and strengthening of the counterintelligence networks, among other things.

It is not surprising that in the past 10 years, Dope, Inc. has zeroed in on India, situated as it is between the Golden Crescent of Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan and Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle—the world's major opium-producing regions. A large country, with open international airports until 1985, India had virtually no laws against narcotics. For instance, acetic anhydride, one of the principal chemicals required for the refining of heroin, was freely available for sale and export, and regularly found its way to Burma to supply the refineries there.

By 1984, as the strategic destabilization of the region took hold, beginning with the Khomeini revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the rise of Khalistani separatist-terrorism in Punjab, India had become a major transit point for dope.

In the next several years, what was piously hoped to be "merely a transit problem," was quickly transformed into a consumption and production problem. As the otherwise inexplicable large increases in Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent opium outputs in recent years indicate, Dope, Inc. had included India in its "market survey," as a potentially huge consumer from the outset.

While the principal market for the increased production of the Golden Triangle was the West—both Western Europe and the United States—still the most massive expansion in drug consumption has been within Asia itself. In addition to the 500-700,000 estimated heroin addicts in India, there are now 300,000 in Thailand, 600,000 in Pakistan, 20,000 in Nepal, 35,000 in Sri Lanka, and 100,000 in Malaysia.