

Popularity of Indonesian leaf alarms US health authorities

KRATOM DRUG

PONTIANAK: The sweltering backwaters of Indonesian Borneo have become the unlikely ground zero for the global production and export of Kratom — a tree leaf hailed as a miracle cure for everything from opioid addiction to anxiety. Part of the coffee family, the leaf has been used for centuries in Southeast Asia and Papua New Guinea for its pain-relieving and mildly stimulating effects but it is now sold in powder form and exported worldwide — alarming some health regulators who have raised concerns about safety.

Kratom stimulates the same brain receptors as morphine, although it produces much milder effects. “I take Kratom and have had no problems. Every strain has its benefits — some help you

relax, others can treat insomnia or treat drug addiction. Some help increase stamina,” grower Faisal Perdana told *AFP*.

Fellow farmer Gusti Prabu, who now exports 10 tonnes of the drug a month, agreed.

“Our ancestors used Kratom and there were no negative side effects. It can help eliminate drug addiction and help people detox,” he explained.

But its popularity is causing concern — the drug is unregulated, and has had little clinical testing to assess its safety or side effects. Kratom is already banned for domestic consumption in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, though the former allows its export in unprocessed form.

Health authorities in the US — now the drug’s top importer — have linked consumption of the



plant and its derivatives to dozens of deaths, warning it could aggravate a deadly opioid epidemic gripping parts of the country. Compounds found in Kratom are opioids, which expose users to the same risks of addiction and death as illicit opiates, according to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Kratom is legal in 43 states, but the FDA is pushing for greater restrictions and has al-



The Kratom market has been very good over the past decade and it still has potential in the years ahead. People will see its usefulness, sooner or later

Gusti Prabu, a Kratom farmer

ready put an import alert on it, which means shipments entering US can be confiscated.

Scientists say that while Kratom may have positive attributes, very little research has been done into the drug.

“It has great potential as a remedy for pain and opioid addiction given its pharmacology and its potential accessibility,” Michael White, head of the department of pharmacy practice at the University of Connecticut, told *AFP*.