



United Nations
Office on Drugs and Crime

ORGANIZED CRIMINAL NETWORKS LINKED WITH DRUG TRAFFICKING

IN THE EASTERN INDIAN OCEAN REGION

**GLOBAL MARITIME CRIME
PROGRAMME (GMCP)**



**Global
Programme on
Criminal Network
Disruption**

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Key Abbreviations

AOTP	Afghan Opiate Trade Project
DNC	Department of Narcotics Control
GMCP	Global Maritime Crime Programme
IMBL	International Maritime Boundary Line
KG	Kerala Ganja
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam
MNDF	Maldives National Defence Force
NDDCB	National Dangerous Drugs Control Board,
OCNs	Organized Criminal Networks
SIS	State Intelligence Service
STF	Special Task Force
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime

Executive Summary

General Findings

1. Organized Criminal Networks (OCNs) operating in the Eastern Indian Ocean are predominantly hierarchical in their organizational structure with individuals or a network of individuals at the helm of operations.
2. The geographical location, proximity to two major drug-producing regions in Asia, and the vast shoreline have aided the transit of illicit drugs in Maldives and Sri Lanka through the Southern Route.
3. The transnational drug smuggling in the region is mostly transactional, carried out through a series of patron-client networks. Other modes include freelancing and family and community-based networks.
4. The involvement of the local population is driven by both push and pull factors, including profit motive, patronage, protection, poverty, addiction, street masculinity, involvement of family members, peer influence, and social media influence.
5. Corruption within law enforcement and legal institutions was listed as a key problem in both countries. The broken chain of custody and complicity of government officials in illicit activities have affected the prosecution rates in both countries.
6. The socio-cultural factors (i.e. ethnic, national, or family ties) form the basis for building trust and loyalty within the organized drug trafficking networks, establishing working relationships and promotions within networks.
7. Emerging routes in Maldives and Sri Lanka seem to deviate towards the lesser-patrolled areas in the southern part of the Indian Ocean as the criminal networks continue to adapt to the enhanced maritime enforcement measures in the region.
8. The ability of new elements to enter the market can depend on various factors, including existing power dynamics between various local gangs, local political connections, law enforcement efforts, the adaptability of new entrants, and institutional corruption. However, an increase in the trafficking of synthetic drugs and a rise in local consumption were reported as factors that are likely to impact these existing market dynamics.
9. The maritime route holds the largest share in illicit drug trafficking in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, especially larger consignments, but there has been a noticeable rise in the share of the air routes and postal methods post-COVID-19 restrictions.

Maldives

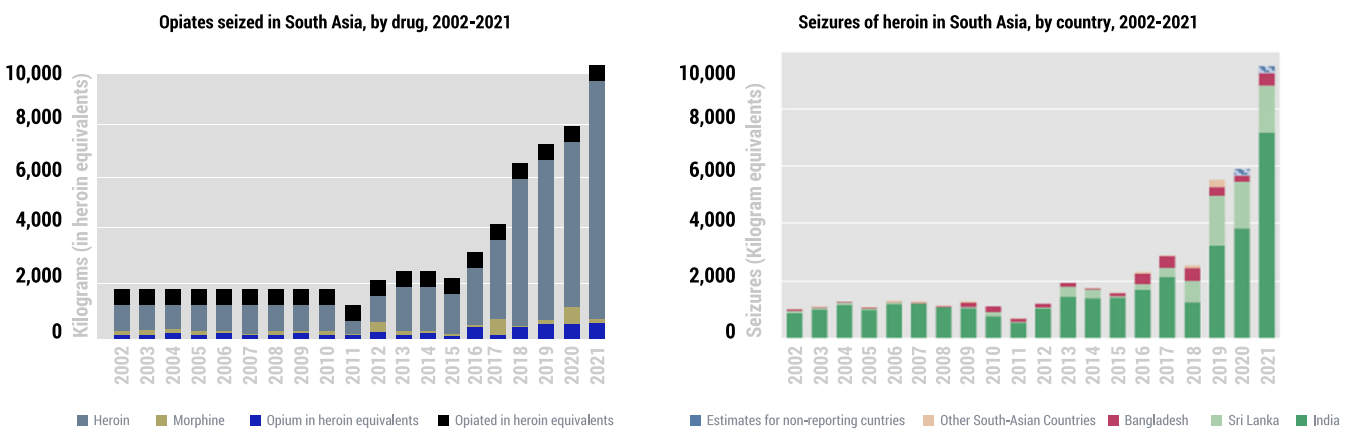
- 1. The structure of gangs is hierarchical, with clear levels of divisions between the top leadership and other members. There are around 44 active gangs in the capital Malé, and approximately 2800 people are identified with direct involvement in organized criminal activities.
- 2. The influence and infiltration within legal institutions and security agencies pose a serious governance challenge for law enforcement agencies. This has forced a change in the approach of police and drug enforcement agencies away from a seizure/prosecution-centric approach (pre-2019) to a financial investigation task force that is looking into the division of labor within networks, new businesses, and transport systems.
- 3. In the decade since 2011, the share of drug carriers departing from South Asian countries has decreased significantly. There has been a reported increase in illicit drug supply from European and South American countries in recent years.
- 4. In the Maldives, the lack of segregation of drug offenders within the Maldivian prisons poses a challenge, which has led to the growth of drug networks and new recruitments within the jails and exposed the gaps and weaknesses of the policing/prison systems which the drug traffickers can exploit.

Sri Lanka

- 1. In Sri Lanka, the gangs operate mostly through a series of patron-client networks. The top leadership was reported to be either based out of foreign countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), India, and Pakistan, or operating from within the Sri Lankan prisons.
- 2. The structure of illicit drug markets was reported to be both fragmented and competitive, depending on the influence and control exerted by different organized criminal groups. At the local village level, monopolistic operators do not allow other dealers to grow their operations, but in large townships, several gangs compete for market control.
- 3. In Sri Lanka, prisons are being misused by the organized criminal group leadership to carry out illegal operations. This is due to a lack of sufficient funding for the training of police staff, a paucity of personnel, and the use of outdated equipment and technologies.
- 4. The Sri Lankan authorities have identified operatives that include deserters from the armed forces and some former Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) members.
- 5. Periods of socio-political unrest can create an environment that is conducive to the growth and expansion of drug trafficking networks in the country. Political events can also have an impact on the relationship between market control and the use of violence.

Overview: The Eastern Indian Ocean region, encompassing Bangladesh, Maldives, India, and Sri Lanka faces a sustained threat from illicit drug trafficking that threatens the national security, regional stability, and socio-economic development in the region. Located between the world’s two largest illicit drug-producing areas in Southwest Asia and Southeast Asia, this region is the largest consumer market for opiates worldwide, which has witnessed an unprecedented rise in opiate users in the last two decades¹. Criminal networks in this Eastern Indian Ocean region exploit the strategic geographical position, proximity to drug-producing regions, and the vast shoreline, with numerous accessible locations for the trafficking of illicit commodities.

Figure 1: Opiates seized in South Asia (2002-2021)



Source: World Drug Report 2023

The region accounted for the majority of heroin and morphine seizures on the southern route over the past two decades and this rose to nearly two-thirds of all seizures in 2021 (See Fig 1)². In 2021, India reported its highest volume of drug seizures in three decades and rising rates of interception on the maritime route, which is estimated to be around 70 percent of all drug trafficking in the region³. Data on drug seizures has shown an increase in trafficking of heroin from African countries along the southern route⁴. Even as opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan witnessed a sharp decline after the 2022 ban that extends to using, transporting, selling, trading, importing and exporting all types of drugs, such as alcohol, heroin, shisha (methamphetamine), tablet K, hashish and all other types of drugs, as well as drug-producing plants⁵, political instability at the other end of South Asia, especially Myanmar, has led to the highest estimated opium production since 2001⁶.

¹ World Drug Report 2023

² UNODC, World Drug Report 2023

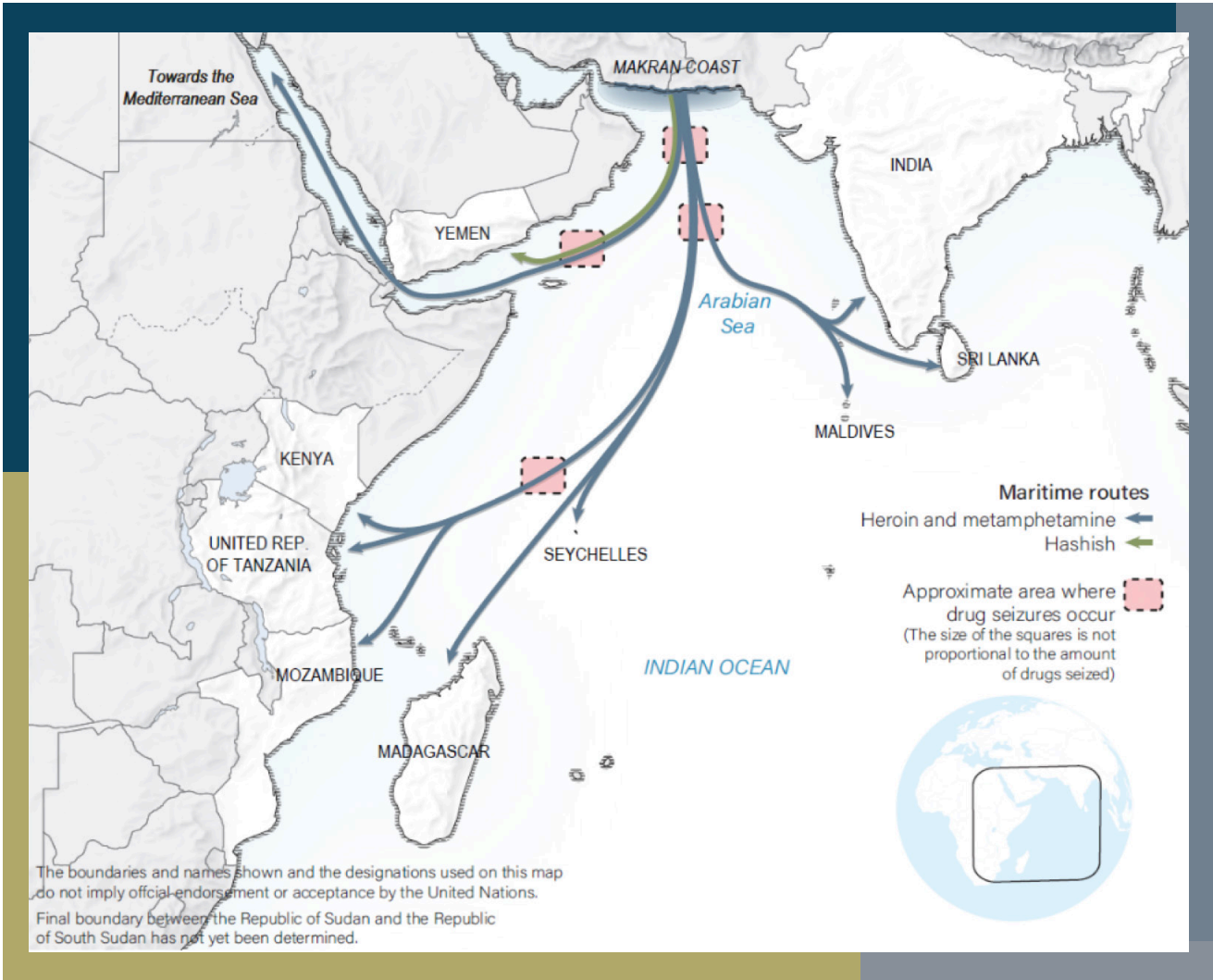
³ Narcotics Control Bureau (2021), Annual Report, Ministry of Home Affairs, India <https://narcoindia.in/periodicals.php>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ UNODC World Drug Report 2024

