

## Timber crime

### CASE STUDY

10

#### COMMODITIES INVOLVED

Timber and illicit drugs

#### CONVERGENCE TYPOLOGY

Diversification of commodities

#### GEOGRAPHIC REGION

Southeast Asia and  
South America



**In Thailand** in October 2020, when officers from the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) raided the home of a deceased member of a drug network, they had been expecting to seize assets acquired from drug money. The deceased man had been connected to a THB 508 million drug case (equivalent to approximately USD 16.9 million). Instead, they discovered a stockpile of rare timber with an estimated value of THB 160 million (equivalent to approximately USD 5.3 million), including 409 planks of rosewood, 1,207 planks of blackwood, 170 planks of teak, and 17 planks of makha mong. Officers from the Royal Forest Department (RFD)

were called in to investigate the origin of the timber, which they suspected could be from protected areas in the northeast of Thailand. They believed it was likely the timber was being stored at the suspect's house while waiting to be exported. DSI and the RFD were jointly investigating the case to identify the convergence between the drug network and the timber, with DSI analysing the financial trail to try to find a link with a particular illegal timber harvesting gang.<sup>53</sup>

**It has separately been** reported that criminal groups in Thailand often pay illegal timber harvesters with methamphetamines. One forestry official stated that when timber harvesters are arrested, they are found in possession of yaba<sup>54</sup> "nearly 100%" of the time, with drugs being a way to pay for labour and to launder money.<sup>55</sup>

**The intersection** between timber and drugs is also seen in the Amazon region. Cocaine is often smuggled using the existing supply routes of the timber industry, with heavy timber trucks discretely carrying cocaine from forest production areas to commercial shipping areas. Timber truck searches are often avoided by drug enforcement agencies due to the high volume of timber trucks on logging roads, the large quantities and significant weight of the timber, and the amount of time a search would take.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2006027/drugs-case-leads-to-rare-wood-inquiry>

<sup>54</sup> Yaba tablets are an inexpensive mix of caffeine and methamphetamine.

<sup>55</sup> <https://chinadialogue.net/en/nature/the-guardians-of-siamese-rosewood/>

<sup>56</sup> <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/illicit-confluences-intersection-cocaine-and-illicit-timber-amazon>

**A major case** was reported in Peru in 2008 with the arrest of the mayor of Pucallpa, one of the most strategically important cities for Peru's timber trade. The investigation started in 2003 when Peruvian law enforcement discovered 523 kg of cocaine hidden in a plywood shipment and traced it back to one of the mayor's businesses. He was eventually arrested five years later in 2008 and alleged to have controlled the major drug trafficking routes from Peru to Brazil, using the logistical and commercial networks in his timber business to move the cocaine. Police seized a total of USD 71 million worth of assets whose origin could not be accounted for, including 34 properties, 44 boats, and 200 vehicles, indicating how lucrative this timber-drug network was.<sup>57</sup>

### GOOD PRACTICE

- **Initiating a joint investigation** (between DSI and RFD) upon the discovery of other illicit commodities connected to the key suspect, to identify the nature of the convergence.
- **Conducting financial investigation and following the money trail** (in the Peru case) to identify illicit proceeds and assets and facilitate asset recovery.

### INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

- **Organised crime group mapping** would be a useful technique to help identify those criminal networks who are involved in a variety of different crimes and enable law enforcement to focus resources more efficiently on targeting those groups posing a greater criminal threat.

<sup>57</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/drug-traffickers-take-note-of-perus-illegal-timber-trade/>