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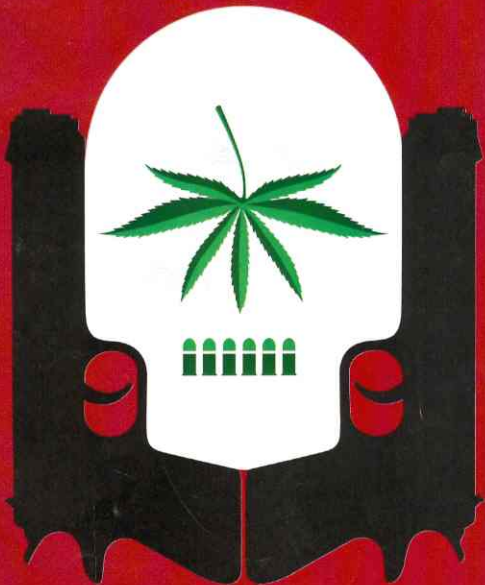
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How to stop the drug wars

Prohibition has failed; legalisation is the least bad solution



A HUNDRED years ago a group of foreign diplomats gathered in Shanghai for the first-ever international effort to ban trade in a narcotic drug. On February 26th 1909 they agreed to set up the International Opium Commission—just a few decades after Britain had fought a war with China to assert its right to peddle the stuff. Many other bans of mood-altering drugs have followed. In 1998 the UN General Assembly committed member countries to achieving a “drug-free world” and to “eliminating or significantly reducing” the production of opium, cocaine and cannabis by 2008.

That is the kind of promise politicians love to make. It assuages the sense of moral panic that has been the handmaid of prohibition for a century. It is intended to reassure the parents of teenagers across the world. Yet it is a hugely irresponsible promise, because it cannot be fulfilled.

Next week ministers from around the world gather in Vienna to set international drug policy for the next decade. Like first-world-war generals, many will claim that all that is needed is more of the same. In fact the war on drugs has been a disaster, creating failed states in the developing world even as addiction has flourished in the rich world. By any sensible measure, this 100-year struggle has been illiberal, murderous and pointless. That is why *The Economist* continues to believe that the least bad policy is to legalise drugs.

“Least bad” does not mean good. Legalisation, though clearly better for producer countries, would bring (different) risks to consumer countries. As we outline below, many vulnerable drug-takers would suffer. But in our view, more would gain.

The evidence of failure

Nowadays the UN Office on Drugs and Crime no longer talks about a drug-free world. Its boast is that the drug market has “stabilised”, meaning that more than 200m people, or almost 5% of the world’s adult population, still take illegal drugs—roughly the same proportion as a decade ago. (Like most purported drug facts, this one is just an educated guess: evidential rigour is another casualty of illegality.) The production of cocaine and opium is probably about the same as it was a decade ago; that of cannabis is higher. Consumption of cocaine has declined gradually in the United States from its peak in the early 1980s, but the path is uneven (it remains higher than in the mid-1990s), and it is rising in many places, including Europe.

This is not for want of effort. The United States alone spends some \$40 billion each year on trying to eliminate the supply of drugs. It arrests 1.5m of its citizens each year for drug offences, locking up half a million of them; tougher drug laws are the main reason why one in five black American men spend some time behind bars. In the developing world blood is being shed at an astonishing rate. In Mexico more than 800 policemen and soldiers have been killed since December 2006 (and the annual overall death toll is running at over 6,000). This week yet another leader of a troubled drug-ridden coun-

try—Guinea Bissau—was assassinated.

Yet prohibition itself vitiates the efforts of the drug warriors. The price of an illegal substance is determined more by the cost of distribution than of production. Take cocaine: the mark-up between coca field and consumer is more than a hundredfold. Even if dumping weedkiller on the crops of peasant farmers quadruples the local price of coca leaves, this tends to have little impact on the street price, which is set mainly by the risk of getting cocaine into Europe or the United States.

Nowadays the drug warriors claim to seize close to half of all the cocaine that is produced. The street price in the United States does seem to have risen, and the purity seems to have fallen, over the past year. But it is not clear that drug demand drops when prices rise. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that the drug business quickly adapts to market disruption. At best, effective repression merely forces it to shift production sites. Thus opium has moved from Turkey and Thailand to Myanmar and southern Afghanistan, where it undermines the West’s efforts to defeat the Taliban.