⁶ Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2023

Figure 2: Maritime trafficking routes in the Indian Ocean Region



Source: Findings of the Expert Working Group on Trafficking Opiates and Methamphetamine on the Southern Route (2023)

Between 2016 to 2019, Maldives reported 47% increase in the domestic sale of drugs and over twelve thousand reported drug induced cases⁷ The rising and diversifying trends of drug trafficking in the region can be attributed to the demographic dynamics in the region, increased availability of drugs, high rates of urbanization, capacity related challenges for law enforcement agencies, and rising income levels in some countries.

⁷ National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of National Planning, Housing & Infrastructure, Maldives (2020)

Objectives

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), through its Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP), in partnership with the Afghan Opiate Trade Project (AOTP), Global Programme on Criminal Network Disruption (GPCD), conducted an assessment that aimed to investigate the organised criminal networks (OCNs) engaged in illicit drug trafficking in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region. The assessment concentrates on two major countries of the region: Maldives and Sri Lanka. Both countries are significant transit hubs for drugs in the region, especially through the southern route, and gaining insights into the fundamental organizational structures of the local OCNs could aid efforts to identify the gaps in current anti-narcotic policies, capacity building of criminal justice systems in these countries, and building a regional picture of cross-border drug trafficking⁸.

Some of the key areas of inquiry included:

- I. The business models adopted, characteristics of supply chains, and distribution networks;
- II. The modus operandi employed by organized criminal networks, including trafficking routes, methods, and operational tactics;
- III. The structure and hierarchy of these criminal entities, including their leadership, recruitment mechanisms, and communication mechanisms;
- IV. The links of OCNs to transnational actors and networks;
- V. The financial and monetary aspects of organised crime, including money laundering methods, and illicit financial flows;
- VI. The challenges of drug trafficking for security, governance and the rule of law.

⁸ Giommoni, L., Aziani, A., & Berlusconi, G. (2017). How do illicit drugs move across countries? A network analysis of the heroin supply to Europe. Journal of Drug Issues, 47(2), 217-240.

Methodology

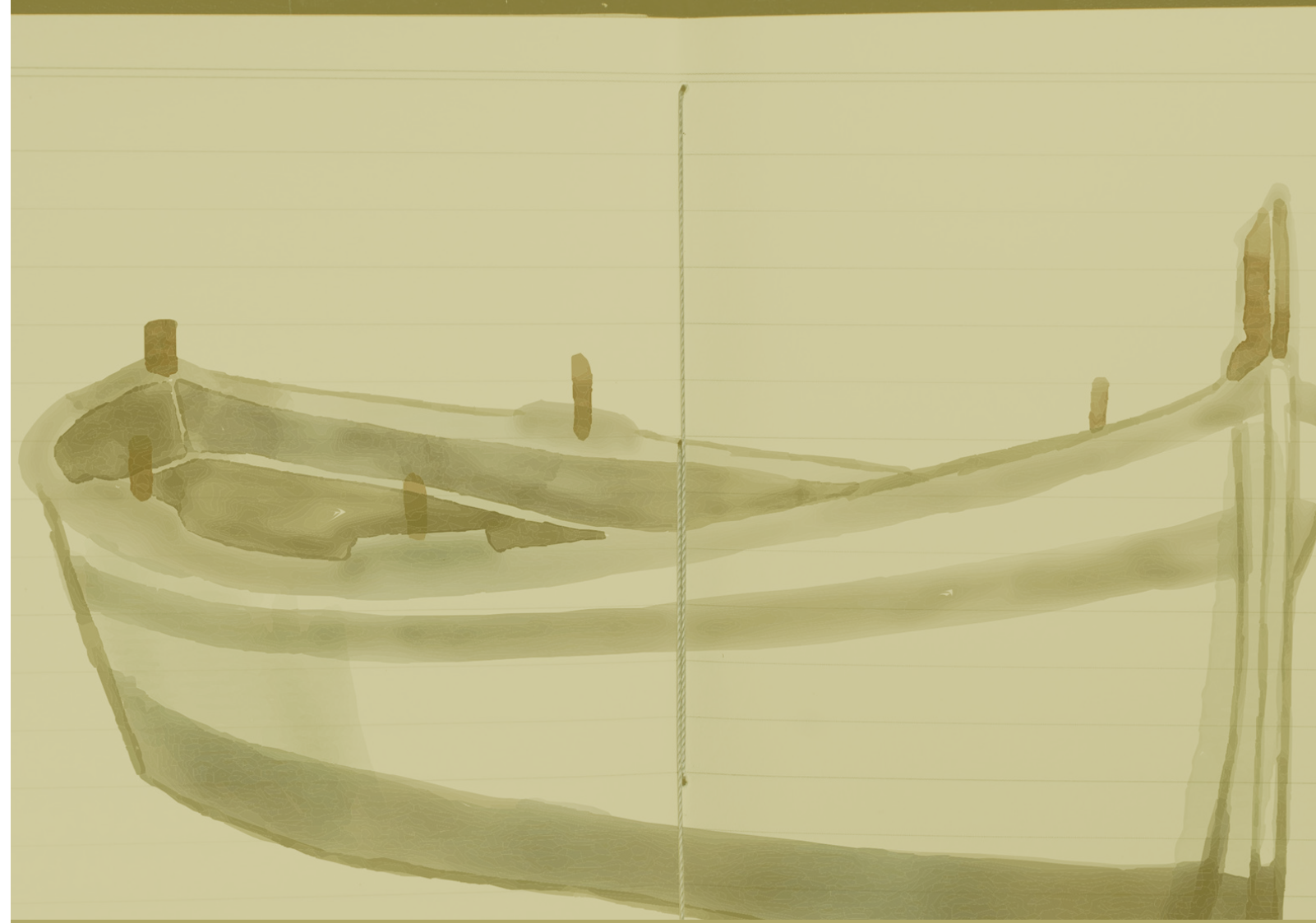
There has been a paucity of empirical data and in-depth analysis on the factors that shape the contours of transnational drug trafficking networks and supply-side dynamics of illicit drug markets in the eastern Indian Ocean region. The assessment aims to fill this gap and encourage further analysis of this critical issue in the region.

This is predominately a qualitative assessment, where key national security stakeholders were interviewed in the two countries. All interviews were conducted in person by UNODC staff and consultants and questionnaires and consent forms were shared with the agencies before the interviews. A comprehensive literature review was conducted at the beginning of the study to understand the trends and structures of organised criminal networks and drug trafficking in the region. The literature review indicated that the national level data collection and research on drug trends have been conducted in this region but there is a gap in empirical research in the region, particularly related to OCNs.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in Maldives and Sri Lanka, and they included sets of open-ended and closed-ended questions regarding the characteristics of the organized criminal networks and their involvement and role in the drug trade, their motivations for entering and remaining in the drug trade, the business model and drug trafficking networks. The study ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of stakeholders and gave the respondents the freedom to respond/not respond to each question. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary. The respondents were briefed on the research objectives, and upon their signed consent, the interview was conducted. Following the preparation of the first draft of this assessment, national level consultations with stakeholders from relevant agencies was held in both Maldives and Sri Lanka. Given the lack of existing research, this study provides valuable insights into the region's drug trafficking networks, their modus operandi and business models and their impact on security and governance in the region as a whole.

The major limitation of the assessment was the overlap of fieldwork with the national elections in Maldives. This led to a relatively smaller number of key informant interviews, but the findings provide a unique insight into drug trafficking networks of the region and highlight critical gaps that would benefit from further analysis.

