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INCB in Action: On-site Monitoring

The practice of “quiet diplomacy” best characterizes the watchdog activity of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) as it monitors the implementation of the international drug control treaties and seeks to identify weaknesses, as well as, best practices in national and international drug control.

In its just released Annual Report the Board lists 18 countries where it has undertaken missions to obtain first-hand and on-site information on the national drug control situation (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).

The Board, an independent and quasi-judicial control body of 13 international experts, works behind the scenes to ensure that adequate supplies of controlled drugs are available for medical and scientific purposes, that leaks from licit sources to illicit traffic do not occur and that governments take actions against illicit traffic and abuse of drugs. It maintains a constant dialogue with all governments in the world, mainly through the exchange of correspondence. The Board also visits 15 to 20 countries every year and gives a brief account of those on-site visits in its annual reports.

Country missions of the Board go virtually unnoticed by the media, since it is the Board's policy, in line with the spirit of the international drug control treaties, to discuss all issues on a confidential basis with the respective governments. The only exception to this rule occurs when governments choose, for their own internal reasons, to actively publicize the Board's mission. Details of the discussions and the outcomes of the mission, however, continue to be kept confidential by the Board. During its sessions, the Board decides whether the attention of the general public has to be drawn to a particular issue, otherwise the Board's report only contains general references to the missions.

The Board considers in detail the findings of its country missions at its sessions, held behind closed doors, in May or November of each year and adopts a set of observations and recommendations which is then transmitted to the government concerned. Recommendations are aimed at enhancing the measures against drug trafficking and drug abuse.

The aim of the missions varies according to the national situation of the country. Visits are often undertaken to countries that have not yet acceded to one or more of the international drug control treaties. In other cases, new policy developments may have occurred in the country which warrant closer examination. The Board also receives invitations from governments when they wish to assess whether the measures they have taken meet the requirements of the international Conventions or to discuss particular problems of drug control they are facing in their countries.

Missions are usually made up of a team of two to three members of the Board and its secretariat, last several working days and involve drug policy discussions with government ministers and other high-level officials. The missions are organized by the host governments with the view to give the Board the possibility to discuss national drug control legislation, drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking and review the coordination of drug control activities at national and international levels, the extent of the drug abuse problem in the country, and the illicit cultivation and trafficking of drugs and countermeasures taken by the government. Missions generally also include an “operational” or on-site element. This may entail the visit to a pharmaceutical manufacturer, a hospital pharmacy or a drug abuse treatment centre.

As a result of the “quiet diplomacy” practiced by the Board, several countries have reviewed their legislation to give effect to the provisions of the international drug control treaties, have established appropriate national structures for action against drug abuse and illicit trafficking and reinforced their drug control activities.

The Board reviews the implementation of its recommendations made pursuant to its missions at regular intervals, in cooperation with the government concerned.