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ENSURING ACCESS TO PAIN TREATMENT MEDICINES IS VITAL AND POSSIBLE, SAYS INCB

Vienna, 5 March (United Nations Information Service)—Millions of people around the world are suffering from acute and chronic pain, as essential narcotic drugs are being insufficiently used for treatment of pain in many countries around the world, warns the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its Annual Report (5 March 2008). It calls on Governments to support a new programme of the World Health Organization (WHO), which aims at improving access to those medicines.

INCB notes that the low consumption of morphine and other opioid analgesics in many countries is not due to the lack of supply of raw materials needed for their manufacture. On the contrary, the stocks of raw materials used for the manufacture of morphine increased to record levels after 2000, as production of those materials was higher than demand for their use.

“Suggestions to further increase the supply of raw materials by using opium from the illicit production in Afghanistan do not address the cause of the problem. Governments should focus on measures to increase demand for pain-relief medication in line with the recommendations of INCB and WHO,” said INCB President Philip O. Emafo.

Millions of people throughout the world needlessly suffer acute and chronic pain caused by childbirth, surgery, trauma and diseases such as cancer and AIDS. While global consumption of opioid analgesics for the treatment of moderate to severe pain has more than doubled over the past decade, that increase occurred mainly in Europe and North America. In 2006, those two regions together accounted for 89 per cent of global consumption of morphine. In terms of population share, 80 per cent of the world population lives in developing countries and consumes only 6 per cent of the morphine distributed worldwide. In some developing countries, access to this opioid analgesic is extremely low and almost non-existent for most of the population.

The situation is similar for some other opioids such as fentanyl and oxycodone, for which new treatment forms (transdermal patches, controlled-release tablets) have been developed in recent years. The consumption of these drugs is limited almost exclusively to Europe and North America, which in 2006 accounted for almost 96 per cent of global consumption of fentanyl and 97 per cent of global consumption of oxycodone.

Analyses undertaken by INCB and WHO have revealed that difficulties in ensuring access to opioid analgesics are due to diverse interrelated factors such as inadequate medical education of health professionals and lack of knowledge and skills in pain treatment, public attitude, regulatory impediments or economic constraints. INCB has requested Governments to identify impediments in their countries and to take steps to improve the availability of these medicines.

To assist Governments in removing obstacles to access of these medicines, WHO, in consultation with INCB, has prepared the Access to Controlled Medications Programme, an assistance programme which addresses all identified impediments. The programme will be implemented by WHO. INCB encourages all Governments and international organizations concerned to cooperate with WHO in its implementation. INCB has also called on Governments to provide resources to WHO for the same.