Findings of the Study





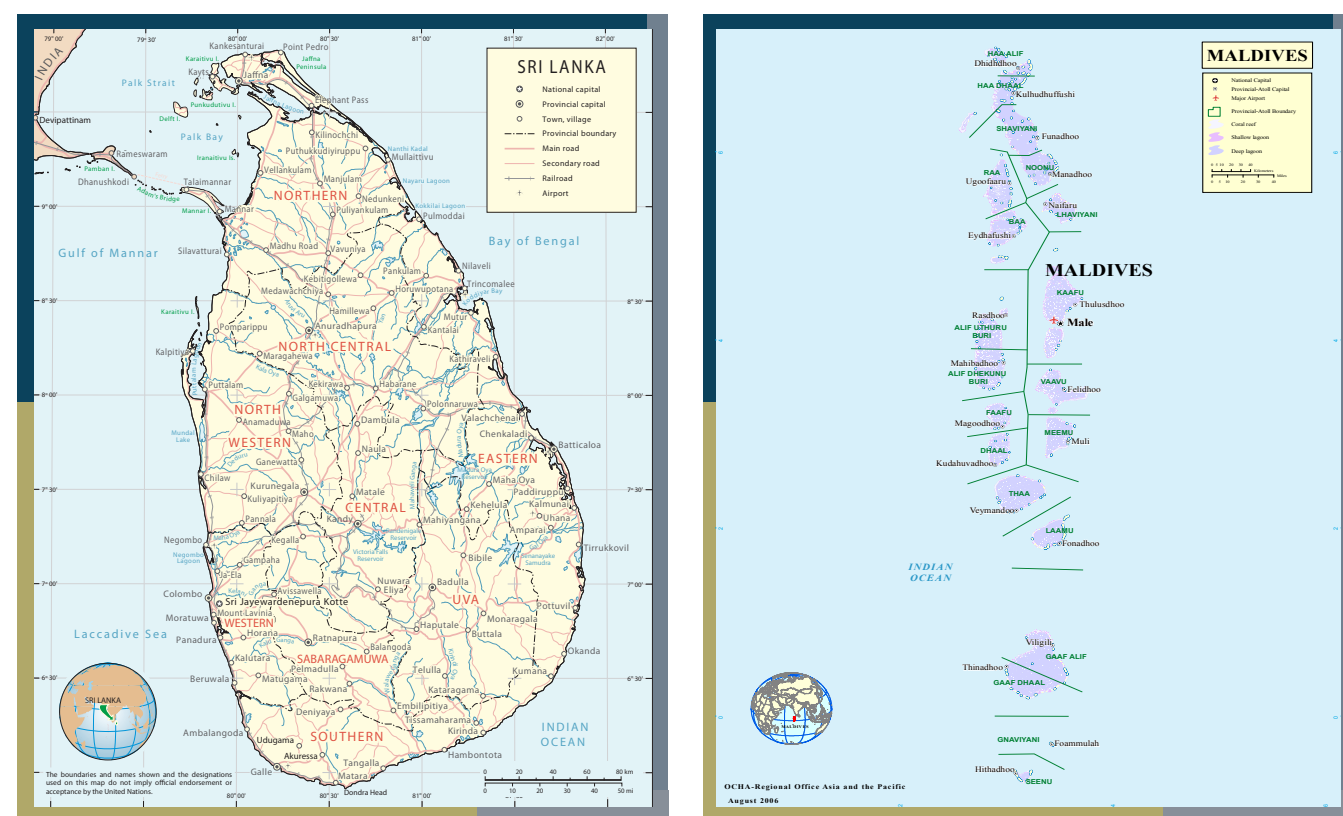
1.

Characteristics of Organized Criminal Networks in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region

1.1 Definition

Organized crime is a “continuing criminal enterprise that rationally works to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. Its continuing existence is maintained through corruption of public officials and the use of intimidation, threats or force to protect its operations.”⁹ The organized criminal groups in the Eastern Indian Ocean region typically refer to groups or gangs engaged in illegal activities, often structured hierarchically, and having a systematic approach to committing crimes. In the Maldives, the Gang Related Crimes Act, which was enacted in 2010, prohibits the creation of gangs¹⁰ or groups to perform criminal activities. In Sri Lanka, organized criminal networks mostly operate as small groups (gangs) engaged in distribution and smuggling of drugs¹¹. Assessments indicate that there are currently 44 gangs in the Maldivian capital Male, and approximately 2,800 people have been identified with direct involvement in criminal activities¹². Most OCNs are active in Male and Addu (Southern city) of Maldives. Central regions are found to be more prominent in terms of drug trafficking activities¹³.

Figure 3: Political Maps of Sri Lanka and Maldives



Source: United Nations, www.un.org/geospatial/mapsgeo/generalmaps

Source: OCHA-Regional Office Asia and the Pacific

In Sri Lanka, the size of these networks can vary significantly, ranging from small groups to large, complex organizations. The structure and size of an OCN in Sri Lanka can evolve, influenced by various factors such as changes in societal, political, and economic conditions. OCNs may have a geographic distribution across the country, potentially with specific areas of influence or control. Landing points for drugs are always dominated by the same group who are operating in the area¹⁴.

⁹ UNODC (2018), Defining organized crime, https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/defining-organized-crime.html#:~:text=Orga-nized%20crime%20is%20a%20continuing,force%20to%20protect%20its%20operations_

¹⁰ In Maldives and Sri Lanka, the authorities used the term ‘organized crime groups’ or ‘gangs’ interchangeably to refer to the illicit drug trafficking networks.

¹¹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

¹² Interview with the Maldives officials

¹³ Administratively, Maldives is divided into 5 regions- Upper North, North, Central, South Central and South

¹⁴ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

Several gangs operate in Colombo and its suburbs, including Maligawatta, Dematagoda, Maradana, and North Colombo. These gangs focus on supplying the street-level market for the younger generations (Ice/ Heroin/ Cannabis/Ecstasy tablets) and elites (Cocaine)¹⁵. It is important to note that the size of an OCN does not necessarily correlate with its influence or the extent of its criminal activities¹⁶. Gang violence in countries such as Maldives and Sri Lanka, which have smaller populations, can negatively affect the community, particularly the young and vulnerable people, at an alarming rate and scale¹⁷.

1.2 Structure of Organized Criminal Groups

The term ‘organized crime’ is often used to classify a wide variety of illegal groups and organizations, mostly referring to a group of actors organizing for committing a crime, to gain financial and other material benefits¹⁸. Campana and Varese (2018) applies the concepts of ‘production’, ‘governance’ and ‘trade’ to classify organized crime groups¹⁹. The groups that specialize in production of illegal drugs, for example the Golden Crescent, tend to have a degree of hierarchy and strong ties within, rather than across groups.

Afghan drug trafficking organizations for example are frequently made up of family-based organizations, both large and small. Prior to the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan, analysis showed that there were multiple mid- and small scale-family businesses involved in the trafficking of drugs within Afghanistan, with trafficking organizations consisting of around two to six members, mostly based around a single-family group, with some associates²⁰. Women also had important roles in these family-based networks²¹. These mid- and small-scale trafficking organizations provided smaller quantities of drugs – in the 5-30kg range – to larger drug trafficking organizations, which although still family-based, were much larger and which could traffic drugs outside the borders of Afghanistan to international markets²². Some of these very large Afghan drug trafficking organizations were well connected to the Taliban insurgency²³. Following the return to power by the Taliban, the picture is less clear, however there are indications that many of the smaller trafficking networks have been pushed out of the trade as the Taliban enforce the ban, but the larger trafficking networks with connections to the de facto authorities continue to operate²⁴.

In case of the Eastern Indian Ocean countries, the groups involved in drug trafficking have been found to be mostly led by individuals or a network of individuals at the helm of operations. In the Maldives, the OCNs are led by a few individuals who run a highly organized executive level of operations. Drug networks are mostly led by an individual’s direct command as the leader, with his close associates leading different criminal activities that supports the network. These activities include major street violence and other crimes by members of the network, as well as drug trafficking and distribution activities and financial activities²⁵. These groups have been active for the past 20 years, but they have become more efficient and organized in the past 7-8 years.

¹⁵ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

¹⁶ Interview with Sri Lankan officials

¹⁷ Zalf Z. (2022) ‘Of 44 active gangs in Maldives capital, nine believed to be extremely dangerous: police’Rajje.mv <https://raajje.mv/118423>

¹⁸ Breuer, N., & Varese, F. (2023). The Structure of Trade-type and Governance-type Organized Crime Groups: A Network Study. The British Journal of Criminology, 63(4), 867-888.

¹⁹ Campana, P., & Varese, F. (2018). Organized crime in the United Kingdom: Illegal governance of markets and communities. The British Journal of Criminology, 58(6), 1381-1400.

²⁰ UNODC, “Voices of the Quachabar”. Page 32-33, 2020.

²¹ UNODC, “Afghan women and the opiate trade”. 2022.

²² UNODC, “Voices of the Quachabar”. Page 33 & 37, 2020.

²³ Azizi, H. “The nature and extent of the Taliban’s involvement in the drug trade before and after the regime change (1994-2022): insights from experts. Small wars and insurgencies. 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2024.2381847>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Interview with the Maldives officials

At the operational level, criminality and violence are more widespread (for example through the activity of street gangs), but the financial operations are mostly in the hands of selected, highly educated people with clean backgrounds²⁶.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, gangs mostly operate through a number of patron-client networks²⁷. These groups can have fragmented structures, and they also occasionally form coalitions where multiple smaller groups collaborate on specific illicit activities²⁸. They have a clear chain of command, with lower-ranking members providing support and resources to higher-ranking individuals in exchange for protection and patronage²⁹. The top leadership is often based out of foreign countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), India, and Pakistan or domestically within Sri Lankan prisons. This is attributed to the large-scale operations and arrests by special task forces in Sri Lanka in the late 1990s that pushed the leadership of OCGs abroad to handle coordination with international drug networks in Pakistan, Iran, India, and Afghanistan. The Sri Lankan authorities also noted that prisons have turned into safe places for the leadership of OCGs to carry out their illegal operation³⁰s. Inside Sri Lankan prisons, drug dealers have a smart network of courier systems, hand signals, and food concealment system to transfer drugs inside the prison, as well as communication channels with the outside world through use of smart phones. A lack of awareness, insufficient funding for training of police staff, a paucity of personnel, and outdated equipment makes it difficult for the jail authorities to identify the problems³¹.

