

## Fentanyl trafficking plus a trade row makes for a vicious cocktail

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WASHINGTON/NEW YORK -- The Trump administration's charge that China is responsible for most of the illicit fentanyl flowing into the U.S. is threatening to become another flashpoint in the trade war.

The U.S. president has denounced his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, saying he has broken his promise to stop fentanyl from reaching U.S. shores. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid 80 to 100 times stronger than morphine. Trump cited continued smuggling of the drug as a reason for escalating his trade war with Beijing.

"He [Xi] said he was going to stop fentanyl from coming into our country. It's all coming out of China. He didn't do that," Mr. Trump said in remarks on the White House lawn in August.

But a Chinese drug enforcement official rejected Trump's allegation that China is responsible for most of the fentanyl coming to the U.S. Liu Yuejin, vice commissioner of China's National Narcotics Control Commission, speaking at a Sept. 3 news conference, called the claim "completely groundless and untrue."

The fentanyl dispute takes place against a backdrop of souring U.S.-China relations, faltering trade talks and rising tariffs. It is also entangled with the deep-seated problem of drug abuse in the U.S., which in turn is linked to other social ills, including unemployment and lack of educational opportunities for many Americans.

If the issue of fentanyl trafficking comes up in the next round of trade talks slated for October, the prospects for a resolution of the acrimonious trade spat between the world's two largest economies could worsen.

Trump announced a fresh effort to deal with what he called the "opioid epidemic" in a speech at the White House on Sept. 4, saying, "To cut off the supply of ultralethal narcotics at the source, my administration has also prioritized stopping the influx of fentanyl from China."

Every day, more than 130 people in the U.S. die from overdoses of opioids or drugs with similar properties, according to the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse. Opioids include the illegal drug heroin and synthetic drugs such as fentanyl. Pharmaceutical fentanyl was developed as a pain reliever for cancer patients but its effects, including a brief, intense high, have made it popular with recreational drug users.

In 2017, nearly 29,000 people in the U.S. died from fentanyl overdoses, a ninefold jump from four years earlier, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2016, the pop star Prince died from a synthetic opioid overdose.

Trafficking of fentanyl from China has been cited as a major contributor to the problem. U.S. officials say China is the main source of illicit fentanyl and related substances. As the supply of legally prescribed fentanyl has dwindled due to tighter regulations, more drug abusers have turned to fentanyl smuggled in from China.

U.S. authorities seized 31.75 kg of illegal fentanyl at the border in the fiscal year ended September 2015. In the first seven months of this year, that amount reached 952.5 kg, enough to kill the entire U.S. population. Almost all of the illicit fentanyl found in the U.S. comes from abroad, mostly from China, according to Jim Carroll, director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy.

The U.S. Department of Justice has indicted two Chinese men living in Shanghai, Zheng Fujing - also known as Gordon Jin -- and his father, Zheng Guanghua, accusing them of operating a drug ring that manufactured and shipped deadly fentanyl analogues and 250 other drugs.

The pair "created and maintained numerous websites to advertise and sell illegal drugs in more than 35 languages," according to the Treasury Department, and used digital currencies like bitcoin to facilitate production and sales. In March, the leader of another drug ring was convicted of smuggling narcotics from China through a website on the "dark web," and selling them in the U.S.

In May, China imposed strict regulations on all fentanyl-related drugs to curb trafficking. Since then, there have been no fentanyl smuggling cases involving the U.S. and China, said Liu of China's National Narcotics Control Commission.

Liu Yuejin, center, vice commissioner of China's National Narcotics Control Commission, rejected the U.S. charge that China is responsible for the illicit fentanyl in a Beijing press conference on Sept. 3. © AP

China's regulation of drugs and chemicals is generally looser than in other countries. To make matters worse, fentanyl is easy to manufacture. Experts say it costs around \$3,000 to produce a kilogram of fentanyl in China, which can sell on the street for up to \$1.5 million in the U.S.

Jeffrey Miron, director of economic studies at the Cato Institute, a think tank, said the U.S. has long tried to halt flows of illegal drugs from specific countries, but traffickers have always found

ways to circumvent those measures. A lasting solution requires greater efforts to tackle the root causes of drug abuse.

Another source of public anger over the opioid crisis is drugmakers, who are blamed for fostering addiction by marketing the powerful painkillers as safe and nonaddictive. Trump has pledged to hold big pharmaceutical companies accountable for their role in fostering addiction.

Facing more than 2,000 lawsuits related to the opioid crisis, Purdue Pharma, maker of the painkiller OxyContin, on Sept. 15 filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy as part of its plan to settle litigation with states and other plaintiffs.

But Trump continues to point the finger at China over the issue as he tries to shore up his support in the Midwestern Rust Belt states that propelled him to the presidency in 2016. Many people in these states began abusing drugs as manufacturing jobs moved overseas, many of them to China.

In Ohio, a swing state where fentanyl abuse is a serious problem, the biggest challenge facing the city of Ashtabula, northeast of Cleveland, is how to revitalize the local economy and deal with the drug problem, said Jim Timonere, the city manager. Ashtabula also happens to be the birthplace of Robert Lighthizer, the U.S. trade representative.

Trump, whose older brother died of complications from alcoholism, has a special passion for tackling the drug abuse problem. But tying the fentanyl issue to the already fraught trade negotiations with Beijing could make a deal even more elusive.