

# ON THE TUK-TUK EXPRESS

## Has methamphetamine hit the Cape Flats?

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Crystal methamphetamine is a drug with a high addiction potential that can elicit bizarre and aggressive behaviour. Preliminary research with gang members on the Cape Flats suggests that the drug may be growing in that community. If so, this is an issue for law enforcement to watch, because speed and violent criminals are not a good combination.

There has long been a market vacuum for methamphetamine in South Africa. The major precursors have been available, and the manufacturing process is not complicated. South African clubbing youth have a taste for speedy drugs, and the international market in MDMA has not been consistent. Trafficking routes to the Far East involving, among other things, Cape abalone, have been detected, and it is in the East where the drug has become most problematic. South Africa also has internationally linked biker gangs, and bikers are some of the leading promoters of speed overseas. It was only a matter of time before someone put two and two together.

According to Andre Koch, the clandestine lab specialist for the SAPS National Forensic Labs, the first time the police bust a methamphetamine manufacturing operation was in November 1998, but this was clearly a bit of an anomaly, because there were few seizures of the drug until 2001. In total there have been 10 laboratories discovered in the country, all but one of which was in Gauteng. The exception was found in Woodstock in 2001. A white man and his coloured girlfriend were caught in possession of the chemicals to make the drug, though none of the finished product was found. The property where the lab was found is currently the subject of an asset forfeiture case.

While manufacture appears to have been based primarily in Gauteng, National Forensic Lab figures indicate that the drug has penetrated both the white and coloured communities in areas across the country. In the early years, many of the seizures of methamphetamine were in the form of tablets or powders in which methamphetamine was combined with MDMA (the primary drug in most ecstasy tablets) or other stimulants. Much of this was likely for use in the (white-dominated) club scene. In 2001, the majority of seizures were in Gauteng and most of these involved MDMA or other stimulants.

But insofar as enforcement figures track underlying usage changes, there seems to have been a shift in recent years. Of cases so far recorded in 2003, the majority are in the Western Cape, including multiple seizures in Mitchells Plain and other coloured areas. Most involve pure methamphetamine powder. Similar to the growth of ecstasy in the coloured community, a crossover with crystal meth may be taking place.

According to the South African Community Epidemiological Network on Drug Use (SACENDU), treatment demand for methamphetamine addiction in the Western Cape has also increased in recent months. In the first half of 2002, there were only

three meth patients in treatment in Cape Town, out of over 1,600 in rehab for drug addiction. This increased to 13 in the second half of 2002, and to 35 in the first half of 2003. Of the sentinel sites SACENDU monitors, which include all the major metropolitan areas, only Cape Town has shown crystal meth admissions.

It would thus appear that, in addition to a growing crime problem, Cape Town might be facing a whole new order of powerful stimulants. And there are preliminary indications that it is becoming popular with some gangsters.

#### **What it is**

Methamphetamine is a kind of speed, a more potent version of amphetamine sulphate. It can be found in a variety of forms, from a fine powder to larger crystals ('ice'). Depending on how well and by what method it is manufactured, it can smell of ammonia. It can be smoked, snorted, swallowed, or injected.

Like all forms of speed, the principal effect is stimulation. Users get wired for varying periods of time, depending on dosage, tolerance, and method of ingestion. But in general it is a long-acting drug, far more so than crack-cocaine. There is a feeling of elation and confidence that some argue is greater on meth than on other forms of speed. It can keep users awake for days, with little desire for food.

It is sometimes referred to as 'Hitler's drug', as it was allegedly utilised by the Nazis (under the brand name 'Pervitin') as a means of assisting soldiers in combat. This formulation of the drug is said to be used by manufacturers in Thailand today, where methamphetamine has become more popular than locally grown heroin in recent years. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime publication *Global Illicit Drug Trends*, in 1990 there were only 97 people treated for methamphetamine abuse in the whole of Thailand. A decade later, this number had increased to more than 15,000.