Some criminal groups in the region, particularly in Sri Lanka, are led by a network of individuals who share power and decision-making authority³². This type of leadership is often seen in more complex and larger criminal organizations. These leaders enhance their social capital by strategically brokering information among their associates, balancing security and efficiency, by favouring meetings over telephones. This centrality shows their strategic brokering position as well as the social embeddedness of criminal groups³³.

The second level leader, or operational leader usually lives in Sri Lanka, and they handle all operations under the command of the OCN heads based outside of the country or imprisoned. The tactical level leader handles the local operators managing the village-level and the city-level ground operators (See Fig 4)³⁴. In one case the Sri Lanka authorities have identified a second-level operative (operational commander) from former Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), further linking some of the OCNs with actors seeking to resurrect the LTTE³⁵. These younger associates do not interact or meet with their leaders, who are hiding in other country, but they are bound to carry out their assign tasks with the trustworthy operational leaders³⁶. The lives of the members of OCN's are characterized by several unique elements, of which their socialization, family history, socioeconomic environments, addictions, and social adjustment, among other things, have emerged as key factors behind their involvement³⁷.

²⁶ Interview with the Maldives officials and Sengupta, Seema (2022) Long read: trouble in paradise – Maldives’ continuing battle with its drug-abuse problem. South Asia @ LSE (05 Apr 2022). <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2022/04/05/long-read-trouble-in-paradise-maldives-continuing-battle-with-its-drug-abuse-problem/>

²⁷ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

²⁸ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

²⁹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

³⁰ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

³¹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

³² Interview with Sri Lanka officials

³³ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

³⁷ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

Figure 4: Organizational Structure of OCNs in Sri Lanka



Source: Based on interviews conducted with Sri Lanka officials

Historically, these gangs survived on ransom payments, maintaining brothels, and guarding their clients. Significantly, deserters who left the Sri Lankan Army, Navy, Air Force, and Police have joined criminal organizations where they were recruited because of their experience in handling weapons and on-ground tactics. Some of the deserters joined organized crime gangs because they were unable to find suitable employment³⁸.

³⁸ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

1.3 Profile of Members of Organized Criminal Networks

Age Group: The average age of gang members in the Maldives is between 18 to 35 years, with the older members taking the leadership roles. Recent statistics show that a significant number of children have been involved in drug-related criminal activities across the country³⁹⁴⁰. The ‘lost age group’, which includes children aged 16-17 years, who fail to continue their advanced-level education, are considered unattractive for employment until they turn 18 and are particularly vulnerable to the influence of street gangs in the Maldives⁴¹⁴². In Sri Lanka the average age of members, predominantly male, falls between 20 to 40 years, except for the leadership that is reported to be older (between 50-60 years)⁴³. In Sri Lanka, close to half of the drug-related arrests (for cannabis, hashish, and heroin) in the past 5 years have been 30 years of age or above⁴⁴. While the involvement of women is relatively restricted, the authorities have observed young couples getting involved in criminal activities.

Factors impacting the Entry into Organized Criminal Networks: Criminal networks often involve a complex interplay of push and pull factors in this region. While family, community ties, peer pressure, brotherhood, street masculinity, language, sense of identity, income, status, financial gain, and protection were listed by authorities as the major pull factors that drive youth to such groups in both countries, the profit motive was noted as the main motivation as the high street value of drugs makes it a financially attractive prospect⁴⁵⁴⁶. In Sri Lanka, gangs and mobs often use ethnic ties as an organizing principle to foster trust in their illicit activities. The local, cultural model of organized crime structure highlights the importance of heritage (i.e. ethnic, national, or other cultural ties) as the basis for trust, which is fundamental to establishing working relationships in illegal activities⁴⁷. The need to belong among the youth and the ability to form relationships in the digital space poses a new challenge for the authorities, as such online spaces, forums, and social media platforms provide both anonymity and a broader reach for criminal networks to communicate, advertise and lure potential members⁴⁸.

Poverty, lack of job opportunities after school, drug abuse, and housing issues were also noted as the major push factors for the involvement of youth in Maldives⁴⁹. Individuals from marginalized or minority communities might be overrepresented within these networks due to societal exclusion and higher rates of poverty. The authorities noted a history of minor offenses or involvement in petty crimes is common before joining criminal networks⁵⁰.

39 Trafficking in Persons Report: Maldives (2023), US Department of State,<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/maldives/#:~:text=Traffickers%20use%20Maldivian%20children%20in,with%20a%20PRC%20affiliated%20company.>

40 Wijewardhana, B. V. N. (2017). A longitudinal study on the phenomenon of street children and their likelihoods to join juvenile gangs upon transient from the adolescence.

41 The Asia Foundation & Maldives Institute for Psychological Services, Training and Research. (2018). Rapid situation assessment of gangs in Male’. Colombo: Sri Lanka

42 Global Organized Crime Index: Maldives 2023, <https://ocindex.net/country/maldives>

43 Interviews with Sri Lanka officials

44 Interviews with Sri Lanka officials

45 Interviews with Maldives officials and Gang wars, unemployment, political violence: A journalist reports from the dark side of the Maldives <https://scroll.in/article/1055760/gang-wars-unemployment-political-violence-a-journalist-reports-from-the-dark-side-of-the-maldives>.

46 Interviews with Sri Lanka officials

47 Interviews with Sri Lanka officials

48 Interview with the Maldives officials

49 Ibid

50 Ibid

The authorities in both countries noted prisons as a hotbed for the recruitment and expansion of these networks-A lack of infrastructural capacity and the failure to segregate various kinds of criminals within prisons is making individuals more susceptible to recruitment efforts by criminal networks, leading to continued involvement in criminal activities even after their release⁵¹⁵². Periods of social unrest or political upheaval can also create environments conducive to the growth and expansion of OCNs in the region⁵³.

Drug Abuse: In Maldives, many gang members abuse drugs while working for the networks, however addicts and high-level abusers are not assigned to responsible roles. Authorities noted the prevalence of a form of credit system, wherein vulnerable people, often with addiction, are sent to Dubai and Pakistan, as collateral for payments to drug networks (often non-related to the groups but disguised as blood relatives)⁵⁴. In Sri Lanka, authorities noted the ritual of substance abuse as part of the initiation process for entry into OCNs, or as a means of bonding with other members. Substance abuse can also occur while working for the OCN, often because of the stressful and dangerous nature of the activities⁵⁵.



51 Interview with the Maldives officials

52 Interview with Sri Lanka officials

53 Interview with Sri Lanka officials

54 Interview with the Maldives officials

55 Interview with Sri Lanka officials



2.

Business Models of Organized Criminal Networks in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region

The illicit drug trade has emerged as one of the largest illicit markets worldwide, one that has a complex web of supply chain networks spread across different parts of the world. The transnational nature of drug trafficking has meant that such networks extend beyond national boundaries and link global crime networks involving producers, transporters, distributors, and sellers. In both case studies- Sri Lanka and Maldives- the illicit drug trade was observed to be in state of flux, with transnational supply chain networks heavily affecting local and regional operations.

2.1 Characteristics of Organized Criminal Networks Engaged in Drug Trafficking in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region

The drug markets in these countries follow different models that are based on the contextual variables. In Maldives, the same gangs operate in synthetic drugs and plant-based drugs markets, and some may be involved in both international trafficking as well as domestic supply chains⁵⁶. Individuals maintain direct contact with foreign suppliers and assist in trafficking and supplying drugs to local networks. However, there is lack of clarity of in Maldives on the transnational operations of gangs beyond its national borders⁵⁷. In Sri Lanka, the structure of illicit drug markets varies- It may be monopolistic, oligopolistic, fragmented, or competitive, depending on the influence and control exerted by different criminal groups. At the village level, monopolistic operators do not allow other dealers to grow operations, but in large town areas, it is oligopolistic with several competing groups⁵⁸.

The ability of new elements to enter the market can depend on various factors, including existing power dynamics, law enforcement efforts, the adaptability of these new entrants, institutional corruption, and state-crime nexus. At the strategic level, there may not be a restriction to entering the market but at the operational level it is very difficult for new elements to gain access to the market due to existing networks' ground experience and strong trustworthy connections (both at the local and international levels)⁵⁹. However, some agencies also noted the importance of connections with corrupt politicians, law enforcement officials, and other agencies as key factors ⁶⁰. Officials noted that recent trends reveal Sri Lanka is no longer just a transit hub but is also becoming a final destination for drug trafficking. This suggests that the market dynamics are changing, which could potentially create opportunities for new elements to enter the market⁶¹.

Drug trafficking across international borders from production regions to destination countries for retail and consumption involves the sequential tasks of production, manufacturing, smuggling, and wholesale and regional distribution⁶².

⁵⁶ Interview with the Maldives officials

⁵⁷ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁵⁸ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁵⁹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁶⁰ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁶¹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁶² Natarajan, M., Zanella, M., & Yu, C. (2015). Classifying the Variety of Drug Trafficking Organizations. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 45(4), 409–430. doi:10.1177/002204261560339

This assessment found that, except for the manufacturing of illicit drugs, all the other activities are predominantly organized in chains of patron-client networks- smuggling, wholesale distribution, and regional distribution. The smuggling of illicit drugs was primarily listed under the transactional category, which indicates a profit-driven set of relations among different criminal groups. Family businesses and community linkages were the other categories that were listed in relation to the smuggling and distribution of drugs in these countries.

Drug networks in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, both compete as well as cooperate, depending on the specific circumstances such as enhanced surveillance measures and anti-narcotic drives by governments, or to make more profits with less effort and fewer risks. In some circumstances, OCNs divide their territories and if there is a drug scarcity in a particular area, they may mutually decide to permit others to operate on a profit-sharing basis within their territory⁶³. As Sri Lanka has emerged as a destination for illicit drugs in recent years, the market dynamics are also changing including a rise in gun violence incidents in the past year⁶⁴.

