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## THE INTERNATIONAL DRUG CONTROL TREATIES DO NOT MANDATE A “WAR ON DRUGS”, SAYS INCB REPORT

In the run-up to the special session of the General Assembly on the world drug problem to be held in April 2016, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), in its 2015 Annual Report:

- Recalls that the ultimate goal of the drug control treaties is to ensure the health and welfare of mankind
- Cites a balanced and humane approach as key to meeting health and welfare aims
- Encourages Governments to devise practical and realistic measures to protect the public from the harms posed by the increasingly large number of new psychoactive substances
- Calls on Governments to ensure health-care providers do not overprescribe sedatives, particularly among elderly people
- Calls for a realistic assessment of the state of the international precursor control system

Just weeks ahead of the 2016 special session of the General Assembly, the Vienna-based INCB says, in its Annual Report for 2015, that the international drug control treaties do not mandate a “war on drugs”.

At a time of debate on drug policy, INCB stresses in its Report that ensuring the availability of drugs for medical purposes—as stipulated by the international drug control treaties—and reducing the illicit supply of drugs needs to be carefully balanced.

INCB President Werner Sipp said: “It is not the case that the world must choose between ‘militarized’ drug law enforcement on one hand and the legalization of non-medical use of drugs on the other; but rather to put health and welfare at the centre of a balanced drug policy.”

The 2016 special session, a meeting of United Nations Member States to review the achievements of and challenges to the international drug control system, will take place from 19 to 21 April 2016 at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

### New psychoactive substances: a growing threat

New psychoactive substances have continued to emerge in increasingly high numbers over the past year. By October 2015, Member States had reported 602 new substances. This represents a 55 per cent increase from the previous year, when 388 new substances were reported.

Keeping up with this pace represents a key challenge for the international drug control system, which will need to come up with more flexible and workable approaches to tackle the threat of new psychoactive substances.



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In 2015, 10 new psychoactive substances were placed under international control by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, and national control of such substances was expanded in a number of countries, including China and India.

INCB launched in 2015 the Project ION Incident Communication System (IONICS) to allow for real-time communication among Governments about incidents involving new psychoactive substances. So far, more than 170 users from 60 countries have used the system, communicating over 500 incidents—such as suspicious shipments, trafficking, manufacture or production of new psychoactive substances—within as little as two days of their occurrence.

## Overprescribing of insomnia drugs to older people

In its Report, the Board notes with concern the risks of the unwarranted prescribing and overuse of benzodiazepines, a class of drugs used to treat insomnia and anxiety, by older people. This could be dangerous, as older patients often have more health complaints for which they receive more than one medication at a time. Insomnia seems common among this category of patients, making them an attractive target group for manufacturers of sleeping pills.

This is despite studies that have shown there is a risk of drug dependence as a result of unnecessary use of these substances. What is more, patients over the age of 65 using benzodiazepines have been shown to have a 50 per cent higher chance of developing dementia within 15 years, compared with patients who have never used them.

The Board calls on Governments to ensure that health-care providers follow sound medical practice when prescribing benzodiazepines. Health-care staff, especially in nursing homes, but also family members and caregivers of elderly people, need to be made aware of the risks of overusing benzodiazepines.

## Afghanistan: fewer opium-free provinces, but overall illicit opium cultivation decreased

For the first time in six years, the estimated area under illicit cultivation of opium poppy in Afghanistan has decreased. Nevertheless, levels of illicit opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan continue to be high in absolute terms, even though 40 per cent more opium poppy was eradicated in 2015. The Report notes the fundamental role played by alternative development initiatives in curbing opium poppy cultivation and providing farmers with legitimate alternatives for supporting themselves and their families.



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## Availability of pain relief medications

As stated in the Board's special Report on Availability of Internationally Controlled Drugs, people in many low- and middle-income countries still have inadequate access to pain relief medications (opioid analgesic medicines), even though the use of such medications has more than doubled globally since the beginning of this century. Meanwhile, people in Europe and North America use almost 95 per cent of all pain relief medication consumed globally. Governments reported to INCB that the problem is not insufficient global supply, but rather a lack of training and a fear of addiction.

## Precursors Report

Recent seizure statistics show that the diversion of precursor chemicals into illicit manufacturing channels is increasingly occurring within domestic trade rather than international trade. *alpha*-Phenylacetoacetonitrile (APAAN), which had been widely used to produce amphetamine and methamphetamine, was placed under international control in 2014. As a result, APAAN seems to have lost its prominence, as the number of seizures in 2015 decreased and confiscations occurred less frequently at international borders, suggesting that international controls are having the desired effect.

In its Precursors Report, the Board highlights the need for a realistic assessment of the state of the international precursor control system in the run-up to the special session of the General Assembly. According to INCB, the international precursor control system has been increasingly successful in monitoring legitimate trade in a defined set of precursor chemicals to prevent them from being diverted into illicit channels. However, drugs of abuse are still being manufactured using constantly emerging new chemicals which are not under international control.

The Board is convinced it is time to take new paths. This could include voluntary public-private partnerships between Government and industry and new legal instruments for law enforcement when there is evidence that a substance is intended for use in the illicit manufacture of drugs.