

INDO-MYANMAR BORDER TRADE AND MOREH IN MANIPUR**Khwairakpam Goutam Singh**

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Mizoram University, Mizoram- 796004

E-mail: goutamkhwairakpamsingh@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Border trade between India and Myanmar has emerged as an important catalyst for the economic development and regional integration of both countries. This 1,643-kilometer-long border between India and Myanmar has enormous potential for nurturing bilateral trade, improving connectivity, and encouraging cross-border investments. There are progressive and advantageous features, but several obstacles prevent the complete realization of the potential of the Indo-Myanmar border trade. The drug trade is one of the main problems associated with this trade. Moreh, a small town in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur, has recently attracted widespread attention for its alarming ascent as a drug hub. The town's location on the India-Myanmar border has made it an important transit point for drug trafficking. This transformation has had far-reaching effects on the local community and the country's regional security.

Keywords: - Border Trade; Drug; Manipur; Moreh; Myanmar**INTRODUCTION**

The Indo-Myanmar border, which spans 1,643 kilometers and traverses four Indian states (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram) alongside the Sagaing and Chin states of Myanmar, is a vital economic corridor that facilitates trade and connectivity between India and Myanmar. The history of the trade relationship between these two countries transcends centuries. This international trade has evolved over the years, expanding the potential for economic development, enhancing regional integration, and fostering diplomatic relations. The Indo-Myanmar border trade in Manipur has become a crucial economic lifeline for the state, inspiring bilateral trade and facilitating cross-border interactions. Manipur, located in India's northeast region, shares a porous 398-kilometer border with Myanmar, providing a vital trade corridor between the two countries. Due to its strategic location on the border, Manipur has been a significant trading centre between the two countries for centuries. The Indo-Myanmar border region, particularly the town of Moreh in Manipur, has been a significant cross-border trade hub for many years, fostering economic relations between India and Myanmar. Historically, the bustling border trade in Moreh has played a vital role in facilitating the flow of goods, fostering cultural exchanges, and promoting regional prosperity. However, despite its undeniable

advantages, this vital economic corridor confronts a significant obstacle: the illegal drug trade. Additionally, border trade is impeded by security concerns. Illegal trade and smuggling of goods can undermine legitimate trade channels. The reputation of Moreh, a commercial centre at the Manipur border known for its border trade, declines. Drug trafficking is prevalent at porous international borders devoid of security agencies. The Indo-Myanmar border is one suitable illustration of this issue.

OBJECTIVES

1. To highlight the importance of Indo-Myanmar border trade in promoting economic growth and regional connectivity.
2. To identify and examine the major challenges posed by the illegal drug trade along the border.
3. To understand the implications of the drug trade on border communities, regional stability, and cross-border trade activities, with a focus on Moreh, Manipur.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the study's facts. It involves theoretical and analytical research. The study utilizes both secondary and primary data sources. The secondary sources include a comprehensive literature review of academic journals, reports, government publications, and credible online sources, which provides a thorough

comprehension of the subject's historical context and current scholarly discourse. In addition, observations and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, government officials, and experts are used to collect primary data.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The opening of border trade in Northeast India has significant prospects and economic benefits in terms of employment generation, reducing unemployment problems, and income generation. It also fosters social interaction and harmonious relationships among the ethnic groups residing across the border (Marchang, 2018).

Northeast India's connection with Southeast Asian countries, where a substantial portion of the world's population resides, holds special significance for the economies of the northeastern states, given their large international border segments (Das & Bordoloi, 2015).

However, the landlocked economy of Northeast states, such as Manipur, heavily relies on overland trading routes, making it susceptible to illegal drug trade. Manipur's border town, Moreh, is a primary route for drug trafficking, as the state shares a long, porous border with Myanmar (Indira, 2015).

