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REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

Africa

While cannabis remains a major issue of concern throughout Africa, trafficking in and abuse of cocaine, heroin and amphetamine-type stimulants is on the rise in many countries in the region.

The practice of injecting drug use, which is spreading in a number of African countries, could exacerbate the already severe HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa.

The lack of adequate control measures in most African countries facilitates the abuse of psychotropic substances, diverted from licit distribution channels.

The limited institutional and technical capacity of African countries to deal with the drug issue in an effective and comprehensive manner has had a negative impact on national drug control strategies.

Most countries in Africa lack adequate legislative framework and the necessary administrative mechanisms for the control of precursor chemicals. Such a situation may lead to serious problems in the international monitoring of trade in such chemicals.

In many countries in Africa that are emerging from conflict and civil strife, drug abuse continues—in particular, among child soldiers.

Americas

The North American region is, collectively, the largest market in the world for illicit drugs. Large scale trafficking and illicit manufacture of drugs are also a grave concern, and the abuse or misuse of prescription drugs appears to be a growing phenomenon. At the same time, the countries of the region dedicate a large amount of resources for dealing with their drug problems, both within and beyond their individual countries.

The first national survey on drug abuse since 1994 was launched in Canada in December 2003. The survey represents the first step in ensuring that comprehensive data on current trends are available, as recommended by the Board.

As a result of law enforcement efforts, including joint operations involving the United States and other countries, eight major international drug trafficking organizations were dismantled during the past year and seven others were weakened.

Though recent official data shows that the rate of drug abuse among the general population of the United States has remained stable since 2002, there has been a significant decrease in the abuse of illicit drugs among secondary-school children, the first such decline in more than a decade. The perception of the risks involved in the abuse of drugs, in particular cannabis, among young persons also appears to have increased—a development that may be attributed in part to the effectiveness of media campaigns.

INCB is concerned about recent indications that drug trafficking organizations are beginning to change their methods in Mexico, perhaps targeting the country as an emerging market.

The region of Central America and the Caribbean continues to be affected by large-scale cocaine trafficking and abuse; serious drug abuse problems have emerged in countries in the region.

In Central America, many youth gangs have been involved in violent crime and drug trafficking. At a summit held in March 2004, the heads of government concerned agreed to cooperate in the fight against youth gangs.

Ninety per cent of the cocaine manufactured in South America—590 tons out of an estimated total of 655 tons in 2003—is trafficked by sea, mainly through the Caribbean.

Cocaine abuse appears to be increasing in Central America and the Caribbean.

Heroin abuse in Central America and the Caribbean is relatively low, but the situation is changing due to increasing levels of drug trafficking throughout the region.

Women account for an increasing proportion of drug abusers in Central America and the Caribbean.

Drug control in South America continues to be an issue of considerable political importance, not only to the region itself, but also to the rest of the world. The Governments of several countries in the region have made considerable headway in tackling drug trafficking networks, as evidenced by, among other things, the increased drug seizures.

Drug trafficking, and the money-laundering and corruption associated with it, continues to endanger stability in the South American region. As in the recent past, drug traffickers have attempted to intimidate public prosecutors, demonstrating once again the close links between drug trafficking and organized crime.

Open clashes between farmers who cultivate coca bush and the Government, which has made an effort to reduce such cultivation, continue in Bolivia; in Peru, the frequency and the level of violence of such clashes has increased.

Since coca bush cultivation is often found in poverty-stricken areas, the Board is convinced that measures to alleviate poverty are extremely important in order to achieve a continuous reduction in the production of coca leaf and other narcotic drugs in South America.

Asia

Illicit opium poppy production continued to decline in South-East Asia. In 2004, illicit opium poppy cultivation reduced significantly in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. The average yield of illicit opium production also went down. Thailand is no longer a major source of illicit opium and heroin.

The illicit manufacture of, trafficking in and abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants, especially methamphetamine, remains a major concern in East and South-East Asia.

In several countries in East and South-East Asia, (namely, Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam) the abuse of opiates appears to have shifted away from opium and towards heroin. Heroin is also the main drug of choice for injecting drug abusers, raising concern about the spread of HIV/AIDS in many countries in the region. Injecting drug abusers who share syringes continue to account for the largest percentage of new HIV/AIDS cases in China and Viet Nam. HIV infection associated with injecting drug abuse is also increasing as a result of a shift from opium abuse to heroin abuse in India and Nepal.

Asia accounts for over two-thirds of the world's amphetamine abusers, and East and South-East Asia accounts for approximately 95 per cent of the amphetamine abusers in Asia.

