World

Testing tolerance in a corner of Denmark

COPENHAGEN DISPATCH
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Drug dealers and police play cat and mouse in a hippie commune

BY ELLEN BARRY

When a phalanx of Danish policemen in bulletproof vests crosses the boundary into Christiania Freetown, the hippie commune in the center of Copenhagen, many things happen at once.

There is urgent shouting. Lumps of hashish and bags of marijuana disappear into black vinyl sacks, which are then rolled up and thrown onto roofs, hidden under floorboards and stuffed into ingeniously camouflaged hidey holes — inside hollow propane tanks or behind mirrors. The dealers themselves scatter, sneakers pounding.

By the time the police officers reach the open-air hash market on Pusher Street, pistols at their hips, the scent of hash has been replaced by the scent of cinnamon rolls, and half the population is missing. The police march through, poking ineffectually at the drug dealers' empty stalls.

The officers, burly and heavily armed, survey the marketplace with their legs planted far apart, projecting dominance. But within seconds of their departure, the bustling drug market reassembles itself and business resumes.

This dance has taken place several times a day this summer between the government of Denmark and Freetown Christiania, one of Europe's longest-running utopian experiments.

The area was an abandoned military base in 1971 when squatters broke down the barricades and occupied 84 acres of land, declaring "a self-governing society" of artists and freethinkers. Denmark has allowed the commune to exist for nearly half a century, in violation of planning laws and drug laws.

Christiania is now one of Copenhagen's biggest tourist attractions, the subject of a vast number of academic studies and a kind of living monument to Danish tolerance.

"If it had happened in Germany or France, the military would have shut it down," said Jiesper Tristan Pedersen, an anthropologist and occasional resident of Christiania. "Danish policy back then was more gentle. They were irritated, they didn't know what to do, but they didn't want to use violence. A lot of people look at it this way, as Danish gentleness and politeness."

The mood in Denmark, though, has swung to law and order in recent years. Urban housing projects have become the scene of increasing drug offenses and gang activity. And as anxiety rises, so does support for the anti-immigrant far right.

Conservative-leaning politicians have promised to shut down the Pusher Street drug trade, noting a jarring act of violence that occurred two years ago, when a dealer shot and injured two policemen. This summer has been tense.

"We hate, hate, hate the police," hissed Carsten, a hash dealer with a shaved head and a diamond earring, who requested that only his first name be used because he sells illegal drugs. "They've been in the gym for a week, learning techniques to take people down. They are just waiting to try them out on real people."

Christiania's full-time residents, who number around 900, have their own system of self-regulation, including a strict ban on violence and hard drugs like heroin.

The result is an uneasy equilibrium between drug dealers and residents of the commune, who have the power to expel the drug dealers. Their common adversary is the police.

Decisions are made by consensus — the assembled members clap to express support — at meetings that regularly stretch into five-hour marathons, since, by the commune's doctrine, everyone is allowed to speak.

One dealer who had the freckled, gangly look of an adult Huckleberry Finn rolled his eyes at the commune's hippie elders as if they were a geriatric Chamber of Commerce.

"We used to throw stones at the police," he said. "They tell us to throw flowers. They give us restraining orders. It's messed up, right? We say we are all criminals, how come we have so many rules?"

MAURICIO LIMA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Police officers patrolling the drug marketplace known as Pusher Street in Christiania Freetown, one of Europe's longest-running utopian experiments.

Another dealer, who introduced himself as Pat the Albanian, said self-regulation was quite effective. The threat of being ostracized, he said, was powerful — more so than the threat of being imprisoned by the Danish government.

"A lot of people here are outcasts from society, but if you follow the rules, you are welcome," Pat said.

He said it was a chilling sight to see people expelled, sometimes by a crowd of a hundred or so neighbors who escort them to the edge of the commune. "If you cannot follow the rules, you are not accepted by the flock," he said.

After the policemen were shot in 2016, the drug market was dismantled by residents, but the pause was temporary, and the daily game of cat and mouse swiftly resumed.

"Only freedom is holy," reads the writing on a wall in the neighborhood. Tibetan prayer flags form a fluttering, sunlit tent above the Pusher Street drug market, obstructing the view of police surveillance drones. The dealers go by street names — Rama, Manhattan, Seafood, Shoeshine Jimmy — and use elaborate evasive maneuvers.

But the stress of constant vigilance takes its toll.

Mr. Pedersen, the anthropologist, whose masters' thesis was titled "We Have Time for a Cup of Coffee Before the Police Arrive," said many drug dealers he met in Christiania had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, like soldiers returning from a war. Some sleep with baseball bats beside their doors, he said, or change their phone numbers regularly or don't use phones at all.

One recent morning when a middle-aged woman took a photograph of Pusher Street, a young man confronted her and demanded she delete the photo. The police, he explained, routinely scan social media for photographs that can be used to make arrests.

Are you at war? he was asked. He was, he replied cheerfully.

"It's been going on since 1971," he said. "And they're still losing."