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GLOBALIZATION AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES CREATE CHALLENGES TO DRUG LAW ENFORCEMENT

Young people face dangers from drug dealers in cyberspace warns International Narcotics Control Board

Governments must take action to limit the dangers that globalization and new technologies pose in fighting drugs, urges the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its Annual Report published today (27 February 2002).

The report shows that drugs are being sold over the Internet, private chat rooms are being used by drug dealers and online pharmacies are selling prescription-only drugs over the web. These are just some of the challenges posed by new technologies and globalization highlighted by the Board in its Annual Report.

The President of INCB, Professor Hamid Ghodse, said: "For the Internet there is a real danger that its benefits might be seriously undermined by criminals for illicit gain. Governments must address the challenges that new technologies pose to drug law enforcement in an era of increasing globalization."

INCB is particularly concerned that young people are at risk from drug dealers in cyberspace using the Internet. The Board is calling on Governments to raise public awareness, especially among parents and teachers, about the fact that young people using the Internet may be exposed to messages promoting drug abuse.

The consequences of these developments are alarming, states the Board. Young people may be drawn into drug-related crime by misinformation, propaganda or brainwashing on the part of unseen individuals whose aim is to profit from a broader drug-abusing population. When the approach is 'virtual', the warning signals that might deter a young person in the real world are minimized.

Internet drug sales booming

- Reports from the Czech Republic indicate that illicit drug sales and purchases are agreed online at Internet cafes or on cellular telephones.
- Companies in the Netherlands have been using the Internet to sell cannabis seeds and derivatives throughout the world.
- Authorities in the United Kingdom have identified a large number of web sites worldwide offering to sell illicit drugs - ranging from cannabis through to heroin, ecstasy and cocaine.

Drug recipes freely available

In the United States of America, there has been a rapid increase in seizures of laboratories used for the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine - because drug recipes once closely-guarded secrets, are now widely available to anyone with Internet access.

The Board also outlines how drug traffickers are using new technologies to improve delivery and distribution of drugs and to protect themselves from detection or investigation. For example, drug trafficking groups conceal information about the shipment of illicit drug consignments through encrypted messages or launder drug money by electronic transfer.

Detection difficult with encryption

In 1995, a drug trafficking group in the Netherlands used encryption software to encrypt their communications and to create a secure database of unmarked police and intelligence vehicles.

Cybercrime, the Board warns, is easy to commit, requires few resources and is extremely difficult to detect. Better international cooperation is needed to investigate and prosecute these crimes.

Globalization, too, has provided new opportunities for drug-related crime. Growth in trade and financial activity has provided criminals with greater cover to conceal illicit transfers of goods such as internationally controlled drugs and precursor chemicals, and for disguising their proceeds from them.

Internet banking used for money laundering

The increase in Internet banking has been exploited by drug traffickers. In the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, for example, authorities report that it has become more difficult to detect the laundering of drug-related funds with the advance of electronic commerce.

Virtual casinos are also springing up on the Internet - there may be more than 2,000 already. The Board is concerned that they will be used for money-laundering and will flourish in such an unregulated environment.

Internet chat rooms used by drug traffickers

A drug investigation carried out jointly by the Colombian and United States authorities found that the traffickers had kept in touch through setting up and using Internet chat rooms protected by firewalls to make them impenetrable.

The Board is encouraged that certain progress has been achieved nationally and internationally to fight high technology crime. However, the Board warns that unless further action is taken, organized criminal gangs will continue to exploit the technological advances and drug-related transnational crimes will increase. The Board is particularly concerned that countries without adequate legislation against crimes involving new technologies may become sanctuaries.

Government take action to fight high tech crime

The national police forces of several countries including Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States have established dedicated anti-cybercrime units. The Australian Federal Police have developed an online investigation management system. In Spain the central investigation unit on information technology crimes and the department for high technology crimes of the Ministry of the Interior are actively involved in preventing the use of the Internet for illicit advertisement of controlled substances.

More has to be done nationally and internationally, urges the Board. Internationally there may be a need to consider the development of a United Nations Convention on Cybercrime, taking into account regional advances in this field such as the Convention on Cybercrime of the Council of Europe. At the national level, appropriate laws should be introduced to deal with drug-related cybercrimes. The Board recommends that these measures be harmonized to prevent the growth of data havens and that assistance be provided to developing countries at risk of such exploitation.