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Message from the President



At the turn of this century, we should look back and ask ourselves how successfully we have responded to the challenges inherited from the last century and prepare ourselves for those to be faced in the next. During this century, international drug control has been a

fairly successful endeavour. The unrestricted availability of opium and other drugs at the end of the last century led to unprecedented levels of drug use; for example, over 25 per cent of the adult male population of China smoked opium and opium dens were commonplace in Europe. Confronted by the devastating health and social consequences resulting from the unrestricted availability of drugs, it became evident that national and domestic legislation in isolation were insufficient and that international collaboration and cooperation were essential.

In 1909, the first international conference on drugs was held in Shanghai, China. The adoption of the International Opium Convention in 1912 laid foundations for the modern international drug control system based on international consensus. Since then, it has been extended to cover other narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as well as their chemical precursors, which are used in illicit drug manufacture. The principle of all international drug control treaties is to limit internationally controlled substances to legitimate use -- in the case of drugs, to medical and scientific purposes. The Board monitors Governments' actions to ensure that the drug Conventions are implemented in letter and

in spirit.

Today, licit narcotic drugs are effectively controlled almost everywhere in the world, and this control covers all phases -- from production, manufacture, trade and distribution to consumption. There is virtually no diversion of licit manufactured narcotic drugs into illicit traffic, even though the number and quantity of drugs under the international narcotics control regimes are substantial. The control of psychotropic substances is achieving similar results. Had it not been for these controls, the addiction epidemics seen in some countries in the first few decades of the 20th century would have continued and similar situations would have developed in many other countries.

Notwithstanding the considerable and obvious achievements of international drug control, many challenges remain. One of them is ensuring the availability of drugs for appropriate medical purposes. Morphine, codeine and other opioids, for example, which are essential for the alleviation of pain, are not always accessible to those who need them. On the other hand, certain psychotropic substances appear to be over-prescribed in many countries.

Such over-prescription goes hand in hand with societal attitudes encouraging pharmaceutical solutions for all social and behavioral problems, however minor. If young people are told to take prescription drugs to respond to emotional stress, to improve their school performance and to achieve conformity with the generally desired body image, how can they be expected to refrain from abusing drugs? In this environment, influencing the attitudes of young people so that they refrain from drug abuse is a difficult challenge. More efforts must be made worldwide to create youth cultures rejecting the use

of controlled substances except for well-established medical purposes.

The increasingly politicized battle over cannabis must end, since it has had a negative effect on attitudes towards drug abuse, particularly from young people. The Board has noted with regret how possible medical uses of cannabis have been used to justify the legalization of all cannabis use. The Board welcomes and encourages serious, scientific research on the alleged medical properties of cannabis as well as the wide dissemination of such work, but warns against misusing these research efforts for "blanket" legalization purposes. Should the medical usefulness of cannabis be established, it will be a drug no different from most narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. Cannabis, prescribed for medical purposes, would also be subject to licensing and other control measures under the international drug control treaties.

In June 1998, I addressed the Special Session of the General Assembly on the World Drug Problem and witnessed how leaders of governments around the world reaffirmed their political will to strengthen measures against drug abuse and illicit trafficking. The Political Declaration and Action Plans emanating from that event will be globally and universally applied, since they are founded on commitment at the highest level. Follow-up to this session will now be crucial. In the Political Declaration, governments pledged that "commitments must be met by action and resources needed to ensure real and measurable results". This pledge must now be translated into

action and tangible results. This is the opportunity for governments to show that they are serious about national and international commitments by implementing the action plans fully and conscientiously. The Board will monitor these developments, within the mandate entrusted to it under the international drug control treaties.

Adopting the Declaration on the Guiding Principles of Demand Reduction is an important step forward. The Declaration incorporates many of the Board's views on this issue, as highlighted in its annual report for 1993 and again in its annual report for 1997. If a substantial change in attitudes towards drug abuse leads to a cultural change in societies towards drug use, drug demand for non-medical purposes can be reduced considerably.

The world community has come a long way during this century and, in recent years, there has been consensus for a balanced approach towards all aspects of drug abuse and related problems. Now we need to move towards the next millennium with resolute determination to reinforce the international consensus. To achieve this, the universal ratification and implementation of as well as compliance with the drug Conventions will be essential. We celebrate those who laid the foundation for our modern approaches and hope the world community of today will be judged in the same light in the future.

Hamid GHODSE