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INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL BOARD ISSUES ANNUAL REPORT ON WORLDWIDE DRUG SITUATION

This year's International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) annual report, released on 23 February 2000, highlights the need for a coordinated effort to ensure adequate licit supply of narcotic drugs for medical purposes, especially in developing countries. In a world of growing illicit drug taking, coupled with the complacent attitudes of some authorities, it is of enormous concern to the Vienna-based INCB that people for whom drugs would be of great benefit such as those experiencing pain in the later stages of cancer, have no access to well established pain relievers such as morphine and other opiates.

In contrast to this lack of pain relieving medicines in developing countries is the problem of overmedication in the developed world. The high consumption of amphetamines and other nervous system stimulants in the Americas and the excessive reliance on benzodiazepine-type hypnotics and stimulants in Europe is also a major concern for the INCB.

Lack of regulation, insufficient information and means to assess reliable estimates of the actual needs of countries on the one hand, combined with aggressive marketing strategies on the part of pharmaceutical companies and improper medical practices on the other hand, account, according to the Board, for a situation of simultaneous undersupply of much needed narcotic drugs in developing countries and an overuse of psychotropic substances in developed countries.

The Board urges Governments to adopt a flexible, more humanitarian approach that relies on a functioning drug-supply management system that conforms with existing international rules and procedures but at the same time is capable of ensuring the availability of controlled drugs for medical purposes especially for developing countries and in special situations such as humanitarian emergencies. (see Release No. 3 for more information)

Other issues discussed by Board's annual report include the use of government-sanctioned drug injection rooms -- so called "shooting galleries" -- by addicts in some developed countries. Such establishments are not in accordance with the drug control conventions and the Board regards them as places where breaking the law goes unpunished. As an alternative the Board calls for Governments to set up treatment centres where addicts can receive properly supervised medical treatment and prescribed medication. (see Release No.5 for more information)

The increasing abuse of cannabis among the young is an especially alarming development, states the report. Growing numbers of young abusers and the easy availability of highly potent strains of the drug, together with the lenient attitudes of some Governments, makes the fight against cannabis even more important. The Board is keen to correct the image of cannabis as a "harmless" drug and reiterates its call for scientific, not anecdotal, evidence of its medical benefits. If cannabis were proven to be of medical usefulness, it would be treated in the same way as other drugs, such as morphine, with its medical use strictly supervised by the medical authorities. (see Release No. 7 for more information)

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The tracking of so-called "precursors", chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of drugs, continues to be a major aim of the Board. Potassium permanganate, one of the key chemicals used in the clandestine manufacture of cocaine, has been successfully tracked and intercepted in a new international cooperative venture, known as "Operation Purple". The Board, with the participating Governments and international authorities, will extend the operation and will also initiate similar projects to track down other precursors, such as acetic anhydride which is used in the illicit manufacture of heroin. (see Release No. 6 for more information)

REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

(see Chapter III of INCB Annual Report for 1999)

- ▲ drug trafficking and abuse of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances in Africa are strongly influenced by the various ongoing civil conflicts and post-conflict situations, triggering growing abuse of narcotic drugs especially among children and youth;
- ▲ the liberal approach of some Governments in Central America and the Caribbean to offshore banking and gambling industries is of great concern for the Board as it creates favourable conditions for money-laundering;
- ▲ the impressive achievements in reducing illicit coca bush cultivation in Bolivia and Peru in the past two years seem to have been offset by the increased production of coca leaf in Colombia;
- ▲ abuse of and trafficking in amphetamine-type stimulants is spreading quickly across East and South-East Asia, with China being a major source of clandestinely manufactured amphetamine-type stimulants;
- ▲ the commitment of the Taliban in Afghanistan to ban opium poppy cultivation and heroin manufacture remains questionable, as it continues to collect taxes on harvested opium poppy crop and manufactured heroin. Approximately 75 per cent of the world production of opium takes place in Afghanistan with cultivation spreading to new areas. In 1999 production reached a record level of about 4,600 tons;
- ▲ there is a rapid spread of illicit crop cultivation and trafficking in and abuse of drugs, especially heroin, in central Asia and the Caucasus with an increase in criminal activities;
- ▲ the increasing indoor cultivation of cannabis in Western Europe and intensified cultivation in southern Europe, mainly Albania, has increased the availability of cannabis considerably and this, coupled with a tolerant attitude towards cannabis, has led to increasing abuse;
- ▲ in Australia, the average age of first-time abuse of heroin has fallen below 18 years, in some areas the average age of first time abuse of heroin by injection is in the mid-teens.

NOTE:

Background information on the international drug control treaties, the work of the INCB and drugs of abuse can be found on the INCB website: www.incb.org

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