

Drug Use, Smuggling Increasing in Libya

March 06, 2013 9:56 AM Jamie Dettmer

TRIPOLI, LIBYA — Drug use is on the rise in Libya, as a host of post-revolutionary challenges after the fall of Moammar Gadhafi prevent the government from stemming the tide.

The evidence of drug use isn't hard to find in Libya's capital, from discarded syringes littering small parks in residential side streets to the smell of pungent hashish being smoked in the rubble-strewn remains of toppled strongman Gadhafi's former residential compound.

According to the chairman of the national security committee of the country's parliament, Abd Al-Wahhab Muhammad Qaid, drug trafficking is a serious challenge for the Libyan government, with narcotics flowing in from its southern neighbors, Chad and Niger.

“I live in the south and I know we have big borders, and in fact we suffer from many things – from illegal immigration and drugs. We don't control our borders,” said Qaid.

Border enforcement lacking

With Libya's security forces still in disarray, there is little coherence in the policy of border enforcement.

A 400-kilometer section near the town of Gadhames adjacent to Algeria is patrolled by a handful of militiamen. The pilot of the one spotter plane that has been deployed has only a cell phone to contact ground forces.

A lot of the smuggled narcotics – hash, amphetamines and cocaine – is destined for the lucrative markets of Europe. Last month, the authorities seized a boat off the coast carrying 25 tons of hashish.

Libya isn't just a trans-shipment point, though. It is a market itself. There are increasing reports of Libyans using drugs, presenting both a public health crisis, as well as a law-and-order problem.

Crime on upswing

Police claim that 80 percent of Libyan crime is drug-related, with traffickers and dealers fighting nightly turf battles in Tripoli and Benghazi, and addicts resorting to carjacking and robbery.

And the public health side of the problem is being ignored, said Kamal Aisharif, a 34-year-old dental technician. He has set up a non-governmental organization to publicize the drug crisis and to work in schools to explain the damage that drug addiction causes.

“It is worse than before. The most popular now is hashish and pills, amphetamines. No one talks about drugs from my side I think it is the most big problem in Libya. Children in schools know nothing about drugs, the risk of drugs and side-effects,” said Aisharif.

Aisharif said the Gadhafi government closed the country’s few detoxification units in 2009 and 2010, and now there is just one for the whole of Libya – a 34-bed facility in Benghazi.

And he said he is worried about the dangerous mix of drugs and guns.

“I am worried because, you know, most crime happens in Tripoli, for example, because of the drugs, people under drugs, and they don’t know what they do, and they have guns and they are out of control,” said Aisharif.

There are only seven people trained as drugs counselors in Libya. Aisharif is now planning training courses for more.