Determinants of Promotion: The dominance of patron-client networks has meant that demonstrating loyalty, reliability, and trustworthiness within the network is crucial for promotion. Individuals with certain skills or resources that are valuable to the groups, such as military training, knowledge of logistics, finance, and negotiation skills, are more likely to be promoted⁶⁵. Individuals with a history of successful criminal activities, and connections to influential individuals within the organization can also be promoted quickly⁶⁶.

The length of service and experience within the network and an ability to generate substantial profits or expand the network's operations by building connections, alliances, or having influential ties might be recognized and promoted. In some instances, individuals who are more willing to engage in violent acts or coercion might rise within the ranks due to their perceived effectiveness in ensuring compliance or eliminating threats or competition⁶⁷.

2.2 Drug trafficking Routes in Maldives and Sri Lanka

Between 2016 to 2019, Maldives reported a 20% increase in the import of drugs into the country, and an alarming 47% increase in the sale of drugs in the country⁶⁸. Sea-based transportation, which includes multiday trawlers, single-day trawlers, and dinghy boats, is preferred by organized crime groups for bringing in larger quantities, due to relatively less scrutiny by security agencies. Emerging routes in Maldives and Sri Lanka seem to deviate specifically more towards the less-patrolled areas in the southern part of the Indian Ocean. The authorities noted that dhows coming from Iran or Pakistan carry drugs (heroin and cannabis) through the maritime routes into Maldives. Before 2019, these vessels carrying illicit drugs entered the territorial waters of Maldives, but now they remain 40-50 nautical miles outside the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ)s⁶⁹. The eight-degree channel is secure against maritime crimes such as piracy and trafficking because of the heavy presence of the Indian Navy and MNDF. However, it is the southern Maldives area, particularly at the Chagos Islands where monitoring is weaker, which remains vulnerable to drug trafficking.

⁶³ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁶⁴ Interview with Sri Lanka and Maldives officialss

⁶⁵ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

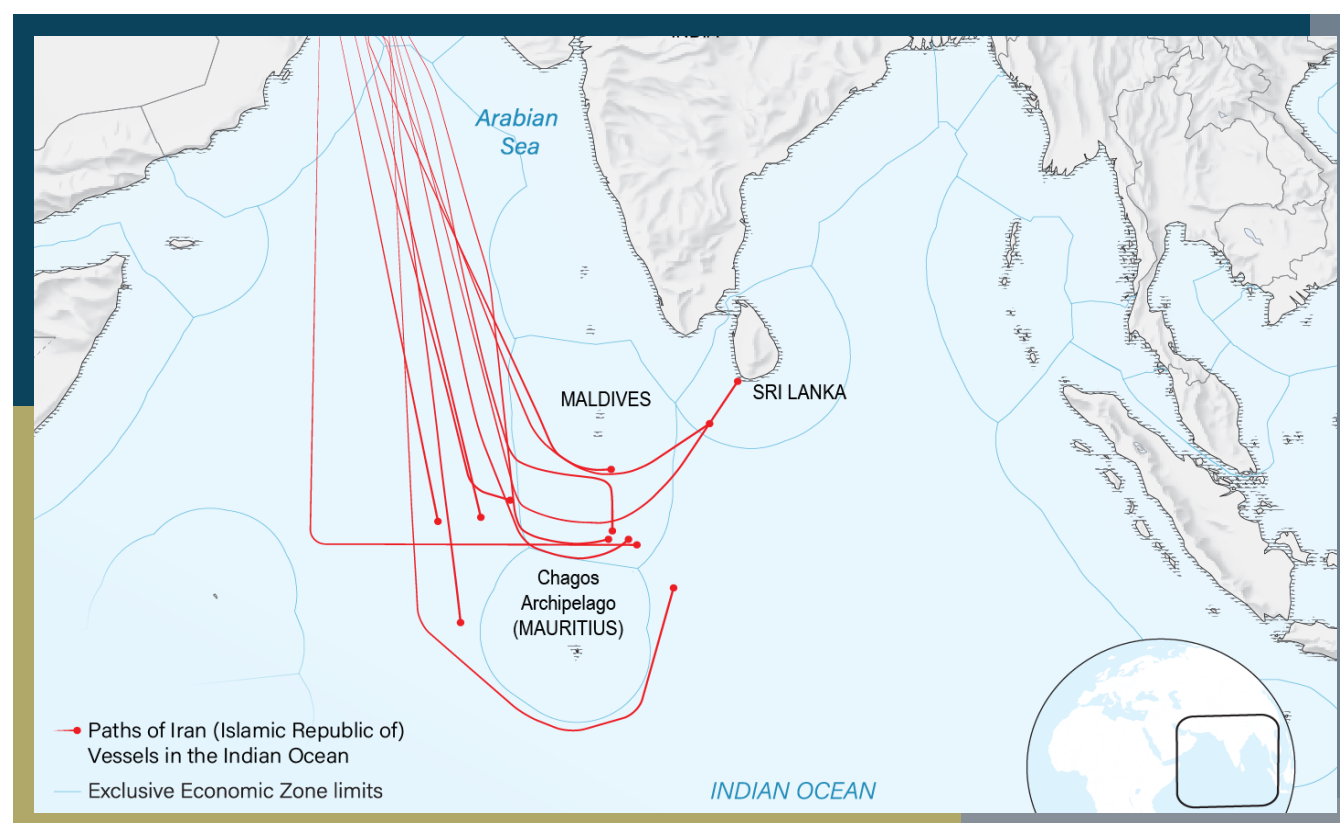
⁶⁶ ibid

⁶⁷ Interviews with Maldives officials

⁶⁸ Statistical Yearbook of the Maldives 2020

⁶⁹ Interview with Maldives officials

Figure 5: Paths of Vessels in the Indian Ocean



Source: Sri Lanka officials

In Sri Lanka, drug trafficking supply chain networks are complex, interconnected and extend beyond national boundaries. These networks are involved in the smuggling of drugs but also liquor, illicit goods, and various illegal items, generating enormous profits⁷⁰. The sea route is the predominant route for illicit trafficking in both Maldives and Sri Lanka, especially for larger consignments, but there is a noticeable rise in the share of air routes and postal methods in recent years⁷¹. OCNs may specialize in trafficking-specific drugs or diversify to engage in poly-drug trafficking, involving multiple types of narcotics. The Western and Northern provinces of the country have witnessed drug trafficking including heroin, hashish and cocaine, mostly through sea routes. OCNs based in north-east and north-west of Sri Lanka mostly deal with Kerala Ganja (KG) and Ice, which is directly transferred from south India via sea route (by fiber glass dingy) and exchanged at International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL)⁷².

National authorities have observed that drugs are supplied to Southeast Asian countries through Sri Lanka and then to Western countries and Australia often via sea route. Most of the groups follow old established patterns for the exchange of contraband, which is generally mid-sea transfer from a mother boat (large vessel) to small fishing boats (see figure 6)⁷³.

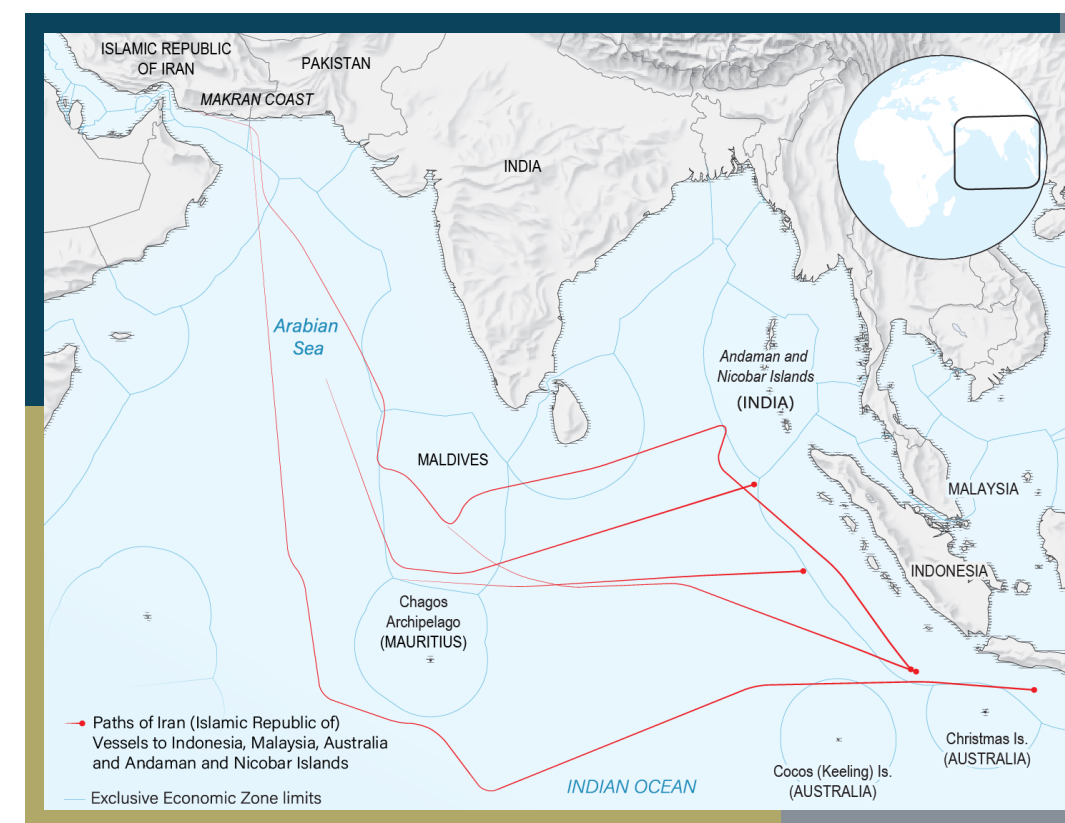
⁷⁰ Interview with Sri Lanka Officials

⁷¹ Interview with the Maldives officials

⁷² Interviews with Sri Lanka Officials

⁷³ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

Figure 6: Path of vessels to Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia & Andaman /Nicobar Islands



