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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



The environment, in its broadest sense, has a major influence on the nature of demand for drugs. Over the last years, we have witnessed how drug abuse is increasingly regarded as being acceptable or even glamorous. The fashion industry coined the term "heroin chic" and certain pop stars have made statements to the effect that the recreational use of drugs is a normal and acceptable part of a person's lifestyle and even include such messages in the lyrics of their music.

Powerful pressure groups run political campaigns aimed at legalizing controlled drugs. All these developments, to name but a few, have created an environment which is tolerant of or even favourable to drug abuse and undermines actions to address the problem.

This year's report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) focuses on the issue of demand reduction and prevention within an environment that has become tolerant of drug abuse. It calls on governments to abide by their legal and moral obligation and to counteract the pro-drug messages of the youth culture to which young people are increasingly exposed.

The international drug control treaties require parties to take action against drug abuse and, under the treaties, the INCB is mandated to determine whether Governments are complying with the provisions of those treaties. The Board's Annual Reports provide a comprehensive analysis of the global drug control situation, draw the attention of Governments to gaps and weaknesses in treaty compliance and make suggestions for improvements. Demand reduction was the core issue in the 1993 Annual Report when Governments were asked to pay far more attention to this issue.

The international community acknowledged the importance of this topic by, inter alia, drafting an international declaration on the guiding principles on drug demand reduction for adoption at the Special Session of the General Assembly on international drug control, which will be held in June 1998. It is important to bear in mind, however, that drug abuse is driven by both supply and demand and that both factors must be addressed simultaneously and in a concerted fashion in order to achieve success in drug control.

Determined and concerted action on the part of the Governments can lead to measurable results and the Board is satisfied to note some of the positive developments in its 1997 report. These include:

-- Governments have become more active in drug control; many legislative improvements have been made; there is more and closer regional and international cooperation; and law enforcement is becoming more efficient in intercepting trafficking in controlled drugs, precursor substances and other chemicals.

-- In India increasing regulatory and law enforcement action has reduced the large-scale smuggling of methaqualone from India into various African countries. There has been a sharp decrease in methaqualone seizures in India, and seizures in African countries of methaqualone of Indian origin have become rare.

-- In Nigeria, tightened control over psychotropic substances has led to substantial seizures of diverted drugs thus preventing millions of street doses from reaching their illicit markets. There are also indications that, due to strengthened controls, seaports and airports in Nigeria are now used less frequently by traffickers for the trans-shipment of cocaine and heroin than in the past.

-- Japan and the Republic of Korea have managed to keep drug abuse and trafficking at a relatively low level.

-- The prevalence of heroin abuse is stagnant -- and even declining -- in several parts of the world. But more significant still is the increasing number of countries which have introduced demand reduction strategies including education, treatment and rehabilitation.

-- The resolute stance of the governments of some countries in Europe against the decriminalization of controlled drugs, in the face of very liberal attitudes towards drugs and advocacy for legalization.

However, not all trends are positive. The Board is troubled that those who support the legalization of non-medical use of drugs are gaining strength and influencing political decision makers. Efforts to reduce drug abuse worldwide will be less effective if demand reduction programmes are undermined by advocacy for the legalization of drugs. The Board calls on all Governments to strictly conform to the spirit of the international drug treaties on which they have already agreed.

The Board also remains concerned about the proliferation of schemes permitting the administration of heroin to opiate addicts and particularly about the ramifications of this, worldwide, on drug abuse prevention and supply reduction.

While developments in 1997 have shown that we can be successful, our work is far from completed, not least in counteracting the thrust of an environment which is tolerant of and permissive towards drug taking. We would like to take this opportunity to invite community leaders, politicians, educators and particularly the media, which has an important role to play in public education, to lend their support to their Governments in tackling the menace of drug abuse and trafficking as well as the devastating health and social problems that are associated with it.

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