Illegal drug trafficking is prevalent in Manipur since 1970...South East Asia and South West Asia are the traditional areas for production of opium and manufacture of heroin. In South East Asia, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos are notoriously known as the "Golden Triangle"...The production of heroin in the "Golden Triangle" started increasing following the crackdown on the Mexican centres in late 70s. (Singh, 2001, pp. 66-67)

Kshetrimayum (2010), argues that addressing illegal trade requires streamlined efforts, sincerity, and honesty from state police and security forces. Major security considerations involve tackling drug trafficking and narco-terrorism. Building efficient border infrastructures and mending porous borders are essential for the smooth functioning of border trade. Border fencing is seen as a necessary step to control the activities of insurgent groups and prevent the trafficking of drugs, arms, and people (Srikant & Haokip, 2021, p. 361).

Vijayan (2023), highlights that drug abuse leads to social disruption and destabilization of the socioeconomic situation in the state. Additionally, other transnational organized crimes, such as Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) trafficking, human trafficking, the spread of HIV/AIDS,

funding of insurgent groups, and their involvement in politics and administration, pose challenges to India's national security concerning drug trafficking.

Myanmar, as the immediate neighbour, plays a crucial role in influencing Northeast India and India as a whole. Kalita (2020), emphasizes that India must persuade its eastern neighbour to take action against drug trafficking and arms smuggling, which are major obstacles to India's Act East policy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Border trade relations between India and Myanmar trace back to ancient times and are driven by cultural, geographic, and historical links. Since ancient times, the border region has experienced the exchange of products and services, fostering intercultural and economic relations. According to historical records, the Ahoms of Assam and the rulers of the kingdom of Ava in modern-day Myanmar engaged in prosperous trade (Kalita, 2019). Through this region, the ancient Silk Road connected the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia. "The route which connected India with China, Tibet and Burma (Myanmar) was through Assam. The traders traded on items like silk, pearls, cowries, musks, vermilion, cotton fabrics, China ware, lead, copper, silver, etc." (Saikia, 2020, p. 2). There are existing ancestral connections between the inhabitants of the four Indian states (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram) and the Sagaing and Chin states of Myanmar, which have nurtured a thriving trade relationship for generations. Myanmar has been an important transit route for India's trade via land with Southeast Asia, and the two countries have traditionally participated in cross-border trade, including the interchange of goods, services, and cultural influences. The former "Stilwell Road," constructed during World War II, connected the Indian city of Imphal in Manipur to the Chinese city of Kunming via Myanmar and served as a vital supply route. Imphal was a crucial location in the China-Burma-India Division during World War II, and its defense played a crucial role in securing the supply lines for the Stilwell Road and sustaining the regional Allied war effort. Presently this historic road, also known as the Ledo Road, has been revitalized as "Asian Highway 1 (AH1)," enhancing trade and connectivity between India and Myanmar. The road has deteriorated to the point where it is riddled with craters. The Stilwell Road, despite being a long-neglected piece

of infrastructure, contains the key to fulfilling the Act East Policy's promises in significant ways, and we must not let this opportunity pass us by (Ravi & Kapadia, 2012). Modern-day trade has been hampered by colonial boundaries and political restrictions. Manipur's strategic location on the border has made it an important trading centre between the two countries for centuries. Subsequently, with the attainment of independence and the demarcation of borders by both countries, border trade was suppressed by the respective governments, resulting in the obstruction of the free flow of trade and movement of people. Typically, agricultural products, forest products, handicrafts, textiles, gems, and spices were traded primarily through traditional systems, also known as the "barter system." However, as time has progressed and geopolitical dynamics have shifted, formal trade mechanisms have emerged. This border trade was characterized by informal arrangements and facilitated daily by them. A formalization of trade procedures became crucial for promoting economic growth and integration. To formalize and streamline this trade, the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade was inaugurated on April 12, 1995, by the then Union Minister of State for Commerce as a follow-up to the Trade Agreement signed between the two countries on January 21, 1994, in New Delhi (Department of Commerce and Industries, Government of Manipur, n.d.). The objective of the agreement was to increase bilateral trade, establish a trade infrastructure, and encourage interactions between individuals. Moreh-Tamu, Zokhawthar-Rhi, Avakhung-Pansat, and Lungwa-Somra are the designated trading centres along the border.