Al Capone, but on a global scale

Indeed, far from reducing crime, prohibition has fostered gangsterism on a scale that the world has never seen before. According to the UN’s perhaps inflated estimate, the illegal drug industry is worth some \$320 billion a year. In the West it makes criminals of otherwise law-abiding citizens (the current American president could easily have ended up in prison for his youthful experiments with “blow”). It also makes drugs more dangerous: addicts buy heavily adulterated cocaine and heroin; many use dirty needles to inject themselves, spreading HIV; the wretches who succumb to “crack” or “meth” are outside the law, with only their pushers to “treat” them. But it is countries in the emerging world that pay most of the price. Even a relatively developed democracy such as Mexico now finds itself in a life-or-death struggle against gangsters. American officials, including a former drug tsar, have publicly worried about having a “narco state” as their neighbour.

The failure of the drug war has led a few of its braver generals, especially from Europe and Latin America, to suggest shifting the focus from locking up people to public health and “harm reduction” (such as encouraging addicts to use clean needles). This approach would put more emphasis on public education and the treatment of addicts, and less on the harassment of peasants who grow coca and the punishment of consumers of “soft” drugs for personal use. That would be a step in the right direction. But it is unlikely to be adequately funded, and it does nothing to take organised crime out of the picture.

Legalisation would not only drive away the gangsters; it would transform drugs from a law-and-order problem into a public-health problem, which is how they ought to be treated. Governments would tax and regulate the drug trade, and use the funds raised (and the billions saved on law-enforcement) to educate the public about the risks of drug-taking and to treat addiction. The sale of drugs to minors should remain banned. Different drugs would command different levels of taxation and regulation. This system would be fiddly and imperfect, re- ▶▶

quiring constant monitoring and hard-to-measure trade-offs. Post-tax prices should be set at a level that would strike a balance between damping down use on the one hand, and discouraging a black market and the desperate acts of theft and prostitution to which addicts now resort to feed their habits.

Selling even this flawed system to people in producer countries, where organised crime is the central political issue, is fairly easy. The tough part comes in the consumer countries, where addiction is the main political battle. Plenty of American parents might accept that legalisation would be the right answer for the people of Latin America, Asia and Africa; they might even see its usefulness in the fight against terrorism. But their immediate fear would be for their own children.

That fear is based in large part on the presumption that more people would take drugs under a legal regime. That presumption may be wrong. There is no correlation between the harshness of drug laws and the incidence of drug-taking: citizens living under tough regimes (notably America but also Britain) take more drugs, not fewer. Embarrassed drug warriors blame this on alleged cultural differences, but even in fairly similar countries tough rules make little difference to the number of addicts: harsh Sweden and more liberal Norway have precisely the same addiction rates. Legalisation might reduce both supply (pushers by definition push) and demand (part of that dangerous thrill would go). Nobody knows for certain. But it is hard to argue that sales of any product that is made cheaper, safer and more widely available would fall. Any honest proponent of legalisation would be wise to assume that drug-taking as a whole would rise.

There are two main reasons for arguing that prohibition should be scrapped all the same. The first is one of liberal principle. Although some illegal drugs are extremely dangerous to some people, most are not especially harmful. (Tobacco is more addictive than virtually all of them.) Most consumers of

illegal drugs, including cocaine and even heroin, take them only occasionally. They do so because they derive enjoyment from them (as they do from whisky or a Marlboro Light). It is not the state's job to stop them from doing so.

What about addiction? That is partly covered by this first argument, as the harm involved is primarily visited upon the user. But addiction can also inflict misery on the families and especially the children of any addict, and involves wider social costs. That is why discouraging and treating addiction should be the priority for drug policy. Hence the second argument: legalisation offers the opportunity to deal with addiction properly.

By providing honest information about the health risks of different drugs, and pricing them accordingly, governments could steer consumers towards the least harmful ones. Prohibition has failed to prevent the proliferation of designer drugs, dreamed up in laboratories. Legalisation might encourage legitimate drug companies to try to improve the stuff that people take. The resources gained from tax and saved on repression would allow governments to guarantee treatment to addicts—a way of making legalisation more politically palatable. The success of developed countries in stopping people smoking tobacco, which is similarly subject to tax and regulation, provides grounds for hope.