Source: Sri Lanka officials

2.3 Transnational Sources of Drugs

Maldives reported different existing and new supply chains - heroin shipments were mostly reported to be from Iran and Pakistan, cannabis from India and Bangladesh, and synthetic drugs mostly from Europe⁷⁴. Cocaine, heroin and hashish were reported to be the most seized drugs in the country⁷⁵. The maritime route was reported to be the main route for drugs, particularly drugs coming from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. 14 major operations were carried out between 2019-22 in the Maldivian coastal waters and the EEZ that led to 92 arrests, of which 24 were foreign nationals from Iran and Pakistan⁷⁶. The key reasons for the predominance of sea routes in Maldives include a lack of patrolling capacity, especially in the EEZs, and advancement in technologies and mode of transport used by criminal groups, such as speed boats, which is proving to be a capacity challenge for the authorities. Authorities in the Maldives further reported that drugs coming into the country from different sources follow a different modus operandi. While the drugs being trafficked from Pakistan and Iran take the maritime route, drugs from south Asian countries, including India, follow the air route, mostly concealed in luggage rather than directly transported by courier. In 2011, the majority of drug couriers departed from South Asian countries; India (30.8%), Bangladesh (23.1%), and Sri Lanka (15.4%)⁷⁷. However, by 2020, this trend has seen a rising share of European and South American countries. Couriers from new countries included the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Brazil, France, the Czech Republic and the UAE.^{78 79} At the same time, couriers from Bangladesh decreased from 23.1% in 2011 to 8% in 2020, from India from 30.8% in 2011 to 8% in 2020, and from Sri Lanka from 15.4% in 2011 to nil in 2020. Meanwhile, couriers from Pakistan increased from 7.7% to 16% in the same period⁸⁰.

⁷⁴ Data shared by Maldives officials

⁷⁵ Interview with Maldives officials

⁷⁶ Interview with Maldives officials

⁷⁷ ibid

⁷⁸ Interview with Maldives officials

⁷⁹ Interview with Maldives officials

⁸⁰ Situational Analysis of Drugs in the Maldives 2021, World Health Organization and National Drug Agency of Maldives

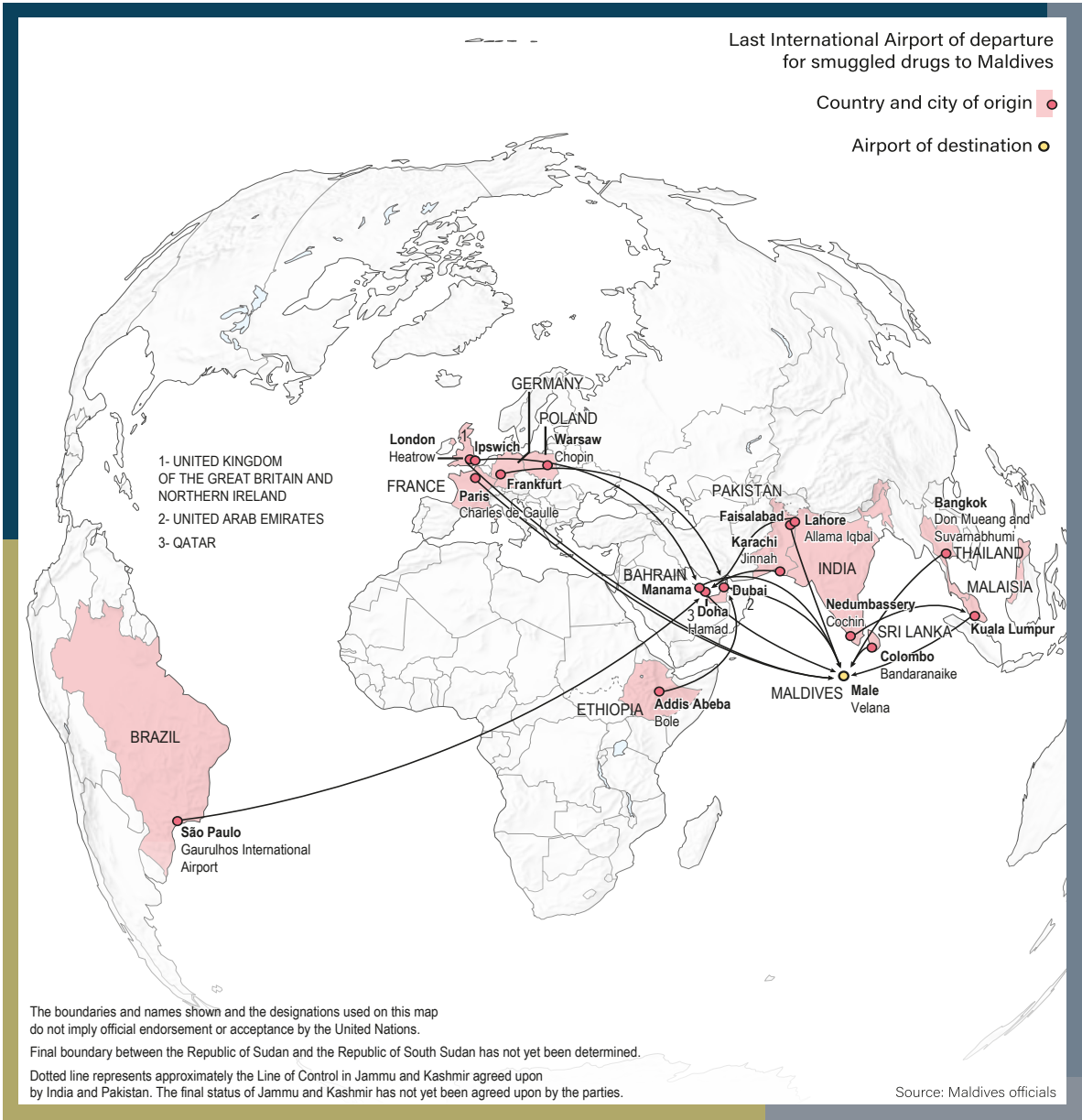
Figure 7: Transnational Sources and Drug types in Maldives



Source: Maldives officials

The Maldivian authorities provided the following information on ports of departure being used for drug trafficking to Maldives:

Table 1: Last Port of Departure for smuggled drugs in Maldives



Source: Maldives officials

In recent years, Sri Lanka has been affected more seriously by the trafficking of heroin, cannabis, methamphetamine, and cocaine⁸¹. Sri Lanka's strategic geographical position and proximity to these countries make it a convenient transit point for drug traffickers. These drugs are sometimes redistributed to Europe, Australia, or Asia⁸². The transnational sources of drugs and top leadership of these criminal networks in Sri Lanka were primarily reported to be in the Golden Crescent region - Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. Sri Lankan authorities noted that there have been instances where Sri Lankan nationals, who were key players of an international drug trafficking syndicates with links in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Australia, have been arrested⁸³. These individuals operate under assumed identities and control the mid-sea pick-up and delivery operations of illicit drugs from Pakistani and Iranian with foreign vessels. It is important to note that the specific sources of these drugs can vary greatly depending on the individual trafficking network⁸⁴.

⁸¹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁸² Interview with Sri Lanka officials

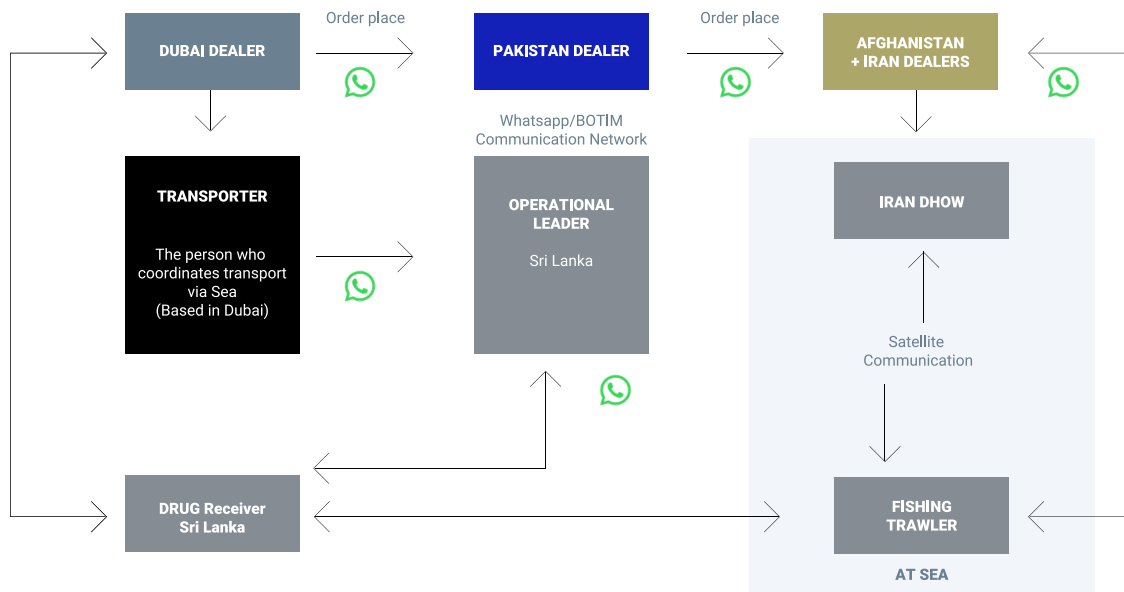
⁸³ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

⁸⁴ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

Sri Lankan law enforcement agencies have observed that drug smugglers routinely approach South Asian countries and dump parcels on small fishing vessels. This is reflected in drug trafficking trends in and around Sri Lankan waters over the past a few years⁸⁵. Typically, drugs are loaded onto sailing boats or power-driven vessels, known as dhows, from the Makran coast of Iran and Pakistan. These vessels then undertake a journey across the Indian Ocean, during which the drugs are transferred mid-sea to vessels from Sri Lanka and the Maldives. There have been instances where these drugs are transported further towards Southeast Asia or the Eastern borders of India and Bangladesh⁸⁶. However, with increased drug law enforcement activities in the Indian Ocean region, drug traffickers have begun to shift their transportation routes further south from Sri Lanka to avoid detection. They have also begun focusing on trafficking drugs to Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka is witnessing an alarming increase in drug consumption, which has attracted both local and foreign drug traffickers who supply the market in the country⁸⁷.