BORDER TRADE

The function of trade across borders in fostering economic cooperation and bilateral relations between neighboring countries is significant. The Indo-Myanmar border trade has flourished for decades along a thriving trade corridor between India and Myanmar. The border states of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh have been significant conduits for trade between the two countries. Indo-Myanmar border trade is primarily conducted through designated border points. India and Myanmar have four land customs stations (LCS) dealing with border trade, of which the Moreh-Tamu LCS is the most active. The Border Trade Agreement signed in 1994 gave border trade a legal framework. The Moreh-Tamu LCS was

opened in April 1995, while a second border trade point at Champhai-Rih was opened in 2004. Border trade is also allowed at Nampong-Pangsau Pass, while a trade point is being proposed at Avakhung-Pansat/Somrai (Florento & Corpuz, 2014). India and Myanmar signed a memorandum of understanding in 2012 to open border haats (markets). Moreh-Tamu, located in Manipur, is the most significant trading point, connecting India's northeastern states to Myanmar's Sagaing region. These trading points facilitate the movement of goods, both legal and illegal, between the two countries.

The community on both sides of the border engaged in barter systems, exchanging commodities including agricultural products, handicrafts, and traditional goods. First and foremost, proximity and shared ethnic and cultural affinities between border communities were the driving forces behind informal trade practices. In Moreh, barter or the exchange of commodities was the preferred method of trade. With the establishment of the Land Customs Station (LCS), this became more challenging. The majority of Moreh's import and export license holders don't have literacy skills. They have little understanding of import-export regulations and are unconcerned about it.

With the signing of trade agreements along with the establishment of border trade centres, the transformation of border trade gained momentum. India and Myanmar signed the Border Trade Agreement in the 1990s, which sought to promote legitimate trade between the two countries. The opening of the Moreh-Tamu and Zokhawthar-Rih border trade points represented a significant step toward facilitating legal trade, streamlining customs procedures, and fostering bilateral economic cooperation.

In its circular RBI/2015-16/230 dated November 5, 2015, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) abolished barter trade, which was a component of border trade between India and Myanmar. In addition, under the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) public notice no. 50 issued on December 17, 2015, it was determined that border trade at Moreh, Manipur would be upgraded to normal trade to boost bilateral trade between the two countries (Sinate et al., 2019). With these modifications, the bilateral policy regime regulating trade across India and Myanmar's land border has changed. The earlier limit no longer applies as the unilateral Duty-Free Tariff Preference (DFTP) Scheme of

India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India Trade in Goods Agreement became applicable to Myanmar.

Agricultural products, textiles, machinery, consumer goods, and petrochemical products are the principal commodities traded between India and Myanmar. Myanmar supplies India with natural gas and legumes, while India exports pharmaceuticals, electrical equipment, and construction materials. The Indian Rupee (INR) and Myanmar Kyat (MMK) have been used as

acceptable currencies in the border trade, which has been conducted primarily through barter. Pharmaceuticals, machinery, electrical equipment, textiles, and construction materials are among India's exports to Myanmar. In exchange, India imports commodities from Myanmar including pulses, legumes, wood products, minerals, and natural gas. The border trade additionally facilitates the transport of essential goods, such as fuel, to India's landlocked northeastern states, thereby sustaining their economic activities.

Figure.1 Indo-Myanmar Border Trade via Moreh-Tamu



Source: LCS Moreh, India, and Ministry of Commerce, Government of Myanmar

Based on the information provided in the chart, we can observe the trade figures between India and Myanmar via the Moreh-Tamu Land Customs Station (LCS) from 2012 to 2018 in terms of the value of commodities traded in US dollars. Myanmar's perspective on total trade value is depicted as "Myanmar Statistics," while India's perspective is represented as "India's LCS Statistics."

a) Following Myanmar Statistics:

Myanmar's total trade value increased from 9 million USD in 2012-2013 to 46 million USD in 2014-2015, a steady increase. Between 2014-15 and 2016-17, there was no significant increase in total trade value, as it remained constant at 46 million USD. In contrast, the total value of trade decreased to 48 million USD in 2016-17 and remained at 46 million USD in 2017-18.

b) Following India's LCS Statistics:

In 2012-13, India's total trade value was 9 million USD, but by 2014-15, it had increased to 25 million USD, indicating a substantial increase in trade. 2015-16 saw a decline in total trade value to 20 million USD, and 2016-17 saw a further decline to 18 million USD. In 2017-18, India's total trade value decreased significantly to just 0.1 million USD, indicating a significant decline in trade through this route.