A calculated gamble, or another century of failure?

This newspaper first argued for legalisation 20 years ago. Reviewing the evidence again (see pages 30-36), prohibition seems even more harmful, especially for the poor and weak of the world. Legalisation would not drive gangsters completely out of drugs; as with alcohol and cigarettes, there would be taxes to avoid and rules to subvert. Nor would it automatically cure failed states like Afghanistan. Our solution is a messy one; but a century of manifest failure argues for trying it. ■



On the trail of the traffickers

MEXICO CITY

Illegal drugs are causing havoc across the world. Over six pages, we look at attempts to curb supply and cut demand, beginning in Mexico

IN RECENT months Mexicans have become inured to carefully choreographed spectacles of horror. Just before Christmas the severed heads of eight soldiers were found dumped in plastic bags near a shopping centre in Chilpancingo, the capital of the southern state of Guerrero. Last month another three were found in an icebox near the border city of Ciudad Juárez. Farther along the border near Tijuana police detained Santiago Meza, nicknamed El Pozolero ("the soupmaker") who confessed to having dissolved the bodies of more than 300 people in acid over the past nine years on the orders of a local drug baron. Mr Meza, revealing a proper sense of machismo, added primly that he refused to accept the bodies of women or children.

"Organised crime is out of control," Felipe Calderón declared on taking office as Mexico's president in December 2006. He launched 45,000 army troops against drug-trafficking gangs. Since then, some 10,000 people have died in drug-related violence, 6,268 of them last year. Troops and police have fought pitched battles against gangsters armed with rocket-launchers, grenades, machineguns and armour-piercing sniper rifles, such as the Barrett 50.

But perhaps their most effective weapon is corruption: in November Noé Ramírez, the prosecutor in charge of the organised-crime unit of the federal attorney-general's office, was charged with taking bribes of \$450,000 a month to pass information to the Sinaloa drug mob. Six other officials from the unit face similar charges.

Officials insist that the violence and the arrests are signs that they are winning. But many disagree. An assessment by the United States' Joint Forces Command, published last month, concluded that the two countries most at risk of becoming failed states were Pakistan and Mexico.

Mexico? The world's twelfth-largest economy, the United States's second-biggest trading partner and an important oil supplier? It has evolved in the past generation into a seemingly stable democracy. Sure enough, the prognosis was angrily rejected by Mexico's government. But it came on the heels of a paper circulated by Barry McCaffrey, a retired general who was Bill Clinton's "drug tsar". General McCaffrey painted a grim picture in which "the dangerous and worsening problems in Mexico...fundamentally threaten us national security." The stakes in Mexico were

enormous, he concluded: "We cannot afford to have a narco state as a neighbour."

If this was intended to press the panic button, it seemed to succeed. On January 12th Barack Obama lunched for more than two hours with Mr Calderón in his first meeting with a foreign head of government since he was elected president of the United States. According to a Mexican official present, Mr Calderón proposed a "strategic partnership" and urged the setting up of a binational group of experts to explore closer security co-operation. That would go beyond a three-year \$4 billion programme of security aid for Mexico and Central America, known as the Merida Initiative, which was approved (reluctantly) by the United States Congress last year. Like it or not, in the cause of the war on drugs the Obama administration looks likely to be drawn into a sustained security commitment to a neighbour of the kind Mr Clinton launched in Colombia.

In both Mexico and Colombia, though in different ways, the drug trade has exploited weaknesses in the capacity of the state to impose the rule of law. In Colombia, where an historically fragile state had long failed to impose its authority over a

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vast territory of difficult geography, drug income breathed new life into left-wing guerrilla movements and begat right-wing paramilitary militias. As the guerrillas threatened to overrun the army and the cities, Mr Clinton launched Plan Colombia, under which the United States trained and helped to equip the security forces at a cost of more than \$6 billion since 2000.

In one respect—counter-insurgency—Plan Colombia has been a big success. The United States added hardware and training to a big Colombian effort that has strengthened the state and made the country much safer. But as an anti-drug programme, it has been much less successful. Thanks to the adamant efforts of Alvaro Uribe, Colombia's president, which included spraying hundreds of thousands of hectares with weedkiller, the recorded area of coca seemed to fall by more than half between 1999 and 2006, according to United Nations estimates. But it has since risen again. And thanks to productivity increases, total cocaine production in the Andes remains stable (see chart).

