



INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN

MAY 2003

U. S. D E P A R T M E N T O F J U S T I C E

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Task Force



The availability of khat, a plant containing stimulants regulated under the Controlled Substances Act, is increasing in the United States. The amount of khat seized by federal law enforcement officers increased dramatically from 14 metric tons in 1995 to 37 metric tons in 2001. Moreover, in the first 6 months of 2002 federal officers seized nearly 30 metric tons of the drug. Individuals of Somali, Ethiopian, and Yemeni descent are the principal transporters and distributors of khat.

Background

Khat (*Catha edulis*)—also known as African salad, bushman's tea, gat, kat, miraa, qat, chat, tohai, and tschat—is a flowering shrub native to northeast Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The plant usually grows from 2 to 12 feet high; however, it can reach 20 feet. Khat plants typically are grown among crops such as coffee, legumes, peaches, or papayas. Fresh khat leaves contain cathinone—a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act; however, the leaves typically begin to deteriorate after 48 hours, causing the chemical composition of the plant to break down. Once this occurs, the leaves contain cathine, a Schedule IV drug. Fresh khat leaves are glossy and crimson-brown in color, resembling withered basil. Deteriorating khat leaves are leathery and turn yellow-green in color.

Schedule I and Schedule IV Drugs

Drugs classified as Schedule I under the Controlled Substances Act are those deemed to have a high potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States, and a lack of accepted safety for use of the drug under medical supervision. Schedule IV drugs are classified as having a low potential for abuse and a currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States; abuse of Schedule IV drugs may lead to limited physical or psychological dependence.

Abuse

In the United States khat use is most prevalent among immigrants from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Yemen. These individuals use the drug in casual settings or as part of religious ceremonies. Abuse levels are highest in cities with sizable populations of such immigrants including Boston, Columbus, Dallas, Detroit, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Nashville, New York, and Washington, D.C. Law enforcement reporting indicates that some other groups in these areas have begun abusing the drug.

Khat typically is ingested by chewing the leaves—as is done with loose tobacco. Dried khat leaves can be brewed in tea or cooked and added to food. After ingesting khat, the user experiences an immediate increase in blood pressure and heart rate. Abusers claim that the drug lifts spirits, sharpens thinking, and increases energy—effects similar to but less intense than those caused by abusing cocaine or methamphetamine. The effects of the drug generally begin to subside between 90 minutes and 3 hours after ingestion; however, they can last up to 24 hours. A state of mild depression can follow periods of prolonged use. Taken in excess, khat causes extreme thirst, a sense of exhilaration, talkativeness, hyperactivity, wakefulness, and loss of appetite. Repeated use can cause manic behavior with grandiose delusions, paranoia, and hallucinations. It also can cause damage to the nervous, respiratory, circulatory, and digestive systems.

Many Muslims, including Somalis, use khat during the religious month of Ramadan. Law enforcement officials in the United States indicate that a large number of khat seizures occur during Ramadan. In 2002 Ramadan occurred from November 5 through December 4. During November and December, U.S. Customs Service (USCS) officials seized nearly 3,000 kilograms of khat from airports in California, Illinois, Kentucky, Minnesota, New York, and Tennessee. [Note: the USCS is now part of the Bureau of

Immigration and Customs Enforcement Service under the Department of Homeland Security.]

Availability

Seizure data indicate that the availability of khat is increasing in the United States. According to Federal-wide Drug Seizure System (FDSS) data, federal law enforcement officials seized 14 metric tons in 1995, over 37 metric tons of khat in 2001, and nearly 30 metric tons in the first 6 months of 2002. State and local law enforcement officials also frequently seize kilogram quantities of khat. For example, in October 2002 local law enforcement officials in Merriam, Kansas, seized nine boxes of khat, each weighing over 13 kilograms, and arrested two Somali nationals.

The use of khat is accepted within the Somali, Ethiopian, and Yemeni cultures. In these countries khat is not a controlled substance and is openly sold at markets. Many immigrants from these countries continue to use khat in the United States. As such, khat frequently is advertised openly on signs in ethnic restaurants, bars, grocery stores, and smoke shops. Signs often are printed in the native language of the store owner. Common names for khat that may appear on such signs include kat, qat, chat, gat, tohai, tschat, and mirraa. Khat generally sells for \$300 to \$400 per kilogram or \$28 to \$50 per bundle (40 leafed twigs measuring 12 to 15 inches in length).