The chart demonstrates that Myanmar's total trade value (221 million USD) was considerably higher than India's LCS Statistics (85.1 million USD) throughout the entire period. The Moreh-Tamu LCS demonstrates a substantial trade relationship between India and Myanmar, with Myanmar consistently exporting more to India than India exports to Myanmar. The data on trade between India and Myanmar via the Moreh-Tamu LCS

demonstrates a general upward trend, with notable fluctuations in certain years.

“The Indo-Myanmar stands at a mere US\$ 2.1b. More importantly, cross-border trade is even more insignificant barely at US\$ 87m (India exports \$78 million and imports totaled \$9 million during 2018-19)” (Datta, 2019, para. 6). This trend indicates a growing economic partnership and cooperation among the two countries. However, the latent potential remains awaiting exploration.

In addition, border trade between India and Myanmar has the potential to contribute to regional integration. The region's proximity to Southeast Asian markets serves as a strategic advantage, as the trade corridor has the potential to become an important link in India's Act East Policy and Myanmar's Look West Policy. Improved economic connections between India and Myanmar can facilitate trade with other ASEAN countries, thereby expanding the regional cooperation and integration framework. Initiatives like the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, which promote regional connectivity, represent advances in the correct direction (Bhaumik, 2022). In addition, the establishment of special economic zones and border haats (markets) has facilitated social exchanges and trade. The economic significance of the Indo-Myanmar border trade in Manipur is immense. It offers access to a vast array of products, including agricultural products, textiles, handicrafts, consumer goods, and equipment. Manipur is a significant source of high-quality agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables, spices, and medicinal herbs, which find a ready market in Myanmar. Moreover, border trade has facilitated the import of essential commodities, energy supplies, materials for construction, and consumer products into Manipur, satisfying local demand and contributing to the economic development of the state. The availability of Myanmar products at competitive prices has also played a significant role in stabilizing the regional cost of living.

Moreh, a Manipur border town with a strategic location, facilitates the movement of products and people between India and Myanmar by serving as a trade hub. The town thrives due to its active border trade. The economic impact of border trade in Moreh is not limited to the volume of trade. It has generated employment opportunities, stimulated local businesses, and contributed to the region's

socioeconomic growth. The trade route connecting Moreh and Tamu in Myanmar is known as the Friendship Road between India and Myanmar. This road is an essential artery for trade, allowing goods to cross the border without difficulty. The vibrant border market of Namphalong in Myanmar, located a stone's throw from Moreh, is a popular destination for traders from both sides. To facilitate efficient trade operations, efforts have been made to enhance trade infrastructure and expedite cross-border facilities. Inaugurated in 2018, the Moreh-Tamu Integrated Check Post (ICP) functions as the primary trading point between Manipur and Myanmar. It offers customs clearance facilities, warehousing, banking, and other trade-related services, facilitating the flow of products and fostering transparency. In addition, both governments have taken steps to simplify trade procedures and lower trade barriers, including alleviating visa restrictions, promoting border tourism, and facilitating banking transactions. The two countries have established cross-border economic zones along the border between India and Myanmar. The state of Manipur is home to the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project, which seeks to connect Moreh, India, to Mae Sot, Thailand, via Myanmar (*The Nation*, 2012). These economic zones offer opportunities for investments, joint ventures, and increased regional trade, thereby strengthening economic connections and fostering inclusive development. Regardless of the market's growing potential, the Indo-Myanmar border trade encounters many obstacles that impede its full realization. The dearth of adequate infrastructure, ranging from road connectivity, customs facilities, and storage facilities, is one of the primary obstacles. A shortage of banking and financial services in border areas also presents obstacles for traders and shareholders.