When cocaine consumption first took off in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the main smuggling route involved island-hopping across the Caribbean from Colombia in light aircraft. It was the success of America's drug warriors in shutting down this route that brought big-time organised crime to Mexico, as the Colombians began to send drugs that way. In Mexico, relatively small gangs had long run heroin and marijuana across the border. Their move into cocaine made them far more powerful. Two things helped them grow. The first was proximity to the United States. They gained control of retail distribution in many American cities, allowing them to dictate terms to the Colombians. And they continue to arm themselves with ease in American gunshops and launder

their profits in American banks.

The second factor was the flaws of the Mexican state. The revolution of 1910-17 gave birth to a seemingly powerful state, democratic in appearance but authoritarian in nature, in which power was monopolised by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). One of the achievements of this system was eventually to take the army out of politics. The police were required merely to impose political order, not to solve crimes. State governors were happy to tolerate—or profit from—drug-traffickers on their patch provided they kept a low profile. Partly because the Colombians at first paid their partners in product, the Mexican gangs began to push cocaine at home. In some areas, especially in northern Mexico, they acquired de facto control. The politicians did little to stop them—until Mr Calderón decided to make security the priority of his government, and a matter of personal commitment.

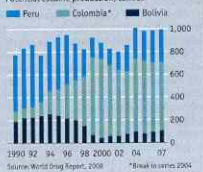
Taking back the street

The aim, says Eduardo Medina Mora, Mr Calderón's attorney-general, is not to end drug-trafficking "because that is unachievable." Rather, it is "to take back from organised criminal groups the economic power and armament they've established in the past 20 years, to take away their capacity to undermine institutions and to contest the state's monopoly of force."

He points to progress. In the past two years the government has seized huge quantities of drugs (some 70 tonnes of cocaine, including 26 tonnes in a trawler, a world record for a single haul), money (some \$260m) and arms (31,000 weapons, including 17,000 of high calibre). It has also made more than 58,000 arrests; and though some 95% of these people are hangers-on or small-time drug-dealers, they include two-dozen kingpins and a

Squeezing a balloon

Potential cocaine production, tonnes



thousand sicarios (hired gunmen).

Brushing aside national scruples, Mr Calderón has stepped up the extradition of drug-traffickers to the United States, sending more than 180 north so far. They can't go on running their businesses from American prisons, as they can from most Mexican ones. Until recently the drug lords lived openly in Mexico's main cities. Now they can show their faces only in remote parts of the Sierra Madre, says Genaro García Luna, the minister for public security.

The violence, officials say, is a sign that the drug gangs are turning on each other in a fight to hang on to a share of a shrinking business. They stress that around 60% of the killings are concentrated in just three of Mexico's 32 states, and most of these in three cities: Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua and Tijuana in Baja California, both just across the American border; and Culiacán in Sinaloa. Some four-fifths of the dead are members of criminal gangs murdered by other criminals. But more than 800 police and soldiers have also died since December 2006 (some may have been working for the traffickers). The beheadings (often carried out after the victim is dead) and torture are intended to enforce discipline within gangs and strike fear into rivals, Mr García Luna says. Despite the headlines, Mexico's murder rate is relatively low, at 11 per 100,000 people.

But the violence provokes "bewilderment and surprise" among Mexicans, says Enrique Krauze, a historian. After the revolution Mexico became "an island of peace, where refugees came from all over the world to escape violence." Several senior police officers, including last year the commander of the federal police, have been murdered by the traffickers. On September 15th eight people died when grenades were thrown at crowds celebrating independence day in Morelia, in Michoacán. In Tijuana ordinary citizens are scared by the violence going on around them. People are going out less at night, and avoiding the city's better restaurants after several cases in which gunmen have burst in and shot a rival, says José María Ramos, a political scientist at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte.



▶ And few doubt that the violence just across the border is deterring investment and tourists from the United States.

