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INCB: We must halt unprecedented proliferation and abuse of 'Legal highs'

INCB Annual Report highlights the importance of shared responsibility in reducing drug-related suffering, warns of global trafficking of precursor chemicals and of prescription drugs being misused, and highlights regional trends

VIENNA, 5 March (UN Information Service) – New psychoactive substances, known as 'legal highs' and 'designer drugs', are a growing threat to public health, as seen by increased emergency room admissions and calls to poison centres, the Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) says in its Annual Report for 2012, launched today in London.

These new psychoactive substances are easily available over the Internet and the total number of such substances on the market, already estimated to be in the hundreds, is growing steadily. INCB is calling for concerted action by States to prevent the manufacture, trafficking and abuse of these substances which are a threat to public health. The President of the Board, Raymond Yans said: "In recent years, there has been an unprecedented surge in the abuse of new psychoactive substances. In Europe alone almost one new substance is appearing every week. Previously, between 2000 and 2005 there were an average of five notifications of new substances per year. Clear action must be taken now by governments to prevent and deal with the abuse of these so-called 'legal highs' which are already a threat to public health and pose a significant challenge to public health systems."

Abuse of prescription drugs: serious health and social threat in many countries

The abuse of prescription drugs has continued to spread in all regions of the world and has increased substantially in recent years, representing a serious health and social challenge, according to the INCB Report. The President of the Board, Raymond Yans said: "Of particular concern is the unabated increase in the already high levels of consumption and abuse of drugs used for the treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), in a number of countries."

The abuse of prescription drugs by injection, increasing the risk of HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C infection, is apparent in many countries, particularly in South Asia. Another major issue, the abuse of tranquilizers and sedatives, is also seen in other regions and countries. Yans warns: "More than six per cent of secondary school students have already abused tranquilizers in some countries, highlighting another alarming trend of drug abuse." INCB recommends various possible solutions to tackle these issues, including education of health professionals, tighter controls on storage and distribution, as well as raising public awareness about the health risks.

International drug control conventions have to be upheld to prevent drug-related suffering

The INCB Annual Report also draws attention to the shared responsibility of the international community to address drug control. The President of INCB, Raymond Yans said: "The drug problem is a truly global problem that necessitates a global solution. We all have a shared responsibility to address it – be it at the international, national, community or even at the personal level – and we have to move forward to prevent and reduce the suffering caused by inadequate availability of controlled medicines and by drug abuse, and the negative impacts associated with the illicit drug market."

The global nature of the drug problem was the driving force in the creation and adoption of the three international drug control conventions that today form the basis of the international drug control system. In its Annual Report INCB warns against initiatives that aim to broaden the use of internationally controlled substances beyond scientific and medical purposes. The President of the INCB, Raymond Yans said: "Such initiatives not only violate the letter of the conventions they also undermine the humanitarian aims of the drug control system and are a threat to public health and

well-being. Proponents of such ideas have argued that their initiatives would solve problems associated with illicit drug markets. This will not work. The drug control treaties are the best available tools for addressing the world drug problem, and for protecting humanity from the suffering caused by drug abuse, and the impacts, such as drug-related crime and violence, of trafficking and illicit cultivation and production of drugs.”

International community must be proactive to counter diversion and trafficking of precursors

Also launched today was the INCB annual report on precursors used in the illicit manufacture of drugs. The report describes how chemical trafficking organizations are circumventing international precursor controls by using new or specially designed non-scheduled substances, or by moving illicit manufacturing operations to regions with weaker controls. Well-functioning controls are therefore essential to monitor trade and prevent the diversion of precursor chemicals. Tools to assist governments in precursor control include the INCB Pre-Export Notification System (PEN-Online) and the new Precursors Incident Communication System (PICS), introduced in March 2012, through which competent authorities from across the globe can securely share valuable intelligence on chemical trafficking in real-time and more quickly initiate bilateral investigations. These tools, complemented by other international initiatives makes it possible for the governments to substantially enhance their precursor control efforts.

Regional Highlights

The total area of illicit coca bush cultivation in **South America** in 2011 has slightly decreased compared to the previous year. The large seizures of cannabis in South America are, however, still a source of concern, as they might be a sign of a significant increase in the magnitude of cannabis production in the region. **Central America and the Caribbean** continue to be used as a major transit area for cocaine trafficked from South America to the North American market, and cocaine trafficking through the Caribbean sub-region is increasing, after a decline in recent years. The destabilizing effects of drug trafficking on regional security have increased and the region has been affected by links between drug trafficking and increased levels of drug-related violence. This continues to constitute a major threat to public security in Mexico as well. According to the Government of Mexico, over 60,000 people have been killed as a result of drug-related violence since 2006.

Despite declining prevalence rates for some drugs, **North America** remains the biggest illicit drug market in the world, as well as the region reporting the highest drug-related mortality rate. Approximately one in every 20 deaths among people aged from 15 to 64 in North America is related to drug abuse. The abuse of illicit drugs in **Europe** has stabilized in recent years, although at a high level. However, new psychoactive substances remain a major challenge in West and Central Europe. The number of Internet sites selling psychoactive products destined for the countries of the European Union more than quadrupled in two years, with 690 such websites in January 2012.

While cannabis remains the most widely cultivated, trafficked and abused drug in **Africa**, amphetamine-type stimulants are seen as a new threat in the region. There has also been an increase in levels of cocaine abuse in West Africa as in recent years the region has emerged as a transit area for narcotics, especially cocaine, from South America to the European market.

East and **South-East Asia** continues to have the second largest total area of illicit opium poppy cultivation in the world, representing one-fifth of the global total. South-East Asia is also an illicit manufacturing hub for amphetamine-type stimulants with almost half the global seizures of methamphetamine in 2010 made in South-East Asia, and further increases were reported throughout the region in 2011. Just as in the previous years, **West Asia** still has the greatest share of global illicit opium poppy cultivation and illicit opiate production, primarily in Afghanistan. The uncertain security situation and political instability across West Asia provides fertile ground for illicit activities that profit both regional and international criminal networks, resulting in increasing levels of illicit trafficking in drugs and money-laundering. Demand for illicit stimulants, such as cocaine and methamphetamine, appears to be increasing in parts of West Asia, where cocaine seizures increased more than 20 times between 2001 and 2010. The levels of abuse and illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants in **Oceania** remain among the highest in the world.

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