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LEGALIZING CANNABIS WOULD BE A "HISTORICAL MISTAKE", BOARD SAYS IN ITS ANNUAL REPORT

Treating cannabis like alcohol and tobacco would be a 'historical mistake', the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) states in its Annual Report published today (27 February 2002) in Vienna. While the damage to health caused by alcohol and tobacco is well-known, it would be imprudent to add to the burden on national health care systems with another harmful substance like cannabis. The Board calls on all Governments and the relevant international bodies to review the situation and find ways to deal with developments on cannabis within the framework of international law.

The Board is increasingly concerned that some States which are signatories to the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, are circumventing the mandated controls of cannabis through legal manoeuvres. Cannabis which is the most widely and frequently abused illicit drug in the world, is controlled under the 1961 Convention which has been ratified by 175 States. Most States are implementing the controls required under the Convention but some States are undermining the principle of the international drug control treaties which clearly state that the use of drugs should be limited to medical and scientific purposes only.

Some Western European Governments have introduced legislation involving the decriminalization of cannabis cultivation or possession for personal use. Four countries in the European Union (Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain) do not penalize the possession for personal use nor is it a criminal offence. The Board reaffirms its view that the 'coffee shops' in the Netherlands which sell cannabis products for non-medical use, contravene the 1961 Convention. The Board views the draft legislation on cannabis in Switzerland as a move towards the legalization of the drug which would contravene the international drug control Conventions.

The Board is disturbed by the fact that while developing countries struggle to eradicate cannabis and fight illicit trafficking of the substance, certain developed countries have chosen to tolerate the cultivation, trade and abuse of cannabis on their territory. There is a growing gap between declared government policy and actual implementation of the treaties, which appears to be motivated by immediate domestic political priorities.

The Board repeats its invitation to any Government if it believes there is scientific evidence that the control of cannabis under the 1961 Convention is not justified, to submit its evidence to the World Health Organization (WHO). Under the Convention, WHO is mandated to determine which substances are liable to abuse and should be under international control. Article 3 of the Convention has a specific mechanism for de-scheduling or rescheduling narcotic drugs and to ignore this procedure is to ignore established international law.

The Board believes that all efforts to control the world drug problem will fail unless there is universal commitment and true implementation of the provisions of the treaties.

The Board urges the international community to consider carefully the impact of amending cannabis controls on the international drug control system. The Board believes the likely increase in the abuse of cannabis and the harm to individuals and the community outweighs any possible benefits from relaxed controls on cannabis.

The Board also notes that, in line with its recommendations in earlier reports, a number of countries are evaluating the potential medical usefulness of cannabis. If the results of scientific research objectively show that cannabis is medically useful, it would still remain a substance to be strictly controlled, but which could be used for medical purposes, as is currently the case with other narcotic drugs.