Mr Calderón's crackdown has inflicted serious disruption on Mexico's main trafficking syndicates (see map). As many of the historic capos of these gangs are killed, arrested or extradited, what was an oligopoly has splintered into warring factions. This fragmentation is not wholly positive, admits Mr Medina Mora.

The biggest worry is that some drug gangs are starting to diversify into other criminal businesses. Extortion and protection rackets are suddenly becoming common. Shops and bars have been burned down in Ciudad Juárez. Over the past six months, big businesses, including multinationals, have become targets, with threats against warehouses and factories if payments are not made, according to a security consultant in Mexico City. This is still local and sporadic, but at least one American company has paid up, he says.

The second growth business is kidnapping. This is not new in Mexico. It tends to go in cycles. Many cases are not officially reported. But the number recorded by Mexico Unido Contra la Delincuencia ("Mexico United Against Crime"), a campaign group, rose sharply over the past two years before falling off in recent months, according to María Elena Morera, its director. And kidnaps are tending to become more violent. They account for only 1% of crimes, yet in one poll 46% of respondents say they are scared of them, says Mrs Morera. The talk among better-off Mexicans is suddenly of whether they should try to leave the country rather than risk their children being kidnapped.

The underlying problem in Mexico is not drug-trafficking in itself, but that neither the police nor the courts do their job properly. Not only have the police themselves sometimes been a source of crime, but they are also not accountable to politicians or public. A survey in 2007 found that seven out of ten crimes are not reported. "Society and the police don't work together," says Ernesto López Portillo, of the Institute for Security and Democracy. Mr García Luna admits that in some parts of the country the traffickers have established a "social base". The previous two Mexican presidents tried and failed to reform the police. Mr Calderón's officials insist that this time they will succeed.

At the headquarters of the public-security ministry on a hill opposite Chapultepec wood in Mexico City, cranes rise above a vacant lot where a new National Intelligence Centre is being built. The government's more immediate innovation is housed in an annex next door. A score of police officers dressed in dark suits sit at computer terminals facing a giant, segmented screen that occupies the whole of the wall in front of them. They are keying

in data for Platform Mexico, an integrated and searchable national database that will combine criminal records with police operations' reports and is due to start up in June. The screens can also display images from closed-circuit television across the country. The operators can communicate with every police post and patrol car in Mexico. Across the city in Ixtapalapa, the police's main operating base in the capital is now equipped with helicopters and rapid-response teams. Eventually each state will have similar centres.

The curse of federalism

Mexico may lack Colombia's guerrillas, but it also lacks Colombia's reasonably effective national police force. That is partly because it is a federal country: each of the 32 states has its own police force and justice department, and there are more than 1,600 municipal police forces. Under the PRI federalism was a legal fiction and the



Supply meets demand

presidency was omnipotent. Now no state governor feels obliged to submit to Mr Calderón's policies. The criminal law is a patchwork: drug-trafficking is a federal crime, but kidnapping is a state matter. To make matters worse, the federal government began to forge its own police force from a disparate bunch of security outfits only as recently as the 1990s. An attempt to turn the judicial police, attached to the attorney-general's office, into a Mexican FBI (known by its initials as AF1) had mixed results: the organisation was corrupted when purged police used legal action to force their reinstatement.

Mr Calderón's government is making a far more serious effort. Last June a constitutional reform reorganised the courts and police; under its auspices, a law signed by the president on January 1st sets up a new national public-security system. It requires all police forces at national, state and municipal level to adopt uniform procedures for recruitment, vetting, training, promotion and operations. Every policeman in

the country is now supposed to be exhaustively vetted. At the same time, the federal police force has expanded from 9,000 officers in 2006 to 26,000. Half of these are soldiers on secondment. But Mr García Luna is now trying to recruit 8,000 graduates to be the core of a civilian investigative division. The government has provided extra funds to some local police forces. And for the first time it can force them to reform. Another constitutional change aims to improve a hidebound judicial system, introducing oral evidence and moving towards adversarial trials. It builds on recent experiments in some Mexican states.