PROFILE OF MOREH

Moreh, the only urban premises in the Tengenoupal district with an area of one square kilometer, is predominantly inhabited by Kuki, Meitei, Tamil, Nepali, and Muslims. Minorities such as Bengalis, Biharis, Marwaris, and Punjabis inhabit Moreh. The border trade at Moreh extends beyond merely economic transactions. It also functions as a cultural bridge between India and Myanmar, facilitating the exchange of customs, traditions, and ideas. The unique blend of cultures and the prospect

to witness firsthand the convergence of Indian and Burmese influences draw tourists to this remote border town. The road distance between Imphal, the capital of Manipur, and Moreh, a border village between India and Myanmar, is approximately 110 kilometers. The primary route between Imphal and Moreh is National Highway 102 (that used to be NH 39), which connects the two urban areas via Imphal and Moreh. NH 102 is an indispensable transportation corridor in Manipur, facilitating business and travel across the state and its surrounding regions. Before motorists could become accustomed to the new three-digit number the roadside signs on the Dimapur-Imphal-Moreh route were changed to Asian Highway-1 (AH1) (Haokip, 2022). Moreh has immense potential as a tourist destination besides its trade and business potential. This area features magnificent landscapes, abundant biodiversity, and sites of cultural significance. Tourists can explore the picturesque Tengnoupal district, partake in adventurous activities such as trekking and mountaineering, and occupy themselves with local customs and cuisines.

Moreh is a gateway for international trade and a major entry point between India and Myanmar. It is strategically located along the AH1 and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, making it an imperative cross-border commercial corridor. Moreh has undergone a rapid transition from a small border hamlet to a thriving commercial centre. Moreh's economic potential derives from its strategic location and the variety of products traded in the region. It acts as a centre for the exchange of agricultural products, consumer goods, textiles, machinery, and other commodities. Moreh provides access to the markets of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and beyond for the export of Indian products to Southeast Asian countries. According to Mahadevan (2020), the town possesses three distinguishing characteristics. Initially, it resides on the boundary and extends to the zero line. Second, it is twinned with a nearby settlement in Myanmar, which can provide storage facilities for contraband smuggled into or out of India. And thirdly, it is connected by road to Imphal, which serves as a place of refuge for the transportation of illegal drugs throughout India. Moreh, historically renowned for its thriving cross-border trade and cultural exchange, is now adjusting to a new identity: a burgeoning drug hub. The illegal drug

trafficking has transformed this once-peaceful town into a hub for drug-related activities.

DRUG TRADE AND MOREH

Moreh, once a modest trading post, it has unfortunately become notorious as a burgeoning drug hub in recent years. "Lately, Moreh has been experiencing a range of drug seizures and arrests. Drugs reach Moreh through Myanmar's Tamu village and then flow to Imphal to Nagaland's capital Kohima and Dimapur" (Vijayan, 2023). According to Singh and Nunes (2013, p. 72), "Burmese heroin is transported from the Burmese town Tamu to Moreh (a town in Manipur). Tamu is a counterpart border town to a free movement of people and goods between these towns". There are various factors leading to Moreh's transformation. The factors such as its Strategic Location, Socio-economic Factors, and Inadequate Border Security. Several factors including its proximity to the infamous Golden Triangle region, renowned for opium cultivation and drug production, Moreh has become a hub for drug trafficking. This region is a conduit for a variety of illegal substances, with Moreh serving as a gateway to India and beyond. Tobacco products, marijuana, alcohol, opium, spasmoxylon, methamphetamine, codeine cough syrup, and pseudo-Ephedrine are readily available in Manipur (Oinam, 2022). Opium, methamphetamine, and heroin are surreptitiously transported from Myanmar to Manipur via Moreh, Lashio, Mandalay, and Bhamo. In Manipur, drug trafficking is no longer a local business; it has become a transnational enterprise involving drug cartels from China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal (*E-Pao*, n.d.). In addition to fueling addiction, the drug trade finances organised crime and terrorist activities.