Transportation

Khat must be transported quickly to its intended market because of its limited shelf life. Thus, the drug often is transported into the United States, typically through Great Britain and Canada, primarily via package delivery services and, to a lesser extent, by couriers aboard commercial aircraft. Khat also is transported into the United States from Canada by private vehicle. To maintain freshness during transport, khat frequently is wrapped in plastic bags, banana leaves, or newspapers and sprinkled with water.

Kansas City Police Department



Khat rolled in newspaper for transport.

Khat smugglers use various tactics to avoid law enforcement scrutiny when shipping the drug via package delivery services. For example, khat usually is listed on manifests (cargo invoices) as Abyssinian or African tea, African salad, molokheya (an Egyptian vegetable), perishable lettuce or fresh vegetables, tobacco leaves, and herbs. It also has been listed as auto parts on at least one occasion.

The amount of khat seized from packages arriving from foreign destinations, as well as the frequency with which these seizures occur, illustrates the extent to which package delivery services are used to transport khat into the



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Khat wrapped in banana leaves and smuggled in a suitcase.

United States. According to USCS, kilogram quantities of khat were seized daily between January and September 2002 from packages arriving at the package delivery facility located at the Memphis International Airport. USCS officials seized 3,916 kilograms of khat during that period.

The following examples demonstrate that seizures involving package delivery services are common in other parts of the country as well.

Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota: On December 31, 2002, USCS officials seized over 146 kilograms of khat concealed in seven boxes shipped from the United Kingdom and arrested a

29-year-old Minneapolis resident as he accepted receipt of the boxes.

New York, New York: In August 2002 USCS officials seized 22 packages containing more than 59 kilograms of khat that had arrived in New York from London. The packages were addressed to individuals in several U.S. cities. During a subsequent controlled delivery, the Kansas City, Kansas, Police Department Interdiction Unit arrested four male Somali nationals and one male Ethiopian national. The Omaha Commercial Interdiction Unit also conducted a controlled delivery and arrested two Somali nationals. Other controlled deliveries have been made in Minneapolis; Norfolk, Nebraska; Seattle; and Sioux City, Iowa.

Kansas City, Missouri: In March 2002 USCS officials seized over 68 kilograms of khat concealed in five boxes shipped from London and arrested two Somali nationals who accepted receipt of the boxes in Kansas City.

Kansas City, Kansas: On October 18, 2002, officers with the Merriam Police Department arrested two Somali men from Minneapolis who were attempting to retrieve several packages containing khat that had been shipped from London, England, to various locations throughout the Kansas City area. The packages were addressed to various individuals with Middle Eastern names and delivered to 10 different hotels via package delivery services. The khat was to be distributed in Minneapolis. At the time of their arrest, the men had retrieved seven of the packages; the police collected the other three.

Khat also is transported into the United States by couriers aboard commercial aircraft. Khat smugglers in Great Britain frequently attempt to recruit couriers who are not of African or Middle Eastern origin, believing such individuals are subject to less scrutiny when entering the United States.

The following example illustrates the use of this smuggling method.

Detroit, Michigan: On January 13, 2003, USCS officials seized approximately 80 kilograms of khat concealed in the luggage of two British women arriving from London. Law enforcement officials executed a controlled delivery of the khat to a hotel near the airport and arrested two Somali men from Nashville, Tennessee, who attempted to receive the drug. The two Somali men were to transport the khat by private vehicle back to Tennessee for distribution among the Somali community in Nashville.

Outlook

Khat likely will become increasingly available in the United States. Abuse of the drug will remain most prevalent in communities with large Somali, Ethiopian, and Yemeni populations. Recent law enforcement reporting indicates that some Caucasian individuals have begun abusing khat; however, the drug likely will not become widely popular due to its limited shelf life and because stimulant abusers commonly seek more intense physiological effects, such as those produced by cocaine and methamphetamine. Although the drug's popularity likely will remain limited to Somali, Ethiopian, and Yemeni populations, khat will remain a growing concern among law enforcement agencies in the United States because of its increasing availability.

Sources

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U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Directorate of Border and Transportation Security

Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement Service

U.S. Department of Justice

Drug Enforcement Administration

Federal Bureau of Investigation

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