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Sri Lanka's Drug Scourge

By Amresh Gunasingham

SYNOPSIS

Sri Lanka's recent move to bring back capital punishment for convicted drug offenders has put a spotlight on growing narcotics related crime in the country. The government's apparent tough stance is in response to concerns that Sri Lanka is re-emerging as a transit hub for global drug trafficking networks.

COMMENTARY

SRI LANKA has announced it will start to hang convicted drug offenders, ending a near-half-century moratorium on executions, in a move that closely mirrors the controversial tactics employed by Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte in his country's war on drugs.

During a state visit to the Philippines in January, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena acknowledged the pro-liferation of illegal drugs in Sri Lanka and lauded Philippines' strategy in dealing with the issue. His praise of the "decisive action" of President Rodrigo Duterte and characterisation of his counterpart's efforts as "an example to the whole world," was met with criticism from international human rights groups. Duterte has run a controversial law-and-order operation which has seen at least 5,000 drug offenders killed since 2016. More than 200 people in Bangladesh have also been killed by police in a similar campaign.

In Sri Lanka, President Sirisena, who has been in office since 2015, has indicated that the government will shift its stance and also deploy the military in anti-narcotics operations. Authorities say a tougher approach is required to deal with drug-related crime, amidst concerns international drug smugglers are using Sri Lanka as a transit hub in Asia. The re-introduction of capital punishment is also significant as although criminals are regularly given death sentences for murder, rape and drug-related

crimes, until now, their punishments have been commuted to life imprisonment. Nobody has been executed in the country for 42 years.

Regional Distribution Hub

Although not a major producer of contraband drugs, Sri Lanka's strategic location along important maritime and aviation shipping routes between Europe and Southeast Asia has made it an attractive gateway for international drug trafficking cartels. Law enforcement officials say organised gangs seek to conceal their shipments to Australian and European markets by bringing them into Sri Lanka, before switching the cargo into Sri Lankan containers and sending them onwards. The high volumes of traffic in the Colombo port and lack of effective security checks on cargo, makes it an attractive trans-shipment point.

According to government officials, a recent spike in large scale cocaine seizures, a drug previously uncommon to Sri Lanka, is a clear indication that the country is emerging as a key transit point for drug-smugglers. Counter-narcotics operations had traditionally focused their efforts on heroin and synthetic drugs.

In December 2016, 928 kilograms of cocaine - the largest cocaine haul in South Asia - was discovered in a container of timber aboard a Colombian ship bound for India, one of several high value cocaine seizures in recent years. This month, Sri Lanka's police seized nearly 300 kilograms of heroin, estimated to be worth US\$17 million, the island's biggest haul of the narcotic, and arrested two people. The growing evidence of Sri Lanka being used as a regional drug distribution hub raises the risk that it will create a local user base as well. As such, substantial focus needs to be given to eradicating traffickers who smuggle illicit drugs into the country.

Domestic Abuse

According to statistics from the National Dangerous Drugs Control Board (NDDCB), the central government agency in charge of combating drug use, there were 79,378 drug-related arrests in 2016, which represents a sharp rise from four years prior in 2012, of 47,926 cases. The government maintains that the high conviction rates are a result of enhanced law enforcement operations, although experts argue that the growing convictions can at least partly be explained by a larger number of both drug traffickers and users in the country. The majority jailed for drug offences were men aged 18-50. Reports indicate such offenders typically come from broken families in which their addiction to drugs and inability to play the role of family breadwinner has led to domestic strife.

Policy Recommendations

Before Sri Lanka becomes established as a drug transit hub, the authorities need to continue to apprehend traffickers, drug abusers and rehabilitate addicts. Among other initiatives, the President has set up a task force on drug prevention directly under his purview which implements and supervises a national drug prevention programme at the grassroots and national levels. Law enforcement and the military have also stepped up their operations, while amendments made to the National Policy for the Prevention and Control of Drug Abuse of 2005 have strengthened legislation against

the production, smuggling, trafficking and use of illicit drugs in the country. Sri Lanka has also sought international assistance. For example, Singapore, which also takes a tough stance on drug crimes, is providing technical expertise on programs conducted by Sri Lanka to prevent and control drug trafficking.

One challenge to overcome is the lack of financial and human resources committed to capacity-building such as training anti-narcotic officers. A low number of drug users also enter rehabilitation programmes, while treatment facilities in prisons also have few takers. The government needs to allocate more money to the rehabilitation of drug users and reintegration programs for the victims of drugs, particularly the youth.

Moreover, it is significant to consider that capital punishment was previously re-introduced in the country after a heroin crisis in 1984 and again in 2004, after a noted judge known for handing out tough sentences was gunned down. However, both instances were followed by symbolic implementations of the penalty amidst opposition from domestic human rights groups and significant public opinion against the use of capital punishment.

The current government will also have to overcome both domestic and international opposition, from those who do not endorse the death penalty for drug trafficking. In an open letter, Amnesty International recently called on Sirisena to halt plans to execute at least 13 people for drug-related crimes and review all cases of people currently under sentence of death with a view to commuting their sentences to terms of imprisonment. Moreover, several Western countries often provide information on drug trafficking networks operating internationally on the condition that prosecution will not lead to the death penalty. By ignoring the moratorium on the death penalty, Sri Lanka risks alienating nations whose help is needed to combat drug trafficking. As such, while the current government appears to be getting tough on drug crimes and has ramped up anti-narcotic operations, there are several challenges ahead.

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