The region's socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, and a dearth of alternative means of support, have led to the growing prominence of the drug trade. Inevitably a means of earning fast cash, drug trafficking attracts a large number of locals, particularly youth, exacerbating the problem. Primarily to the porous nature of the India-Myanmar border and the lack of security forces, it has been difficult to prevent narcotics trafficking. Criminal syndicates take advantage of the terrain's difficulty and the lack of border patrol. Inadequate infrastructure, such as surveillance mechanisms and checkpoints, permits drug

traffickers to exploit shortfalls and transit drugs across borders.

The drug problem in Moreh has profound implications for the socioeconomic structure of the town and its neighbouring communities. Several unsafe drug practices and drug addiction has ravaged families, resulting in broken families, increased crime rates, and a surge in HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. "Drug abuse and the spread of HIV are concerns shared by both the Indian and Myanmar sides. Curing the issue on one side of the border will never be effective because it can readily become polluted on the other side" (Sharma, 2011, p. 56). Tragically, children were exposed to multiple types of drugs at a young age by society, and some are from the drug lord's family, where they have had easy access to drugs since infancy in Moreh (Vaiphei, 2021). In addition, the town's reputation has deteriorated, dissuading potential investors and hampering economic growth. Manipur has become a conduit for contraband products, including sophisticated weapons (Laithangbam, 2022).

IMPORTANCE OF MYANMAR

There is regional/sub-regional cooperation between India and Myanmar, including ASEAN, Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation, and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Myanmar is the only country for India at the intersection of its "Neighborhood First" and "Act East" policies. The Indian government is actively engaged in over a dozen infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects in Myanmar. Myanmar, being the only country strategically connected between India and ASEAN, can function as a hub for the exchange of products, services, and technology (Marchang, 2018). As a component of the larger ASEAN-India connectivity initiatives, the Indo-Myanmar border trade route plays an indispensable part in enhancing regional connectivity. It facilitates trade and business with Southeast Asian countries and connects India's landlocked northeastern states to the rest of the country via land. Myanmar connects India to the broader ASEAN market, providing access to over 650 million consumers (Starting Up a Business, n.d.). The aforementioned trade corridor facilitates the exchange of products, promotes regional integration, and strengthens India's and ASEAN's economic engagement.

Myanmar has a plethora of natural resources, such as oil, natural gas, and minerals. Accessibility to these resources via international trade enables India to fulfill its energy needs and enhances its energy security. As the immediate neighbour, Myanmar becomes a prerequisite for energy security. The border region also serves as a cultural and social bridge between India and Myanmar, facilitating intercultural exchanges and fostering mutual understanding. India and Myanmar have resources that complement one another, generating avenues for diversification and specialization in trade. Myanmar can acquire finished goods, machinery, and agricultural products from India due to its extensive consumer market and manufacturing capabilities. Myanmar can provide India with natural resources including timber, minerals, and precious stones. Myanmar has the opportunity to diversify its trading partners and reduce its reliance on a single market through its border trade with India. It also allows Myanmar to capitalize on India's robust manufacturing sector and technological prowess. In addition, this trade is an essential source of income and employment for border communities, thereby contributing to alleviating poverty and socioeconomic development.

CONCLUSION

The Indo-Myanmar border trade offers both India and Myanmar tremendous potential. It functions as a vital hub for regional integration, economic growth, and intercultural exchanges. India and Myanmar can strengthen their economic relations and create a win-win situation for both countries by nurturing closer cooperation, investing in infrastructure, and fostering a favourable business environment.

To unleash the full potential of this trade route, it is essential to address and overcome obstacles associated with the illegal drug trade and security issues in Moreh, Manipur, Northeast India, and India. Strengthening border security through increased surveillance, intelligence sharing, and law enforcement agency cooperation is essential for effectively addressing these issues. The collaboration between India and Myanmar presents substantial opportunities for trade diversification, resource access, and socioeconomic development for both countries and the broader ASEAN region. The imperative need for effective action is underscored by the transformation of Moreh from a

border town into a drug hub. A multifaceted strategy is required to combat drug trafficking, including law enforcement, awareness campaigns, economic development, and international

cooperation. By tackling the root causes and implementing comprehensive strategies, we can aspire to restore Moreh's reputation, protect its communities, and build a drug-free future.

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