

Alarms ring as doomsday chemical seized, 'US-hating' scholar arrested

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9 KG SEIZED; 2MG CAN KILL A PERSON

New Delhi: In an operation spread over a week, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) with the help of a team of scientists from Defence Research & Development Establishment busted an illegal laboratory in Indore and recovered 9 kg of a deadly synthetic opioid, fentanyl, that could have potentially killed 4-5 million people.

Run by a local businessman and a "US-hating" PhD "scholar chemist", the fentanyl seizure, first in India, has

► Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is a controlled drug used as analgesic (pain killer)

► It's 50 times more potent than heroin; 100 times more potent than morphine

► It can be used in chemical warfare. 2mg can kill a person

► In 2016, fentanyl overdose killed over 20,000 people in US

► It's emerged as a favourite of drug traffickers. It is smuggled from China to Mexico/Canada, then to US

► A kg of fentanyl is procured for \$6,000 but sold in US for \$1.6 million

► 1kg of fentanyl can be made into 1 million pills and can fetch up to \$10-20 million on US streets

raised security concerns in Delhi as the chemical can cause large-scale casualties if used in chemical warfare, a scenario reminiscent of the plot

in Alistair Maclean's thriller "Satan Bug". A Mexican national has also been arrested.

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'Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin'

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Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin and even inhaling its particles can be fatal. This is the first significant seizure of fentanyl by any law enforcement agency in India. It is a landmark and unique seizure as DRI has been able to thwart first attempts to manufacture this toxic drug in India," said D P Dash, DG, DRI.

The discovery has baffled scientists because manufacturing the drug requires the kind of expertise which is available only to trained scientists and high-end research laboratories. It is a controlled substance used with other medication for anaesthesia and pain relief. The drug spreads easily. Absorbed through the skin or inhaled accidentally, just 2mg of fentanyl is enough to kill a person.

A team of experienced scientists dealing with protection against chemical and biological warfare were called from the DRDE, a defence laboratory of the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO), to confirm and authenticate the seizure of Fentanyl last week.

A 100 times stronger than morphine, the value of the narcotic seized is Rs 110 crore. Usually fentanyl is trafficked by drug syndicates to US where it fetches a high street price and is sold as pills mixed with other chemicals.

Sources said, quoting estimates made by US authorities, that more than 20,000 people have died by overdose of fentanyl in US in 2016. "The common street names of Fentanyl pills is Apache, China Girl, China Town, Dance Fever, Friend, Goodfellas, Great Bear, He-Man, Jackpot, King Ivory, Murder and Tango & Cash," said agency sources.

Recently, the Mexican drug cartels have started using India as a base to manufacture the lethal drug, shifting operations from China where a crackdown has begun.

Indian authorities are tracking the procurement of precursor chemical 4ANPP which is used to manufacture the deadly fentanyl. Till recently it was smuggled from China but it is not known how this has infiltrated into the illegal Indian market. "If 4ANPP is not available, Fentanyl can be manufactured using another precursor chemical NPP but it requires advanced skills," sources said.

This has further deepened the mystery as to how such skill sets have been acquired by the PhD scholar which generally comes with training in research establishments. Investigation is still in progress.