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INCB WELCOMES “CRUCIAL AND SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN DUTCH CANNABIS POLICY”

Dutch Government to Reduce Number of Coffee Shops; Recognizes Health and Social Problems Associated with Cannabis Abuse

In its Annual Report released today (2 March 2005), the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) welcomes the initiative taken by the Government of the Netherlands on its cannabis policy. In an inter-ministerial policy paper on cannabis, the Government acknowledged that “cannabis is not harmless”, neither for the abusers nor for the community. It stressed the importance of strengthening “measures against street dealing, drug tourism and cannabis cultivation and continue to reduce the number of coffee shops.”

The Dutch Government informed the Board of this crucial and significant change in their policy in August 2004, which brings it closer towards full compliance with the international drug control treaties with regard to cannabis.

The policy paper recognized that coffee shops are “not blameless” in the maintenance of the illicit drug trade and are inadequate in terms of suppressing drug-related crime. It also noted that coffee shops may discredit the drug policy of the Netherlands in general.

The fact that the Dutch Government has recognized the health and social problems associated with cannabis abuse and its cultivation and trafficking, will have a far-reaching impact on the whole region and beyond. The Board urges the Dutch Government to take further action to reduce the number of coffee shops which are contrary to the provisions of the international drug control treaties.

On its part, the Dutch Government is requesting local authorities responsible for the implementation of the coffee shop policy to assist in tightening the cannabis policy. The Government intends to reduce the number of coffee shops located near schools and in border areas and will take action against uncontrolled outlets. Further, the Government, together with the local authorities, will work on ensuring that drugs tourism in border areas in particular, is monitored closely.

The Dutch Government also said it will implement an action plan to discourage cannabis abuse, which will include specific drug prevention campaigns aimed at high-risk groups. It will also launch an annual mass-media anti-drugs campaign over a period of three years, specifically targeting young people between the ages of 12 and 18. It plans to enhance efforts to treat cannabis abusers. In order to make the illicit cultivation of cannabis with a high percentage of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC—the active ingredient in cannabis) as unattractive as possible, the Dutch Government has advocated a policy of administrative and criminal law enforcement. Specifically, the Government noted that the new guidelines for prosecution provide a basis for acting speedily against cannabis cultivation, and said that it plans to raise the penalty for large-scale illicit cannabis cultivation to at least five years.