

## **Albania steps up fight against drugs under EU pressure**

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Under EU pressure, Albania has stepped up its fight against drug trafficking, setting up a new and more efficient strategy in a bid to halt the smuggling of hashish and heroin over its territory on the way from Asia towards the West.

"The situation in Albania, which has remained an important country for the traffic of narcotics, is worrisome," the latest EU report on the country noted.

It suggested Tirana should adopt an "efficient strategy" in its fight against drug trafficking.

"The fight against drug trafficking will be our main challenge this year," Interior Minister Igli Toska said. Toska said that the Albanian government had been working on a project of the national strategy "which will require international support and cooperation."

In July, the government plans to present a set of anti-mafia laws, which will allow confiscation of property belonging to persons involved in criminal and illegal activities.

This set of laws, which also provides for the special protection of witnesses or those involved in illegal trafficking who decide to testify, "will enable a more efficient strategy," said Adrian Dvorani of the justice ministry.

"Albania's geographic position, its trade with Turkey and Greece, and the situation after the Kosovo war are all elements Albanian criminal groups profit from, thereby making the country an important stop for the transit of narcotics," Toska said.

Albania, whose officials have high hopes for EU membership, has already made significant progress this year in its fight against drug smugglers.

Police forces have seized more than 200kg of heroin and around eight tonnes of cannabis in the past six months, twice as much as last year. But still, these figures pale compared to the estimated quantities of narcotics that are smuggled through the country, experts say.

International police experts based in Tirana estimate the value of the narcotics in transit at over US\$2 billion per year.

The amount makes up about 25 to 30 percent of the narcotics smuggled into Europe from the Balkans, they estimate.

Toska said however that at least 106 smugglers had been arrested since October in Albania.

"Albanian smugglers are linked to the international criminal organizations like [the Italian] Sacra Corona Unita, Cosa Nostra, the Turkish, Russian, Macedonian and Kosovar mafia, as well as the Columbian drug cartels," high-ranking police official Xhavit Shala said.

Last year, the Albanian police cracked an international drug network operating between Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania and Italy, controlled by the Kosovo Albanian and Turkish criminal groups linked with the Calabrian Mafia organization N'Drangheta.

"Faced with the production of opium from Afghanistan, which with 3,600 tonnes last year has reached the level of the years before the US intervention in 2001," said Bujar Mema of the Albanian Interpol office.