South Asia continues to experience increased drug availability and abuse because of its proximity to the major opiate production areas—the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle—widespread domestic cultivation of cannabis and increasing diversion of pharmaceutical products.

Opium production in Afghanistan and its impact on peace and security remains the central element of the drug situation in West Asia. In Afghanistan itself, illicit drug production and related activities reached a record level in 2004 and are threatening the stability of the country. Drug abuse has also risen in Afghanistan in recent years, where an increase has also been noted in injecting drug use among heroin abusers.

Opium poppy cultivation re-emerged in Pakistan in 2003 and continued in 2004.

In Central Asia, there is continued concern over trafficking in and abuse of Afghan opiates, as well as the illicit movement of acetic anhydride, a chemical used in the manufacture of heroin. It is estimated that one third of Afghanistan's opium crop in 2004 passed through countries in the region, in particular Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The large quantities of Afghan heroin transiting through Central Asia (towards the Russian Federation and other countries in Europe) is adding to the illicit drug problems in this sub-region.

In Central Asia, the number of HIV/AIDS-infected people continued to increase, fuelled by injecting drug abuse. While approximately 10 per cent of HIV/AIDS infections are caused by injecting drugs at the global level, this mode of transmission accounts for 60 to 90 per cent of new HIV/AIDS cases in Central Asia.

Countries on the Arabian peninsula are more frequently used as transit points for heroin and cannabis destined for Europe, while precursors are smuggled in the opposite direction. The abuse of opiates, especially heroin, is increasing, as is the already widespread abuse of synthetic drugs.

The drug situation in Iraq may deteriorate further because of the disintegration of the drug control structure in the country, given its geographical location and the current political and economic instability. The complex links between terrorism, organized crime, corruption and drug trafficking pose a serious threat, raising concerns that the overall situation may worsen.

Europe

Cannabis is the most widely abused illicit drug in Europe (and in all other regions). In Europe, an estimated 28.8 million people, or 5.3 per cent of the total population, abused cannabis during the last 12 months. Cannabis abuse continued to increase in 2003 and 2004 in Eastern Europe, where 3.6 per cent of the adult population, or about 8.4 million people, reportedly abused cannabis.

Cannabis abuse has shown an upward trend in almost all countries in Europe over the past decade. However, the public debate over cannabis use is dominated more by its alleged potential benefits than by the associated risks. The upward trend in cannabis use seems related to the efforts by some to promote the notion that cannabis use is not harmful.

In Europe, cocaine abuse has increased since 1998, with a tendency towards stabilization. In Eastern Europe, cocaine abuse is still at a level well below that of Western Europe. It is estimated that more than 200 tons of cocaine are smuggled into Europe every year, entering the region mainly via Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom.

After three successive years of bumper harvests of opium poppy in Afghanistan, heroin trafficking has regained some momentum in Europe. Whereas the abuse of heroin is stable or declining in most countries in Western Europe, it continues to increase in countries in Eastern Europe and in member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). According to official estimates, there are over one million heroin abusers in the Russian Federation; thus, that country has become the largest heroin market in Europe.

The northern and southern branches of the Balkan route continue to supply up to 80 per cent of the heroin distributed in Europe.

The use of contaminated injection equipment among drug users continues to fuel the spread of HIV/AIDS; the Baltic States and the CIS member States have the highest growth rate of HIV cases among the injecting drug abusers. About 80-90 per cent of new HIV cases in those countries are the result of injecting drug abuse.

While the levels of abuse in Western Europe appears to have stabilized, Eastern Europe is becoming increasingly important in terms of the manufacture, as well as the abuse potential, of amphetamines and MDMA (Ecstasy), which are rapidly becoming popular drugs of choice.

In many of the States that acceded to the European Union in 2004, controls over chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of drugs have been stricter than those required by European Commission regulations. The Board is concerned that the enlargement of the European Union may lead to a weakening of existing import or export controls throughout Europe.

Despite several requests to the Government of Albania, it has failed to provide the Board with any information regarding the implementation of its recommendations. The Board continues to be concerned over persistent reports about the serious drug control problems in the country, including lack of attention to widespread drug trafficking to other countries.

Oceania

In Australia, heroin abuse has declined to a level below the levels recorded prior to the heroin shortage of early 2001. Most (90 per cent) of the heroin abused in Australia originated in South-East Asia. The reduction in the availability of heroin in Australia has resulted in heroin abusers turning to other drugs.

There has been a considerable increase in the illicit manufacture and abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants in Australia and New Zealand.

Most of the Pacific island countries continue to be vulnerable to drug transit trafficking and the abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants.