

NESMUN'26

***Committee Name- United Nations Office on
Drugs and Crime***

Topic Brief 2

Topic 2:Reconsidering southeast Asia's militarized drug enforcement: safeguarding the golden triangle communities.

President: Alisha Zakarneh

Deputy President: Adam Ali

Chair: Rana Edeeb

Table of Contents

President
Letter.....

Introduction.....
.....

Background.....
.....

Major Parties
Involved.....

Perspectives on the
Issue.....

Timeline.....
.....

Glossary.....
.....

Bibliography.....
.....

❖ President Letter:

Esteemed Delegates,

Welcome To UNODC!

My name is Alisha Zakarneh, and it is both an honor and a privilege to serve as your President for NESMUN '26. Alongside my distinguished chairing panel, I am committed to creating an enriching and memorable experience for each and every single one of you. Whether you are a first-time delegate or an experienced one, I hope this conference encourages you to think critically, speak confidently, and debate meaningfully. Together, let's make it truly unforgettable and an experience both you and I will always cherish.

Walking into my first ever mun experience, I was no more than an 11 year old seeking means of amplifying my voice, it wasn't until the end of that conference ended did i realize that MUN would soon develop into a long lasting passion that i would carry with me and a space where my voice could be heard. Now as your president, I want to give you all that same experience, one that allowed me to discover my passion for mun, grow my voice and discover a space where i felt truly inspired and challenged.

So delegates I urge you all to step up and make the most of it.

I hope to see you all on the floor very soon!

Sincerely,

Alisha Zakarneh

President of The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

❖ Introduction

The Golden Triangle remains one of the most complex drug-control challenges in the world. Over time, this region has transformed from traditional opium production into a center for synthetic drug manufacturing, with methamphetamine now dominating regional markets. This shift has made drug trafficking faster, cheaper, and more difficult to contain, allowing criminal groups to operate across borders with increasing efficiency.

To counter this threat, many governments have turned to militarized enforcement, prioritizing border crackdowns, armed operations, and strict criminal penalties. While these measures demonstrate a strong commitment to controlling drug flows, they have also revealed serious limitations. Despite intensified enforcement, production continues, and communities living in the region often experience instability rather than long-term security.

At the same time, communities living in the golden triangle face growing challenges. Farmers and villagers often depend on the drug economy due to limited access to education, infrastructure, and legal employment. When militarized operations are introduced without long-term social support, these communities risk displacement, loss of livelihoods, and further instability, making it easier for criminal groups to recruit and expand.

❖ Background

The Golden Triangle, spanning the borderlands of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, has long stood at the center of Southeast Asia's illicit drug economy, shaped by rugged terrain, porous borders, and limited state control. Once dominated by opium cultivation, the region has transformed into a major hub for the large-scale production of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine which can be manufactured year-round, require minimal natural resources, and move rapidly across borders.

In response to the growing scale and sophistication of trafficking, governments in the region have increasingly relied on militarized drug enforcement, deploying armed border patrols, conducting crop eradication campaigns, and launching joint security operations to disrupt supply chains. However, despite record seizures and intensified enforcement, drug production and trafficking continue to expand, highlighting the limitations of enforcement-heavy approaches when implemented in isolation. These strategies often overlook the structural drivers of the drug economy, including chronic poverty, limited access to legal livelihoods, weak infrastructure, and prolonged conflict, especially in parts of Myanmar's Shan State. As a result, communities in the Golden Triangle are frequently caught between organized crime and state enforcement, facing displacement, economic insecurity, and heightened exposure to violence.

This context underscores the importance of re-examining how drug control policies are designed and implemented. Greater emphasis on integrating law enforcement with alternative development programs, strengthened regional cooperation, and community-based initiatives may help reduce reliance on illicit economies while supporting long-term stability and security in the region.

❖ Major Parties Involved

1. **Governments of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand**

These states are responsible for national drug control policies, border security, and regional cooperation. They lead enforcement efforts through legislation, policing, and military deployment, but face challenges such as weak governance, conflict, and uneven state control, particularly in Myanmar's border regions.

2. **Security Forces and Drug Enforcement Agencies**

Military units, border police, and narcotics agencies carry out militarized drug enforcement, including patrols, seizures, and eradication campaigns. While these efforts can disrupt trafficking temporarily, they are often limited by difficult terrain and lack of coordination across borders.

3. **Ethnic Armed Groups and Local Militias**

In areas with limited state presence, especially in Myanmar's Shan State, armed groups exert territorial control. Some benefit directly or indirectly from the drug economy through taxation or protection, complicating enforcement and prolonging instability.

4. **Transnational Organized Crime Networks**

Criminal syndicates manage large-scale production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine. They exploit porous borders, weak institutions, and conflict zones, adapting quickly to enforcement pressure and sustaining cross-border supply chains.

5. **Local Communities and Farmers**

Many residents depend on illicit cultivation or drug-related labor due to poverty, displacement, and lack of legal economic opportunities. These communities are often the most affected by both criminal activity and aggressive enforcement measures.

6. **Regional and International Organizations (e.g., UNODC, ASEAN)** These organizations support cross-border cooperation, provide technical assistance, and promote balanced drug control strategies that combine law enforcement with alternative development and community-based approaches.

❖ Timeline

<u>Year</u>	<u>Details</u>
1960 - 1970	The Golden Triangle becomes a major global source of opium and heroin, supplying international markets
1980	Governments in Thailand and Laos begin crop eradication programs to reduce the opium production
1996	Myanmar signs regional agreements to limit opium cultivation, but enforcement remains weak in remote areas.
2000	Thailand launches its national “War on Drugs,” marking the large-scale use of militarized enforcement in the region.
2005	Drug networks increasingly shift from opium to methamphetamine, which is easier to produce and transport.
2010	Cross-border cooperation increases as Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar begin joint border patrols.
2015	UNODC reports record levels of methamphetamine seizures in Southeast Asia, despite rising enforcement.
2019	Trafficking networks expand across the Mekong region, linking Golden Triangle production to global markets.
2020-2021	COVID-19 disrupts legal economies, increasing dependence on drug production in rural communities.
2022	Southeast Asia records its highest-ever seizures of synthetic drugs, highlighting the limits of militarized control.
2024-2025	Growing international debate calls for rethinking drug policy to better protect civilians and promote sustainable alternatives.

❖ Perspectives on the Issue

- **Governments and security forces:** they'll argue the drug trade is tied to armed groups, corruption, and cross border crime, so heavy enforcement feels "necessary" for control and deterrence, raids, checkpoints, arrests, eradication. They also care a lot about looking tough domestically.
- **Golden Triangle communities (villagers, farmers, border towns):** a lot of people feel like they're paying the price for a problem they didn't create. Militarized crackdowns can mean fear, displacement, loss of income, and sometimes innocent people getting caught up, especially when livelihoods are already fragile.
- **Public health and harm reduction groups:** they focus on the fact that drugs are also a health issue, addiction, overdose, HIV, and they'll say punishment alone doesn't solve demand, it just pushes users into hiding. They push treatment, education, safe services, and reducing harm instead of only arrests.
- **Human rights organizations:** they're worried about abuse, extrajudicial violence, mass detention, and weak due process. Their view is that even if the goal is "anti drug," the method can destroy trust and make communities less safe long term.
- **Police and investigators who are reform minded:** they'll usually say "we need smarter targeting," go after networks, financiers, and precursor supply chains, not just low level users and farmers. They want intelligence led policing and better cooperation between countries.
- **Regional and international actors (ASEAN, UNODC, donors):** they tend to push balanced policy, enforcement plus development plus health. They also care about cross border coordination because the Golden Triangle routes shift fast between countries.
- **Drug networks and armed groups:** from their perspective, militarization is just another cost of doing business. They adapt quickly, change routes, move labs, use corruption, recruit locals, and keep going unless the money incentives and state weakness are addressed.

❖ Glossary

- **Golden Triangle:** border region where Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand meet, historically linked to opium, now also strongly linked to synthetic drugs and trafficking routes.
- **Militarized drug enforcement:** using military style tactics and heavy force for drug control, raids, armed patrols, large scale sweeps, harsh sentencing, sometimes involving the army.
- **Eradication:** destroying drug crops, usually poppy fields, to cut supply at the source.
- **Interdiction:** stopping drugs during transport, seizures at borders, roads, rivers, ports.
- **Alternative development:** replacing drug crop income with legal livelihoods, cash crops, infrastructure, market access, and long term economic support.
- **Harm reduction:** policies that reduce damage without requiring immediate “zero use,” treatment access, education, needle programs, overdose prevention, safe services.
- **Compulsory detention centers:** facilities where people who use drugs are detained “for treatment,” often criticized when conditions are punitive or not evidence based.
- **Extrajudicial killing:** killing without legal trial or due process, a major human rights concern in some drug crackdowns.

- **Precursor chemicals:** legal industrial chemicals used to produce synthetic drugs like meth, controlling them is a key part of stopping production.
- **ATS (amphetamine type stimulants):** synthetic stimulants, mainly methamphetamine and similar drugs, a major issue in Southeast Asia.
- **Trafficking corridor:** common route used to move drugs, chemicals, weapons, or money across borders.
- **Borderlands:** remote border areas where state presence is weaker, governance is contested, and trafficking can thrive.
- **Displacement:** communities forced to move due to conflict, raids, eradication, or insecurity, which can increase vulnerability.
- **Human security approach:** prioritizing people's safety and livelihoods, health, rights, and stability, not just "state security."

❖ Bibliography

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drugs/synthetic-drugs-in-east-and-southeast-asia.html>

<https://thailand.un.org/en/91513-drug-trade-golden-triangle-grows-despite-pandemic>

<https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/golden-triangle-methamphetamine-trafficking-continues-to-surge-un-says/>

<https://thailand.un.org/en/91513-drug-trade-golden-triangle-grows-despite-pandemic>

<https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/05/106772/exponential-rise-synthetic-drug-production-and-trafficking-golden>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/18/qa-un-rep-on-opium-boom-in-golden-triangle>

http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1794-31082022000100177

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348070307_Problems_faced_by_ASEAN_in_dealing_with_transnational_drug_smuggling_in_Southeast_Asia_region