UNODC ON TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND ILLICIT TRAFFICKING IN SOUTH AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Background and Significance

South and Southeast Asia forms a highly interconnected region with extensive land and maritime borders, major international ports, migration corridors, and rapidly growing trade. These same networks are being exploited by transnational criminal groups. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has described transnational organized crime in South and Southeast Asia as increasing in scale.

The problem here is transnational. Strengthening one country's enforcement without the co-operation of the neighbouring countries would simply divert the routes of trafficking. Therefore, intelligence sharing, joint investigations, mutual legal assistance, and coordinated border management is important.

Narcotics Trafficking and Major Routes

The Golden Triangle, particularly the Myanmar - Lao PDR - Thailand area remains a major region of effect. Transnational criminal networks continue to exploit regional vulnerabilities to manufacture, move, and distribute synthetic drugs and illicit chemical precursors across these borders.

Regional Scale and Trends

Recent UNODC data show the scale: 236 tonnes of methamphetamine were seized in East and Southeast Asia in 2024, of which 94% were seized in Southeast Asia and about 200 tonnes in five Lower Mekong countries - Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

For a South Asian discussion, the Myanmar - India - Bangladesh connection needs particular attention. UNODC has documented westward movement of methamphetamine tablets from Myanmar into South Asia, exploiting difficult-to-control border areas involving Myanmar, Bangladesh and India.

UNODC's Passenger and Cargo Control Programme emphasizes intelligence-led risk assessment and inter-agency units involving, customs, police and other authorities to dismantle these illicit shipping pipelines.

Human Trafficking

South-east Asia and South Asia function simultaneously as a source of transit and destination region for trafficking for forced labour and other forms of exploitation. UNODC has identified porous borders, uneven law enforcement and insufficient cross border coordination as significant challenges.

Border Security

In terms of border security, priority measures include the following:

- Intelligence sharing among neighbouring states.
- Joint or coordinated border operations.
- Risk analysis at airports, seaports and road crossings.
- Detection of narcotics and illicit chemicals concealed in legitimate cargos.
- Specialized cells to distinguish trafficking victims from irregular migrants and offenders.

The important diplomatic balance is:

- Stronger borders without closing legitimate borders.
- Stronger law enforcement.
- Law enforcements without criminalizing trafficking victims.
- Proper border coordination between neighbouring states hence, not giving any way to the narcotic networks to divert.
- Stronger international cooperation while respecting national sovereignty.