

Netherlands one of largest suppliers of dangerous drug 'kush', but what is it?

The Netherlands is one of the largest suppliers of kush: the life-threatening synthetic drug that is a particularly serious problem in West African Sierra Leone. So many people die from the addictive drug strain that group cremations are even held in the country. What exactly is kush, and how dangerous is it?

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According to the report by the Clingendael Institute and Global Initiative, published today, the Netherlands is one of the largest suppliers of kush. The largest shipment ever intercepted (300 kilos) came from the Netherlands. The UK is also a major supplier. The synthetic drug is drawing a trail of destruction among the youth of the African country of Sierra Leone.

The stuff is spotty, highly narcotic and extremely addictive: it makes users walk the streets like zombies. Kush is said to have first surfaced in 2016, in the capital Freetown. There, 'hundreds of young men' reportedly died because of organ failure caused by the drug, the BBC reported last year. No official death tolls are known, but it is clear that addiction - with all its consequences - is becoming widespread. In April last year, a state of emergency was even declared in Sierra-Leone.

But what is kush?

The term 'kush' is often associated with cannabis, but in this case it is a synthetic cannabinoid. The cheap stuff is often light green, dark green, brown or reddish in colour and is usually smoked with tobacco. According to users, the drug is said to relieve stress or even 'make all feelings disappear'.

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For a long time, much was unclear about what exactly kush is. According to research now published by Clingendael, the stuff mostly contains synthetic cannabinoids or nitazenes: a heavy painkiller stronger than morphine, heroin and fentanyl. It makes kush extremely potent. Also, according to Clingendael, a lot of rumours about kush circulate: for instance, the drug strain is said to contain methamphetamine and human bones, among other things. No evidence of this has been found.

But it is clear that kush is highly dangerous and extremely addictive. Users reported needing increasing amounts, and according to the research institute, the number of reported overdoses allegedly caused by kush has increased significantly since 2022. Users can suffer from skin abnormalities and ulcers and severe limb swelling. The kush users who die often struggle with serious health problems or stop eating, for example.

The role of the Netherlands

According to Clingendael, the number of kush deaths leads to pressure on morgues and group cremations were even held. Drug users in the survey say they know on average

between two and four people who have died from the drug. Some even have between 20 and 50 kush deaths in their vicinity.

The kush market was expanding at a very catastrophic pace in Sierra Leone. According to Clingendael, there are indications that the Netherlands and the UK are exporting kush. Interviews conducted by researchers show that key figures in the kush market have connections with the two countries. **In 2024, 300 kilos of 'organic material' was intercepted in a cargo from Rotterdam, presumably to make kush. That cargo also contained plastic syrup bottles from a Dutch factory.**

There are no indications that the Netherlands' most wanted criminal, Jos Leijdekkers, is involved in kush. This 'Bolle Jos' keeps to himself in Sierra Leone and is said to be mainly involved in the export of cocaine. In the Netherlands, he was sentenced to 24 years for large-scale drug trafficking.

According to Clingendael, there are a lot of indications that the kush market is being 'protected' at a high political level, but this cannot be sufficiently proven. However, there are said to be two major players who cooperate and have political links through family.