

For information only – not an official document

**EMBARGO: 21 February 2001
00:01 hours GMT**

UNIS/NAR/711

14 February 2001

Background release

TREATING SOCIAL PROBLEMS WITH DRUGS BECOMING ACCEPTABLE HABIT WARNS INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL BOARD IN ANNUAL REPORT

VIENNA, 14 February (UN Information Service) -- The growing consumption of psychotropic substances is the main topic for this year's annual Report of the Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). The UN body is warning that the widespread overuse of such drugs is becoming a socially acceptable habit in especially the developed countries as controlled substances are readily used and prescribed to treat suffering from either psychological or social problems.

In the Report, to be released on 21 February, the Board points to loose regulation, unreliable estimates and information as regards medical needs, aggressive marketing techniques, improper or even unethical prescription practices as the main reasons for the oversupply of such controlled substances as benzodiazepines and various amphetamine type stimulants. Easy availability leads to overconsumption of such substances either in the form of drug abuse or by fueling a culture of drug taking to deal with a variety of non-medical problems.

The under-consumption of narcotic drugs for the relief of pain and suffering in a number of – especially developing – countries was highlighted in last year's Report. By focussing this year on the excessive consumption of drugs in particularly developed countries INCB aimed at completing the picture of a world situation characterized by undersupply of narcotic drugs for medical purposes in one part of the world and excessive consumption of controlled substances in the other part.

The treatment of insomnia, anxiety, obesity and child hyperactivity as well as various kinds of pain are listed among the most common problems to be treated by prescribing psychotropic substances. The Board is especially concerned that preference is given to quick solutions without looking at the long term effects as prolonged, excessive consumption of such drugs could result in dependency and other physical and mental suffering.

The Board, an independent and quasi-judicial control organ for the implementation of the United Nations drug conventions, urges government authorities, health-care professionals, pharmaceutical companies and the consumers themselves to adopt a more responsible and ethical behavior and adhere to a more rational prescription culture.

On-line Trafficking

The Internet, as another source of easy availability of controlled substances, also receives highlighted attention in this year's Report. While the Board acknowledges the advantages of the Web, as on-line shopping makes possible the procurement of vital medicines in remote geographical locations, it also points out that the Internet has become a growing source of on-line drug trafficking.

In previous years the Board drew attention to the role of the Internet in providing easy access to information on drug production and drug taking. In this year's Report the major concern is that on-line drugstores and pharmacies illegally provide prescription drugs, including internationally controlled substances, to clients around the world without adhering to the required prescription practices.

The INCB calls on all governments to take specific legal action to prevent the misuse of the Internet on a national level as the first step. But it also points out that due to the worldwide nature of the Web, national measures in themselves only have limited effect if not supplemented by concerted international action.

Chemical Control

The control of key chemicals (precursors) used in the illegal manufacture of narcotic drugs, especially heroin and cocaine, continues to be an area of international cooperation yielding positive results. The success story of last year's Report, "Operation Purple" – an intensive international tracking programme focusing on *potassium permanganate*, a key chemical for the illicit production of cocaine – has entered into its second phase.

This year the INCB highlights the launch of a new international venture – "Operation Topaz" – a programme, modeling "Operation Purple", aimed at preventing the diversion into illicit channels of *acetic anhydride*, a key chemical used in the clandestine manufacture of heroin. Norephedrine, a chemical often used in the illicit manufacture of amphetamine is also on the target-list of the Board as this substance was placed under international control last year.

Quiet Diplomacy

The INCB also reports on the missions and visits it has undertaken to 18 countries in the past year to obtain first-hand and on-site information about the national drug control situation of the country. Following countries were visited: Albania, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, El Salvador, Honduras, Ireland, Lebanon, Paraguay, Philippines, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Senegal, Spain, Switzerland, United Republic of Tanzania and Uruguay. Through the practice of "quiet diplomacy", working with the respective governments, the Board identifies weaknesses and best practices in national and international drug control and adopts a set of observations and recommendations.

Regional highlights

- In most countries in Africa abuse of drugs and especially psychotropic substances appears to be on the rise, especially the number of women and children abusing drugs is increasing. Civil war, poverty, HIV/AIDS, crime and corruption are very much linked to Africa's drug control problems. Inadequate systems of licensing and weak inspection mechanisms fuel the growing abuse in psychotropic substances.
- Cannabis continues to be the drug most commonly abused in Canada, Mexico and the United States. In Canada, cannabis growers and traffickers often receive too lenient court sentences reducing the impact of efforts by law enforcement authorities. In the United States, a sharp increase in prescriptions of psychoactive drugs for children under the age of six is noted.
- Throughout the region of South America national legislation appears to be comprehensive and policies are well formulated. However, organizational, political and financial impediments hamper their implementation.
- In Iran and Pakistan opium and heroin addiction rates are among the highest in the world.
- In some countries in East and South-East Asia, seizures and the number of abusers of MDMA (Ecstasy) have increased markedly.

- Europe continues to be a major source of illicitly manufactured amphetamines and amphetamine-type stimulants, especially MDMA (Ecstasy) not only for the region but also throughout the entire world.
- Indoor cultivation of cannabis remains a significant problem in Western Europe. Cocaine abuse has increased in that sub region. In Eastern Europe heroin abuse is of growing concern.
- In Australia heroin abuse continues to be prevalent: heroin related death tolls and arrests are on the rise. In New Zealand the demand for MDMA (Ecstasy) is rising, LSD continues to be a major problem.

For further information please contact:

INCB

Tel: 00-43-1-26060-4163

Web address: www.incb.org

Or

UNIS

Tel: 00-43-1-26060-3329

Web address: www.unis.unvienna.org

**(The Report and Press Kit will be available
as of 21 February 00.01GMT)**