These efforts have inspired American help, especially in the form of passing on intelligence that has helped in drug seizures and in the arrest of leading traffickers. Under the Merida Initiative, the United States will provide extra kit (such as night-vision gear and metal detectors) and training. Mexican officials point out that the funds involved are puny (\$400m a year for three years) compared with the \$9 billion they are spending each year. More than the money, Mr Medina Mora says he welcomes the change of attitude. "We've gone from reciprocal finger-pointing to an attitude of shared responsibility for a problem that by nature is bilateral." But he adds that better regulation of the sale of arms in the United States would have a bigger impact. He points out that of 107,000 gunshops in the United States, 12,000 are close to the Mexican border and their sales are much higher than the average. Thousands of automatic rifles are bought for export to Mexico, which is illegal. American officials have promised to do more to stop this.

Mr García Luna says that in the next few months Mexicans will start to see a difference, as all the work over the past two years is put into practice. But there are several big doubts. The first is whether the government is moving fast enough. The original plan was to use the army only as a temporary shock force. But the troops may have to be deployed for another two years or more, Mr Medina Mora concedes. In late February the government sent an extra 5,000 troops to Ciudad Juárez, where the police chief had resigned after death threats. The militarisation of public security—however inevitable in the short term—carries the risk that Mexico will still not get the civilian, community-based policing it needs to prevent and investigate crime.

Turf wars are another problem. No fewer than six ministries are involved in different ways in public security, not to speak of the state governors and mayors. Mr Medina Mora, a former businessman, and Mr García Luna, a career policeman, often do not see eye to eye, and the army is politically untouchable. What is needed is to turn the army into a small professional force for external defence and centralise responsibility for internal security in the public.

security ministry, argues Raúl Benítez, a defence specialist at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City.

The biggest doubt is whether the government can stop its forces being infiltrated and corrupted. One of the most violent of the drug gangs, known as the Zetas, is made up of special-forces troops who changed sides a decade ago. Hitherto, the government has been unable to provide its police forces with sufficient pay and protection to make it worthwhile resisting the threats and blandishments of the traffickers. Has that changed?

In the end, the state in a country as de-

veloped as Mexico cannot lose this battle. "Mexico is not a failed state, it's a mediocre state," says Hector Aguilar Carmin, a sociologist. But already there are signs that the drug business will adapt. The Mexican gangs have set up operations in South America and are starting to export to Europe from there, according to Stratfor, a consultancy based in Texas. And they have moved aggressively into Central America. Just like Colombia, Mexico is finding that drug violence is requiring it to modernise its security forces. That process carries a large human cost. And the drug business, ever supple, will adapt and survive. ■

officials had never intercepted more than a tonne of cocaine each year in Africa. In 2006, they nabbed 15 tonnes. Britain and America have beefed up their presence in the region, but the traffickers may already have planned their next move: on February 10th the UN warned that a new supply route was emerging in the Balkans.

From high seas to High Street

In Britain, Europe's biggest consumer of narcotics, the Home Office reckons that drugs are brought in by about 300 major importers, who pass them to 30,000 wholesalers and then to 70,000 street dealers. Cocaine, meaning both the sniffable powder and smokable "rocks" of crack cocaine (which can be made using a simple microwave), accounts for about half the value of this industry, being less widely taken than cannabis but much pricier.

Some rare light was shed on the business by a Home Office study in 2007, in which 222 drug-dealers were interviewed in prison by analysts from Matrix Knowledge Group, a consultancy, and the London School of Economics. One dealing partnership, based in London and Spain, bought cocaine from a Colombian importer in 10kg bundles, which they sold to retailers using an employee whom they paid £500 (\$703) per transaction. A second employee, paid £250 a day, would collect money from the buyers and pass it to a third member of staff, who would count it (processing up to £220,000 each day). Other employees would pay the Colombians and smuggle the rest of the cash, on their bodies, back to Spain.

Most drug businesses are forced to stay small and simple to evade the police. Only one dealer claimed to be part of an organisation of more than 100 people, and a fifth were classified by researchers as sole traders. Fear of being uncovered also hampers recruitment: most dealers stuck to family and friends, and people from the same ethnic group, when hiring associates. Just like other businessmen, they carried out criminal-record background checks on potential employees—except that, in this case, a record was a good thing.