Indeed, it appears that America's problem drug has been crack, Europe's has been heroin, and Asia's has been methamphetamine. In the Philippines,

92% of all drug treatment admissions are for the drug and in Japan, 90% of all drug violations are for methamphetamine. According to the UN, much of the problem in the region has developed since the mid-1990s.

Both the psychological and physical effects of running on fast-forward are not good. Like many drugs with intense highs, coming down is also intense, and can result in suicidal depressions. Tolerance and dependency can develop quickly. Overdose can result in temporary 'amphetamine psychosis', and there is evidence of long-term disruption of brain chemistry among serious abusers.

#### **Gangsters on speed**

According to preliminary research with gang members in Manenberg and Elsie's River in the Cape Flats, crystal meth is a recent arrival on the scene. Members in Manenberg talk in terms of a year or so, but in Elsie's River, an area where the drug trade is fiercely competitive and linked to the prison numbers gangs, the arrival date of the drug is measured in weeks.

They call it "tuk-tuk", because of the clicking sound it makes when being smoked.

*Tuk-tukkie. Dit is beter as wyn.*

It is also referred to as 'globes' because it is smoked in the glass sphere of light globes after the metal threading has been removed.

*Jy tik met die straw binne in die globe.*

But this technique, also seen abroad, has not been perfected yet:

*Die globe breek na 'n rukkie en dan val jou hele R60 uit [the unit price of the drug].*

Apparently, some members have purchased purpose-made glass pipes for smoking tuk-tuk:

*A Popeye ..... dit het 'n klein gaatjie bo en jy kan hom skoonmaak. Amper soos daai wat hulle in die wetenskap klas gedoen het. It is round at the bottom.*

A third term for crystal meth is 'straws', so called because:

*You buy it in short straws. Then you open it up. It is like salt. Crystals. You put it in a globe and you light your lighter - smoke it in the globe.*

The drug is actually vaporised and the fumes inhaled through a straw, similar to 'chasing the dragon' with heroin.

Reviews of the drug and its effects are mixed:

*You never sleep for three-and-a-half days. You start to go crazy. I think we should go back to the old stuff - ja, die slow boats [dagga]. Daai maak jou nie so vinnig deurmekaar nie. Jy is nog in control van jousef.*

*As jy alcohol in jou het - ons gaan skiet daai en ons soek moeilikheid met die een. Nou die goed dan gaan lê jy. Jy sien hoe baklei hulle met mekaar. Jy hou vir hulle so dop en dan kan jy môre vir hulle vertel hoe hulle aangegaan het.*

The 'white pipe' combination of dagga and Mandrax is used as a sedative to come down. Methamphetamine is seen as an ideal tonic to prepare gunmen for a hit, removing inhibitions, sharpening senses, and fuelling aggression. So, in a sense, Hitler's vision of a 'combat drug' may ultimately be fulfilled.

#### **"Beter as wyn"**

To acquire drug market share in an area flooded with crack cocaine is no mean feat. One comparative advantage of crystal meth is its potential to be manufactured cheaply locally. It is imperative that this potential not be realised.

On 2 May 2003, ephedrine was made a Schedule 5 drug, accessible only by prescription. This is a step forward in reducing local manufacture of the drug. But drug entrepreneurs overseas have found ways around this inconvenience, including the use of

pseudoephedrine, the popular congestion remedy. Pharmacists should be wary of anyone without a major head cold buying stacks of Sudafed.

Much law enforcement attention has been diverted to methcathinone, the synthetic version of the East African herbal drug khat. Some 25 cat labs have been found this year alone. But cat is extremely mild compared to crystal meth, and while its manufacture and use is doubtless more widespread at present, it lacks the destructive potential of its more potent cousin.

Ironically, it may be the extreme nature of crystal meth that prevents it becoming an issue in South Africa. To a certain extent methamphetamine is a self-limiting drug. Its downsides are so extreme that it lacks the appeal to become popular with the masses.

But among certain classes of marginalised people, including violent criminals, a niche market can develop, as it has in the past among bikers, Mexican gangs, and Hawaiians in the United States. This niche can be more dangerous than widespread use of softer chemicals. Law enforcement should keep its eye on this one.