The authorities in Sri Lanka provided an overview of the networks that are operating in the region. They noted that drug networks in Sri Lanka are coordinated by dealers from the UAE and India who have connections with top-level drug dealers in Pakistan or Afghanistan⁸⁸. When an order is placed, for example from a Pakistan based dealer, he arranges for the drugs either from Pakistan or Afghanistan, according to availability, or local ground situation at the time. This consignment, they further noted, is usually loaded onto dhows at the Makran coast of Pakistan using smaller boats⁸⁹. The top leadership then assigns the transportation task to a Sri Lankan gang member, who is an expert in sea transportation and has good links with Sri Lankan multi-day fishing trawlers. Thereafter, this transporter arranges for Sri Lankan trawlers at the given location and time as per the top dealers’ requirements. After receipt, the operational leadership distributes these drugs among tactical leaders in their respective areas. Operational communication is mostly carried out through social media platforms like WhatsApp, Messenger, BOTIM, and the “Thuraya” satellite communication system. Sri Lankan officials noted that they lack adequate capacity and detection systems to help monitor this process more effectively. They rely mostly on gathering intelligence and chasing suspected fishing boats and other small ships at sea (See Fig 8)⁹⁰.

Figure 8: Diagrammatic representation of OCN Networks in Sri Lanka



Source: Based on inputs from Sri Lanka officials

85 Ibid
86 Ibid
87 Ibid
88 Ibid
89 Information shared by Sri Lanka officials
90 Ibid





3.

Modus Operandi of Organized Criminal Networks in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region

3.1 Concealment Methods

Recent trends include concealment of drugs in legitimate cargo shipments (bio-organic compounds, packaged food items for pets and people, within the layers of the cardboard boxes), trafficking by couriers (body packings, false bottom luggage, gifts like chocolates and tea leaves) and modification of vehicles to hide drugs⁹¹. Children and women from vulnerable sections of society are also reportedly exploited for drug distribution. False declaration and mis-declaration of goods have also been witnessed by law enforcement agencies, particularly in the cases of international shipments by sea boats and cargo vessels in particular. Drug traffickers are also reportedly using new technologies such as the dark net and social media apps as new hotspots for selling drugs, especially among the youth⁹².

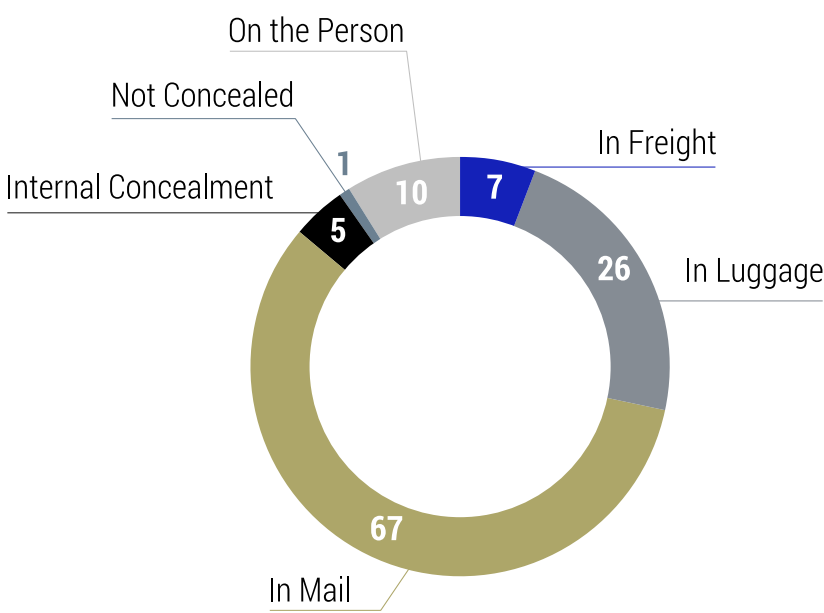
In Sri Lanka, the transfer of drugs at sea on concealment methods on trawlers used to transfer drugs at sea includes hiding drugs in: gangways (ice tanks), fake compartments, fenders, the winch, the radar, hull cabin water tanks, and gas cylinders⁹³. Some high value drugs from top-level officials in Sri Lanka who were carrying them to bypass the security and technological arrangements for immediate transfer, and easy distribution⁹⁴.

3.2 Modes of Transport

Traffickers often utilize various modes of transport, including land, sea, air, and postal services. In Maldives, OCNs operate in smaller groups with access to fast speedboats, better refuelling capacity (that has extended their range of operations), and satellite-connected phones⁹⁵. The authorities have caught vulnerable foreign nationals, sometimes with severe illnesses, openly couriering drugs through Maldives airports. Further, the authorities also noted the trend of drugs hidden in unclaimed baggage at the airport, which points to the links between airport authorities and OCNs. Information regarding these packages, such as pictures of luggage and tags, are shared with the receiver either by the agent or the courier. Courier packages have become the main mode of transport in the past few years, but such supply chains are mostly dealing in smaller consignments mostly organised through freelance networks (See Fig. 9 & 10)⁹⁶.

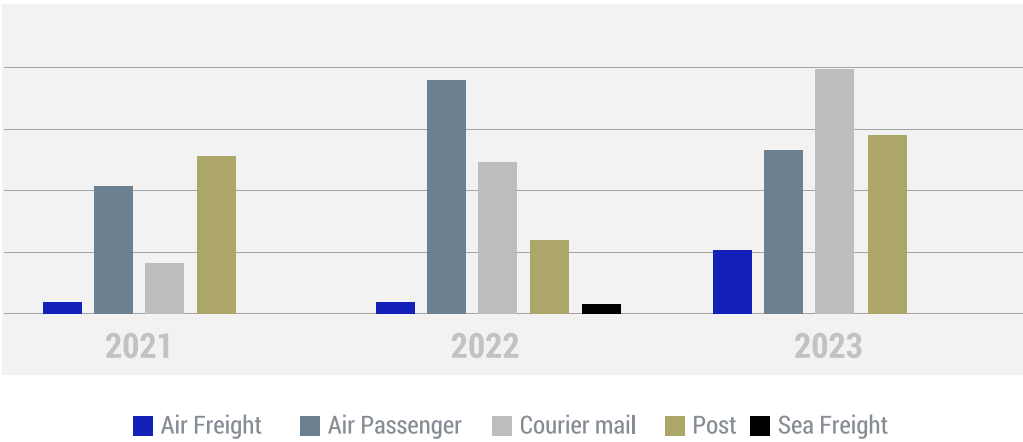
⁹¹ Interview with Maldives officials
⁹² Ibid
⁹³ Interview with Sri Lankan officials
⁹⁴ Interview with Sri Lanka officials
⁹⁵ Interview with Maldives officials
⁹⁶ Ibid

Figure 9: Methods of Concealment of Drugs in Maldives, (2021-23)



Source: Maldives officials

Figure 10: Modes of transportation based on drug seizures in Maldives, (2021-23)



Source: Maldives officials

Coastal areas and ports are commonly exploited, and traffickers may adapt routes based on law enforcement activities. From the North, crossing the IMBL, the transportation of Kerala Ganga (KG) is carried out directly via the sea. Drugs are boarded on boats and shipping vessels from Karachi, Pakistan and transferred to Sri Lanka directly on the Western coast to the Negombo area and from the Southern coastline to the Tangalle area⁹⁷.

⁹⁷ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

3.3 Payment Methods

Narcotic trafficking often involves money laundering to legitimize illicit proceeds. This can result in illicit financial flows that undermine the integrity of financial systems, contributing to economic instability. The principal modes of payment in both countries are cash and hawala⁹⁸. At the operational level, transactions are mostly liquid cash or online bank transfers within the country and the operational dealer who collected the money for a consignment pays the dealer via the Hawala money transfer system. Consumer-level transactions take place through the easy cash system method using mobile phone software, or to a lesser extent via cash payments⁹⁹.

Specifically in Maldives, money laundering and channels for illicit financial flows are used by OCNs involved in opiate trafficking to move and legitimize their profits. These networks run several businesses and front companies to finance the activities of the drug network. Assets belonging to Maldivian OCNs further extend to Jeep fleets, sports and luxury cars, vehicles registered with domain numbers and unique paint jobs associated with the network, luxurious rental apartments, and real estate businesses. Networks also facilitate accommodation and safe houses for their lower-level members and street level dealers. Among the local drug networks, few networks are identified with direct connections with foreign suppliers. Some networks maintain third party connections through individuals who have served jail time in foreign countries¹⁰⁰. There are cases where an individual travels abroad with large sums of money or collateral.

In the case of the Kerala Ganja and other substances trafficked from southern India, operational leaders directly transfer drugs via sea routes and a one-to-one transport and receiving method is used. In this context, the Kerala Ganja transfer from India is mostly paid for by Sri Lankan gold. The gold mafia within the Maldives is another critical network linked to drug trafficking with traffickers buying old gold from pawn centres to pay for Indian drugs¹⁰¹.

