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INCB CALLS FOR STRICT CHEMICAL CONTROLS TO FIGHT SYNTHETIC DRUGS SCOURGE

*Strategy involves choking off supply of chemicals needed for illicit drug manufacture
and identifying and dismantling laboratories*

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), in its Annual Report published today (3 March 2004), calls upon all governments concerned to join forces in combating the problem of Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS) abuse through Project Prism, a worldwide operation to prevent diversions of "precursor" chemicals which traffickers need for clandestine manufacture of ATS.

Project Prism is designed to give governments the capacity to address the ATS problem. It has a two-pronged approach: preventing illicit manufacture of the substances by stopping traffickers from obtaining the chemicals they require, and, identifying and dismantling the laboratories where such manufacture already takes place, by using a variety of law enforcement investigative techniques, such as controlled deliveries.

Synthetic drugs, such as amphetamine, methamphetamine and Ecstasy (MDMA), are made in clandestine laboratories from "precursor" chemicals. Synthetic drugs cannot be made without precursors. Drug traffickers therefore divert those chemicals from licit channels before smuggling them to the places where the drugs are made. While Ecstasy is mainly manufactured illicitly in Western Europe, large-scale illicit manufacture of methamphetamine continues in South-East Asia and North America.

Regional operations were started under the umbrella of Project Prism in January 2003. In particular, law enforcement investigations have been initiated for interceptions in Europe of amphetamine and Ecstasy precursors, and in the Americas for methamphetamine precursors, to track the sources of the chemicals and to prosecute those responsible for the diversions.

These activities reinforce the existing tracking programmes, which were introduced by INCB a decade ago, to prevent diversions of methamphetamine precursors from licit international trade. The tracking programme has prevented traffickers from diverting thousands of tons of precursor chemicals from licit trade and it is now next to impossible for them to obtain the raw material. Instead, it has been found they are increasingly turning to over-the-counter drugs like cold medication as a source of those precursors.

In addressing these more recent developments, Project Prism provides a mechanism for governments to even monitor and track shipments of pharmaceutical preparations in international trade to ensure they are not misused for clandestine drug manufacture.

"Controlled delivery" means the technique of allowing illicit or suspect consignments of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or precursors, to pass out of, through or into the territory of one or more countries, with the knowledge and under the supervision of their authorities, with a view to identifying people involved in committing offences.

The INCB has also widened its net to include tableting machines used for manufacturing synthetic drugs. Besides precursor chemicals, traffickers also require specialized materials and equipment. Since Ecstasy is sold mainly in tablet form and illicitly manufactured methamphetamine tablets are common in large portions of South-East Asia, operational activities are also focusing on launching law enforcement investigations when an illicit laboratory is dismantled and tableting machines are seized. The aim is to trace the source of the machines in order to prevent more machines from being obtained from that source.

As traffickers are increasingly misusing the Internet to obtain the chemicals, materials and equipment they require, an Information Technology Support Group has also been formed to advise the Project Prism Task Force on the most appropriate means to address this new phenomenon. It is expected that important steps forward will be made in this area of investigation during 2004.

In June 2002, the Board convened an international meeting with representatives from 38 countries at Washington, D.C., in cooperation with the European Commission and the Government of the United States of America, on precursors for Amphetamine-Type Stimulants. That meeting launched Project Prism, the international initiative focusing on the five major stimulant precursors (ephedrine and pseudoephedrine for methamphetamine, P-2-P for amphetamine, 3,4-MDP-2-P and safrole for Ecstasy) and on the equipment used in illicit manufacture as well as use of the Internet in diverting chemicals and equipment.