Kevin Marsh, an economist at Matrix Knowledge, argues that most players in the drug business have a poor knowledge of the market. "Shopping around for new wholesale suppliers is risky, so many retailers stick to the same one and pay over the odds," he says. Most of the dealers interviewed knew little about the purity of what they were buying, and money laundering was usually fairly shambolic. Managing cashflow is one of dealers' biggest weaknesses, according to one drug specialist at the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA): "Supply of powder is the most resilient thing. To destroy the business, you have to go after the money." That, and extradite foreign dealers, as America ■

The cocaine business

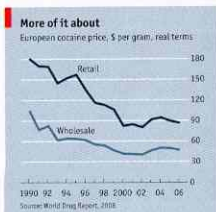
Sniffy customers

Drug-traffickers are expanding their operations in Europe, despite the best efforts of the police

OUTNUMBERED and outgunned, the sailors raised their hands. About 300km off the west coast of Ireland, the yacht *Dances With Waves* was within hours of delivering a half-billion-euro payload of cocaine to Cork in time for Christmas. The vessel had been under surveillance since setting off from Trinidad and Tobago a month earlier. Inside, Irish police found almost 19 tonnes of cocaine. Three British men are now awaiting trial.

Such seizures are getting more common. European forces intercepted some 120 tonnes of cocaine in 2006, more than double the haul they managed in 2001 and nearly six times as much as in 1995. But for every boat that is caught, more slip through. Despite the seizures, the price of cocaine in Europe has been falling (see chart), leading the UN to conclude that its availability has probably increased. At the same time, the number of users has rocketed. In Britain, which recently overtook Spain as Europe's most coke-hungry country, 7.6% of adults claim to have tried it; use has doubled in the past decade. Most rich European countries report a similar picture, especially among the young. Overall, Europe now accounts for 17% of global cocaine seizures. In 1980 the figure was 3%.

Europe's cocaine market is served by an evolving network of trade routes. Shippers commonly head for the Iberian Peninsula, either hidden in legitimate container vessels or on board creaking old "motherships", which loiter out at sea while nimble craft bring the packages onshore. The traditional hotspot is the north Atlantic coast of Spain, though in recent years traffickers have also targeted Barcelona and Valencia to stay ahead of the police. Some three-quarters of European seizures



take place in Spain and Portugal, which also have some of the highest rates of consumption on the continent.

Like any sensible business, drug-traffickers spread their risk: large shipments are complemented with little-and-often supply lines, including parcel post and human mules. That particular ruse has been used up by an advertising campaign run by the police, warning potential mules of the severity of trafficking sentences. Some still risk it, but they now command a fee of around \$6,000, compared with the \$2,000 they used to do it for. That is enough to make the route unprofitable, police reckon.

But as one route closes, another opens up. In the past four years customs officers have spotted a sharp rise in the amount of cocaine being smuggled into Europe via west Africa. Of those seizures where the origin of the cocaine could be identified, European forces reckon that in 2007 some 22% had been via Africa. As recently as 2004, just 5% had stopped off there. Seizures have risen sharply, too: before 2003,

has long done. Britain is believed to be negotiating its first-ever extradition of a Colombian, on drug charges, at the moment.

Times may at last be getting harder for cocaine-dealers. Shortly before Christmas, the wholesale price in Britain shot up to £40,000 per kilo, the highest in years. Better policing was one cause; another was the slump of sterling. European retailers' margins have been chipped away. To protect their profits, dealers are diluting what they sell. A decade ago, average street-level purity was about 60%; police say it is now nearer 30%. "People think there is a lot of cocaine around, but two thirds of it isn't cocaine at all," says one SOCA officer.

That would be fine if the remainder were talcum powder. But in the past few years dealers have turned to pharmaceutical cutting agents such as benzocaine, a topical anaesthetic, which mimic the effects of cocaine and may be more harmful. Dealers call such agents "magic" because of their effect on profits. "Grey traders", who knowingly sell such chemicals to dealers, are starting to be convicted.

Educating drug-takers about what is getting up their noses may lower demand. But cutting raises bigger questions for drug policy. "We may have to say at some stage that taking heavily adulterated cocaine is more physically harmful to the user than taking cocaine that's less adulterated," a senior SOCA official says. "That is not the case at the moment. But we've got to keep asking the question. I'm aware that the health equation could one day say: Stop trying to stop cocaine coming in." ■

Levels of prohibition

A toker's guide

Some countries are pushing the boundaries of liberalisation

UNDER a trio of conventions passed by the United Nations in 1961, 1971 and 1988, most countries have little discretion over how they manage drug-taking. Other than for medical or scientific purposes, those that have signed up to the conventions—more than 140 countries to date, including nearly all of the rich world—must maintain the prohibition on the selling and possession of narcotics. Some are enthusiastic in their upholding of the treaties. But others have grown frustrated, and are finding ways of bending the rules.

