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**Wednesday, 5 March 2008,
0001 hours GMT**

AFGHANISTAN MUST DO MORE TO ADDRESS ITS ESCALATING DRUG PROBLEM, SAYS INCB

Vienna, 5 March (United Nations Information Service)—The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) sounded the alarm on the continued and ready availability of acetic anhydride in Afghanistan, in its Annual Report released today (5 March 2008). Acetic anhydride is the main chemical used in the illicit manufacture of heroin. Afghanistan has no legitimate need for the chemical, which is controlled by the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988. However, traffickers in Asia continue to divert acetic anhydride and other chemicals required for illicit drug manufacture from licit trade, and are smuggling them across borders to heroin-manufacturing areas in Afghanistan.

Seizures of the substance in Afghanistan, as well as in the countries bordering Afghanistan, have remained negligible and little is known about the sources, methods and routes used to divert the substance.

INCB has called on Governments in Asia to establish and strengthen controls over the domestic movement of acetic anhydride and to assist the Government of Afghanistan in intercepting consignments of acetic anhydride that are smuggled into its territory. All relevant Governments must join forces to stop the smuggling of acetic anhydride and of other substances used in the illicit manufacture of heroin into countries in the region, particularly Afghanistan.

The continued widespread cultivation of opium poppy in Afghanistan also remains a concern for INCB. In 2007, some 193,000 hectares in the country were devoted to the illicit cultivation of opium poppy, and Afghanistan now supplies an estimated 93 per cent of the global illicit market for opiates.

Afghan opiates are smuggled to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan as well as to countries in Central Asia. Large-scale drug trafficking results in organized crime, corruption and high illicit demand for opiates and seriously endangers the aims of the international drug control treaties.

Over the recent past, Afghanistan has also become a major source for cannabis resin (hashish) and an estimated 70,000 hectares were devoted to cannabis cultivation in 2007, up from 50,000 hectares in 2006.

The abuse of opiates continues to be a major problem in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has the world's highest abuse of opiates, with an estimated prevalence rate of 2.8 per cent. Pakistan and many Central Asian countries also have high abuse levels, with heroin abuse having replaced cannabis and opium as the main problem.

INCB reiterates its call to the Government of Afghanistan to address the ever-increasing drug problem in its country and continues to consult with the Government pursuant to article 14 of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, an article invoked only in exceptional cases of severe and persistent treaty violations. Under article 14, INCB can recommend an embargo against a country to the Economic and Social Council if the Government fails to take remedial action or cooperate.