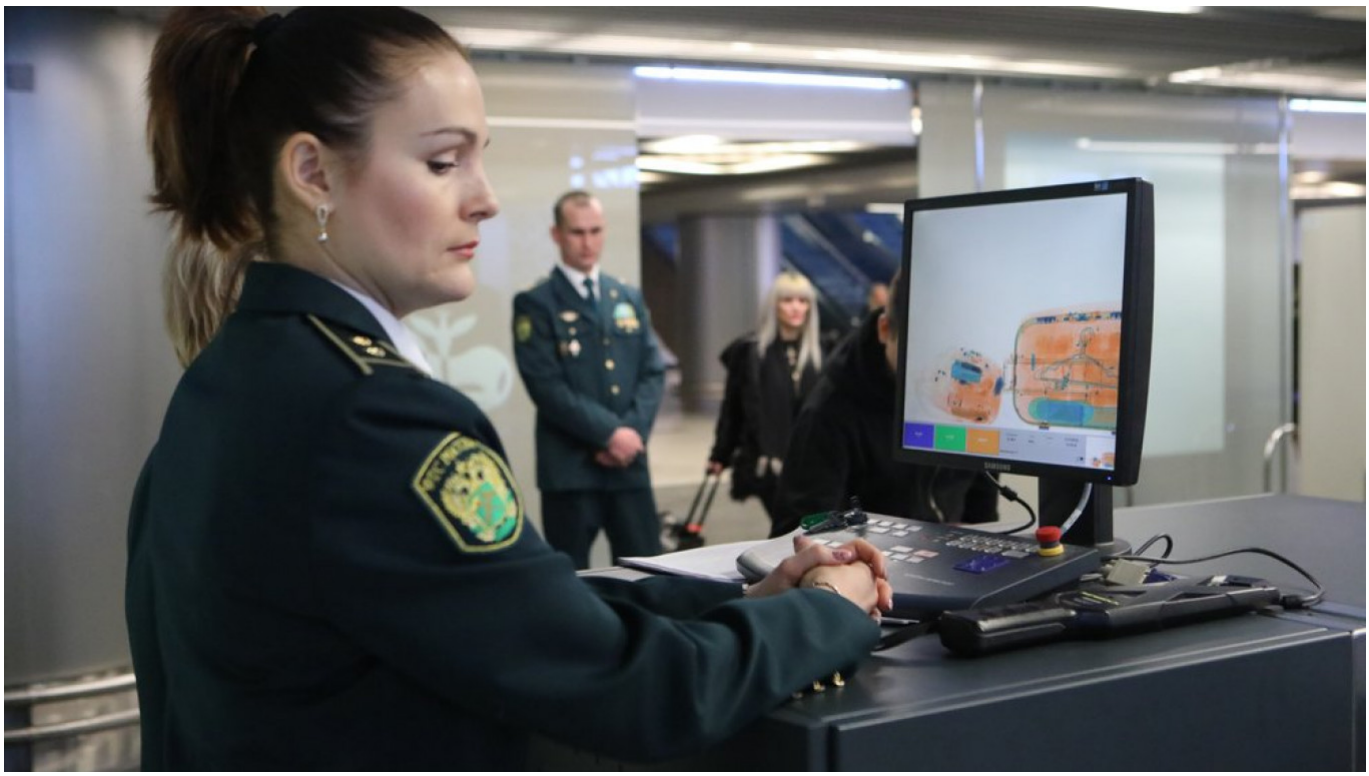
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Russia Busts UN's Anti-HIV Opioid Shipment Bound for Tajikistan

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Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency

Russian officials have seized nearly $96 million worth of opioids at a Moscow airport this month that were bound for Tajikistan as part of a United Nations HIV response program.

The 1.2 metric tons of mislabeled methadone with a black-market value of 6 billion rubles ($95.8 million) arrived at Vnukovo Airport from Germany in early December, Russian authorities said Tuesday. Russia's Federal Customs Service said airport officials opened a large-scale drug smuggling case on Dec. 6, a capital punishment that carries up to life imprisonment for those found guilty.

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A UN Development Program official confirmed the methadone shipment was intercepted due to its incorrect labeling, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported.

“The UNDP is in contact with the Russian authorities to address this issue,” RIA Novosti quoted the unnamed official as saying.

The cargo is part of the UNDP’s HIV prevention program in Tajikistan and is “a life-saving treatment for people who inject drugs,” the official added.

Research says that methadone lowers the risk of HIV transmission among injection-drug users.

Tajikistan’s senior drug and alcohol abuse official Rustam Sharipov laid the blame for the methadone’s seizure in Moscow at the feet of the UNDP’s partner, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS/HIV. The fund had ordered the methadone and was responsible for its delivery, Sharipov told the state-run TASS news agency.

However, the fund assumes responsibility of the cargo only once it’s delivered, an unnamed UN official in Tajikistan told TASS. Until then, the official said, the organization that sent the methadone and the transport company are responsible for shipment.

The UN Development Program launched a $13 million HIV prevention, treatment and care program in Tajikistan last year. Officially registered HIV cases in Tajikistan increased eightfold in 2005-2012, the UN has said.

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