For the past century the standard-bearer of the prohibition movement has been America, which imprisons more people for drug offences than any other country. But in 13 states the police are instructed not to arrest people for cannabis possession. In

Rare, but persistent

Cocaine-taking over previous 12 months* among young adults (15-34 years), % of total sample



Europe, the coffee shops of Amsterdam famously sell cannabis alongside croissants. And other European countries are lenient about stronger drugs. Personal possession of any drug is not a criminal offence in Spain, Portugal, Italy, the Czech Republic or the Baltic states. Some German states and Swiss cantons are similarly relaxed, as are a few Australian states.

Decriminalisation means that possessors may be stopped by the police but do not earn a criminal conviction, and that punishments are light: a fine in Spain, for instance, or suspension of one's driving licence in Italy. Drug-takers can escape even this unless aggravating circumstances apply, such as taking the drug in public or after repeated warnings.

The legal gymnastics that allow countries to soften their line in spite of the UN conventions are extraordinary. A country must ensure that drug possession is a criminal, not civil, offence—but only "subject to its constitutional principles and the basic concepts of its legal system". This caveat has allowed countries to treat drug possession as a civil matter. Further wriggle-room is given in the UN's official commentary on the convention, which states that the spirit of the rule is the "improvement of the efficacy of national criminal justice systems in the field of drug-trafficking". On this basis, countries may tell their police to turn a blind eye in the name of public efficacy.

It is an embarrassing mess for the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which prefers to highlight Sweden, a country that has implemented strict drug laws and can claim some success in its quest for a "drug-free society". In Sweden possession of any banned drug, including cannabis, earns a criminal record and sometimes a jail sentence (albeit one with an emphasis on treatment). Many countries have such laws in theory, but Sweden carries them out: most of its prosecutions for drug offences are for mere possession, rather than dealing. A report from the UNODC in 2007 highlighted the country's lowish levels of drug use compared with elsewhere in Europe, and praised recent falls in consumption. Sweden has a below-average

number of "problem" drug users too, though there is less in it, suggesting that the main effect of harsh laws may be to deter casual pot-smokers rather than to prevent serious addiction. Should other countries follow Sweden's example?

A different UN agency suggests not. A survey last year by the World Health Organisation examined drug-taking in 17 countries and found no link between the strictness of prohibition and the amount of drug consumption. (The lenient Netherlands, interestingly, has one of the lowest rates of "problem" drug use in Europe.) "Countries with more stringent policies did not have lower levels of such drug use than countries with more liberal policies," the researchers concluded. For every strict regime like Sweden, there is another such as Britain or America where a tough approach co-exists with widespread drug use. Drug-taking was more closely linked to being wealthy, single and male than anything else, the researchers found.

Changing drug policy over time also seems to have little impact. In Britain, drugs are classified A, B or C to indicate how harmful they are and to determine how severely offenders should be punished. But after cannabis was downgraded from class B to C in 2004, usage actually fell. All the same, the Home Office last year decided to bump it back to B again, and last month announced that it would ignore expert advice to downgrade ecstasy from A to B, fearing that to do so would "send a message" that the drug was now safe. Is anyone listening? ■

Drug education

In America, lessons learned

LOS ANGELES

But efforts to warn people off drugs are still too timid

HIS memories are added, but the young member of Cocaine Anonymous can just about recall his formal drug education. When he was about 11, he says, a police officer made several visits to his school to give warning of the dangers posed by illicit substances. Although he remembers thinking the cop was "something of a Dudley Do-Right" he agreed with him that drugs were best avoided. He recalls no further lessons. By his late teens he was addicted to crack cocaine and methamphetamine.

By far the best way of reducing the harm that drugs can do is to convince people not to take them. Spraying crops, seizing shipments and arresting dealers can drive up prices and create temporary shortages. But it does not stop drug use. Addicts simply pay more for crumtier pro- ■