

Are Afghan drug syndicates using Indians as couriers?

In a development that has spread alarm among security agencies, Afghans of Indian origin are found to have been used by powerful drug syndicates in Afghanistan to procure raw materials from India to make narcotics.

The arrest of Satpal Singh and Amarjeet Singh, Afghans who originally hailed from India, along with three others a few days ago with 200 litres of acetic anhydride, a chemical essential in the preparation of heroin, has forced the authorities to sit up and take notice.

They are now busy identifying lacunae in security systems on the ground and also suspect the involvement of airline and airport authority officials.

Satpal and Amarjeet, who came to India and settled down in the Chandni Chowk and Tilak Nagar areas of the capital a few years ago after their cloth business was ruined during the war in Afghanistan, are cooling their heels in Tihar Jail. They told their interrogators they were tasked to procure the psychotropic substance in India and then smuggle it to Kabul.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Southwest Delhi) Shalini Singh said the duo was taking direct instructions from Haji Nonu, who runs a large drug syndicate in a Taliban-dominated Afghan area. The money was changing hands through 'hawala' channels.

Amarjeet told police during interrogation that Nonu had asked him in August last year to arrange the chemical in India for a handsome commission. But when he failed despite all endeavours, he was asked to meet Rabia Begum who lives with her husband Kalim Akhtar in the Hauz Qazi area of north Delhi, with the reference of one Karachi-based businessman Babu Khan.

'Begum came into contact with Khan some 12-15 years ago while she was involved in the export-import business between India and Pakistan. At that time she was not involved in any wrong business. She was also doing the same business with people in Hong Kong and Singapore,' a senior investigating police official told IANS on condition of anonymity.

But last year, she got involved in the narcotics racket. While searching for the chemical acetic anhydride, Begum came into contact with a man called Raju, who runs a CD shop near Fatehpuri Masjid. He offered to purchase it through his contacts.

Raju contacted his associate Ismail in Jaipur, Rajasthan, and the duo fixed a deal for Rs.10,000 for each delivery. Ismail used to keep the chemical at the roadside eatery of a man called Sampat on the Delhi-Jaipur highway.

Begum, her husband and Amarjeet used to visit Sampat's eatery shop to collect the chemical. They would pay Rs.10,000 to Raju after returning to Delhi. Begum charged Rs.60,000 from Amarjeet, who in turn made a profit of Rs.3,000 per litre on each consignment. Amarjeet was getting money from one Santok, a Chandni Chowk-based hawala trader.

'Amarjeet used to hand over the stuff to Satpal, who was further assigned to transport the chemical to Kabul by flight. Satpal used to charge Rs.6,000 per litre. Satpal revealed that he smuggled the chemical eight times to Kabul in one year after slipping past customs and security officials,' the

official said.

'Satpal would hide the stuff under a heap of clothes in his baggage. He was very cautious and took only 20 litres at a time. We strongly suspect the involvement of some airlines and Airport Authority of India (AAI) officials in the international racket. Their involvement is being verified and arrests will be made soon,' the official added.

The responsibility of screening the baggage in India lies with airlines, while AAI officials take it to the aircraft.

Along with Satpal and Amarjeet, Begum, her husband and Raju have also been arrested while Santok and Ismail are absconding.

Officials say this new development on the international front is very disturbing as more Indian origin Afghans could be acting as couriers for Afghan drug dealers to make a fast buck. The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) too has made a few arrests and seized acetic anhydride last month.

'This development is shocking. The chemical has been finding its way into Afghanistan from its bordering countries and some Central Asian countries. But with India's name figuring in the racket, it has alarmed all security agencies and put them on their toes. A series of meetings have begun to remove the lacunae in security,' the official added.

Heroin is made by first obtaining morphine, an alkaloid found in opium (opium is the dried milky exudates found in the unripe seedpods of poppy plants). The morphine is then treated with acetic anhydride and the substance produced is named heroin.

Around 200 litres of acetic anhydride yields 100 kg of pure fine quality white heroin that sells for Rs.1 billion in the global market.

Poppy plants are cultivated in Iran, Turkey, Holland, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, India, Canada, as well as many Asian and Central and South American countries.

According to police officials, the chemical falls under the category of controlled drugs and is manufactured only by licensed firms.

(Sahil Makkar can be contacted at sahil.m@ians.in)

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