

## **Fourth annual meeting of Rainbow- International Association Against Drugs**

### **Cultural and commercial penetration by the drugs market in our society**

Statement by Professor H. Ghodse, President of the  
International Narcotics Control Board  
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by saying how pleased I am to address you today. The annual meeting of Rainbow- International Association Against Drugs has become an important forum to debate drug abuse and social policies. I appreciate that this year the Board can contribute to this significant exchange of views.

Rainbow is active in reducing the demand for illicit drugs, an activity which is essential if the world drug problem is to be addressed effectively. As we all know, drug abuse does not happen in a vacuum. The environment has a profound influence on whether a person will start abusing drugs. The individual's environment consists, to a large extent, of attitudes concerning the use and abuse of drugs. During the 1980s, there was a strong belief that the destruction of the mind and body through deliberate drug use for non-medical purposes was wrong. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. Drug abuse appears to be almost normal, sometimes even fashionable. This is evident in many areas in society, for example, in pop music and other parts of the entertainment industry and in certain media, particularly on the Internet.

Popular music is one of the key influences on young people. It is therefore all the more regrettable that many musicians in that industry whose popularity reaches far beyond national boundaries, make statements to the effect that the use of drugs is normal or acceptable. Members of well-known pop groups proclaim the virtues of ecstasy or claim that their most commercially successful compositions have been "inspired" by cannabis or other internationally controlled drugs. Many films show drug addicts as heroes and drug abuse has also been depicted as normal in several situational comedies on television.

The Internet is another source of many messages which show drug use and abuse in a favourable light. There have always been books that explain in detail, for example, how to grow cannabis indoors or how to make a range of "designer drugs". That knowledge is now available on the Internet, crossing all national boundaries and defying restriction on the dissemination of information. There are many pages on the World Wide Web devoted to the production and manufacture of illicit drugs and also pages on how to avoid detection, of sharing experiences and for providing support to persons arrested for illegal possession of controlled drugs. Not to mention that some drugs can even be bought through the Internet.

In addition, more and more food products have appeared in European countries which contain small quantities of cannabis. Such products are heavily advertised. Others, like a soft drink by the name of 'XTC' try to exploit the seemingly positive image of that drug. Many of the sellers of such cannabis products admit that their ultimate aim is the legalization of that substance. While these products may not cause direct damage to the consumers, they nevertheless contribute to the false impression that those substances, which are under international control, are innocuous. Many countries in Western Europe face a dilemma. On the one hand, drugs like tobacco and alcohol are increasingly stigmatized by society, on the other internationally controlled drugs such as cannabis are labelled as harmless or even beneficial to health.

All the aforementioned factors -- popular music, films and television series, the Internet and products made from cannabis, to name but a few-- create an environment where drug use is almost normal and almost acceptable. In these circumstances, it becomes even more difficult for organizations which are active in the fight against drugs, like Rainbow, to persuade young people not to take drugs. The Board examined this matter in detail in its annual report for 1997 and proposes a range of measures that Governments and other entities involved in drug abuse prevention can take to address this issue. At this stage, I will focus on only two issues: information and education.

Young people need to be informed about the dangers of drug abuse. One objective of an effective drug abuse prevention campaign must be to provide youth with credible, factual information about drugs. The information given must be accurate and tailored to the targeted group. Use should be made of modern information and communication technologies. The Board is pleased to note that many Governments in Europe as well as non-governmental organizations have set up Websites on the Internet which offer truthful and objective information about drug use and abuse. Such information is thus easily accessible to a large number of young people and a constructive alternative to all the pro-drug messages that can be found on this medium. The Board encourages all actors in drug abuse prevention to make such information available to young people.

In addition, young people must learn how to deal with the large number of pro-drug messages that are present in our environment and learn to think critically. They must be able to develop personal and social skills to uncover misleading information about drugs and to resist other pro-drug influences. Such skills are best developed in comprehensive life skills training programmes which equip adolescents to deal with the challenges of adolescent life. These include self-improvement skills such as goal setting and self-reinforcement, making decisions and solving problems, thinking critically and analysing media messages, coping with anxiety, communicating effectively, meeting people and making friends, and assertiveness.

At the international level, the prevention of drug abuse has finally received the attention it deserves. The reduction of the demand for illicit drugs was one of the main themes of the Special Session of the General Assembly on the World Drug Problem held in June in New York. That gathering also saw the adoption of the first internationally-binding instrument which is exclusively devoted to the reduction of the demand for illicit drugs --

the declaration on the guiding principles of drug demand reduction. With the adoption of that declaration, the international community has a globally accepted set of principles and standards at its disposal. At the Special Session, the international community also committed itself to achieve significant and measurable results in field of demand reduction by the year 2008.

This ambitious goal cannot be achieved without the support of organizations that are close to the people -- organizations like your own. Governments must therefore collaborate with organizations like the Rainbow Association to form a common front to prevent drug abuse. Together, as the Special Session of the General Assembly stated, we can meet the challenge. I fully share this optimism.

Thank you for your attention.