In Sri Lanka, opiate trafficking funds may flow through diverse illicit channels, in order to evade detection. These channels can include complex financial transactions, shell companies, and other mechanisms that make it challenging for authorities to trace and prevent the movement of illicit funds¹⁰². Traffickers have been known to use a variety of methods to obscure the source of their funds, including traditional methods like cash, as well as more modern methods like online payment platforms, cryptocurrencies, and peer-to-peer mobile payment services. These methods provide a degree of anonymity and can make transactions difficult to trace¹⁰³.

⁹⁸ Interviews with Maldives, Sri Lanka officials
⁹⁹ Interviews with Maldives officials, & Sri Lanka officials
¹⁰⁰ Interview with Maldives officials
¹⁰¹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials
¹⁰² Interview with Sri Lanka officials
¹⁰³ ibid





4.

Impact of Opiate Trafficking on Security, Governance, and the Rule of Law

4.1 Corruption & Collusion

In the Maldives, drug trafficking has had a significant impact on institutional reforms and effectiveness¹⁰⁴. OCNs have actively attempted to bribe, infiltrate and influence law enforcement agencies, government officials, and the judiciary. Infiltration within institutions (police, airport security, courts, etc.) and collusion between politics and organized crime poses a serious challenge as it has halted updates to the drug trafficking-related acts and laws in the country¹⁰⁵. This has forced a change in the approach of police and drug enforcement departments as they have moved away from the seizure and prosecution-centric approach that was prevalent prior to 2019, to a financial investigation task force that is looking into the division of labour within networks, new businesses, and transport systems¹⁰⁶. Maldivian officials noted that OCNs have proved to be very efficient in adapting to these changes. They are rapidly changing their modus operandi, forming a new division of labour, and investing drug proceeds heavily in real estate¹⁰⁷. Infiltration of these groups into legitimate businesses is also reportedly increasing with OCNs owning cafes, guest houses, safaris, motorsports, and currency exchanges and are possibly on the verge of owning a resort in the country. Front companies are also reportedly used for trafficking of chemical precursors under the guise of legitimate trade¹⁰⁸. Corruption plays a major role, with officials being bribed to overlook illegal activities or provide false documentation.

The fast-changing modus operandi in recent years has further created capacity-building challenges for the major law enforcement agencies in the region. The highly resourceful criminal groups in the country, has led to the expansion of the range of operations of gangs. The gangs use fishing vessels and multiple speedboats to traffic illicit drugs inside the territorial waters of Maldives¹⁰⁹.

Heroin and cannabis were the predominant drugs in the pre-COVID-19 period, but now there is a rising trend of methamphetamine – matching the increase in production of methamphetamine in Afghanistan - in the Maldives, which can potentially lead to a public health crisis and failure of hospital systems that are ill-prepared to handle this new crisis¹¹⁰.

Criminal networks also exploit businesses like tourism or money exchange for money laundering or to facilitate the movement of funds related to opiate trafficking¹¹¹. Criminal networks may also collude with, or infiltrate, transport companies to facilitate the movement of drugs¹¹². This could involve using legitimate transport networks to covertly transport illicit substances. There are cases of corrupted law enforcement officers being found using their private vehicles for transfer of drugs in the country¹¹³. In Sri Lanka, in some instances, drugs are also used as a form of currency in the weapons trade. Drug traffickers might barter drugs directly for weapons, creating a direct link between the two types of trafficking¹¹⁴. The change of the government was also a factor that was listed to explain the relationship between market control and use of violence, as well as collusion between political leaders who are helped by certain individuals, linked with OCNs, to rise to prominence in the government¹¹⁵.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Maldives officials

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Maldives officials

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Sri Lankan officials

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Maldives officials

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹¹ Interview with Maldives and Sri Lanka officials

¹¹² Interview with Maldives officials

¹¹³ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

¹¹⁴ *ibid*

¹¹⁵ *ibid*

4.2 Linkages between drug trafficking and other crimes

OCNs engaged in illicit drug trafficking in the region have been found to be engaged in other criminal activities in the region, largely on account of shared operational and organizational characteristics and mutual reinforcement tactics. Criminal activities like human smuggling, migrant smuggling, and drug trafficking are often controlled or facilitated by the same organized crime groups to reduce risks and simultaneously maximize their profits¹¹⁶¹¹⁷. All three crimes—drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking—are driven by economic motivations of criminal groups and economic vulnerabilities of people. The Sri Lankan authorities noted that people and drugs that are being illegally transported in the region are often seen as commodities by the criminals involved. In some cases, human trafficking victims might be forced into drug trafficking, creating a direct link between these two crimes¹¹⁸. By diversifying their criminal activities, these groups can also mitigate risks—if one operation is discovered by law enforcement, the other operations might continue undetected. Drug traffickers often use the same smuggling routes to transport illegal narcotics as the human traffickers do to move people. This overlap in routes and transportation methods can create a synergy between these crimes, as these groups can support and reinforce each other¹¹⁹. These coalitions can be temporary or long-term, depending on the nature of the criminal activity and the existing relationships between the OCNs involved.

Drug traffickers often require weapons to protect and expand their operations, control larger territories, and combat rival gangs and law enforcement. Thus, the demand created by the drug trade in these countries may fuel violence and weapons trade in coming times¹²⁰. The impact is evident in Sri Lanka, where the government has increased its coordination efforts between different agencies including the Police, the Special Task Force (STF), the State Intelligence Service (SIS) and the Army. However, these conditions can also open new opportunities for drug trafficking, as law enforcement resources are stretched thin, and borders may become less secure¹²¹.

Conflict and Violent Extremism: The overstretched resources of local authorities tend to create conditions and space for criminal activities, including weapons trafficking and terrorism, as well as enable opportunities for transnational drug trafficking¹²². Some criminal networks in Sri Lanka that are involved in drug trafficking are also connected to networks engaged in weapons trafficking, leading to synergies in logistics or mutual support¹²³. Direct links between drug trafficking and terrorism or violent extremism in the Maldives are not well established or analysed, however, the national authorities did agree that illicit proceeds from drug trafficking may have been used to support extremist¹²⁴. Similarly, terrorist organizations may recruit drug traffickers for their knowledge of smuggling routes and techniques¹²⁵. The growth of new drug networks within the prison and the exposure of gaps and weaknesses of the policing/prison systems that the drug traffickers can exploit¹²⁶.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Maldives officials

¹¹⁷ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

¹¹⁹ *ibid*

¹²⁰ *ibid*

¹²¹ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

¹²² *ibid*

¹²³ Interview with Maldives and Sri Lankan Officials. In an incident reported in 2021, Indian authorities intercepted a Sri Lankan fishing boat in the high seas near Lakshadweep that was bound for Sri Lanka with 6 Sri Lankan crew members. It 300 kg of Heroin (with image of flying horse stamp) along with five AK -47 Rifles and 1000 rounds of 9mm ammunitions.

¹²⁴ Interview with Maldives officials

¹²⁵ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

¹²⁶ Interview with Maldives officials

The relationship between violence and drugs trafficking is deeply entrenched in the region¹²⁷. Disputes over demarcated areas of the drug distribution and its violations can occur due to power, influence and strength of gang leaders, type of weapons used and the physical endurance¹²⁸. In certain cases, if one OCN's control over an area weakens or in some cases, its leader is arrested by the law enforcement, use of violence may follow as rivals seek control of the local drug market.

Conclusion

This assessment has brought to light the ongoing challenges as well as the efforts being made to combat and disrupt drug trafficking networks in the Maldives and Sri Lanka. South Asia is sandwiched between two of the biggest drugs producing regions in the world and Sri Lanka and Maldives have been significantly impacted by drug trafficking through the Southern Route.

The assessment found that the local authorities are well informed on the business tactics, characteristics, and modus operandi of local gangs, but there is a significant gap in the understanding of the regional and transnational aspects of drug trafficking. Although the two countries are transshipment hubs for drugs on the Southern Route, there is lack of clarity at present on the final destination countries of illicit drugs being trafficked through the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

The regional picture of drug trafficking remains unclear, particularly the transnational exchanges between different organized criminal groups that operate in the region. The seizure and use of synthetic drugs has witnessed an increase in recent years, and this calls for a more focused analytical work in the region. There is a lack of sufficient data on the connections between drug trafficking and several other criminal activities, such as migrant smuggling, human trafficking, weapons trafficking, terrorism, violent extremism, and the trafficking of chemical precursors.

Current operational tactics have many noteworthy achievements in the region, but there are significant shortcomings and challenges such as the adoption of new technologies by OCNs, manpower and equipment shortages, and inter-agency communication, that require the adoption of a combination of operational, legal, and community-focused strategies to effectively disrupt the activities of the drug trafficking in the region. Prisons in both countries are overwhelmed and, in many cases, have served in the growth of organized criminal groups. Recruitment within the networks primarily takes place in prisons, often taking advantage of infrastructural vulnerabilities and limited resource capabilities.

Litigation procedures for drug-related issues are notably protracted in both countries, exacerbated by weaknesses in the chain of custody. The current legal framework requires updating and reinforcement for specific issues, particularly in relation to synthetic drugs in order to reflect the latest trends in the drug market. This can be strengthened through empowering analytical divisions within government agencies, improving data gathering and analytics skills, and effective communication between maritime law enforcement agencies and the judiciary.

Finally, the Eastern Indian Ocean region remains one of the least connected regions in the world. The transnational aspect of drug trafficking underscores the necessity of cooperating with counterparts in the wider region. Both Sri Lanka and Maldives can gain from the exchange of information and promoting stronger regional efforts to address the issue of transnational drug trafficking.

¹²⁷ Interview with Sri Lanka officials

¹²⁸ ibid

Annex A

Country	List of Key Informant Interviewees
Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka Coast Guard Sri Lanka Regional Department of Prisons, Government of Sri Lanka Sri Lanka Excise Department Sri Lanka Navy National Dangerous Drugs Control Board (NDDCB), Sri Lanka
Maldives	Maldives Police Service Maldives Customs Service



