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The 51st session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs

UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa, Vienna, Austria, 10 March 2008

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Last year was the Golden Jubilee of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. This year ends the UNGASS decade launched in 1998 . Next year we look ahead to the 100th anniversary of the Shanghai Opium Commission.



Mr. Antonio Maria Costa, UNODC Executive Director

Are there reasons to celebrate? Has drug control been effective? Is the multilateral framework, established by the United Nations drug Conventions, fit for purpose? Are we living up to the goals enshrined in the UNGASS documents?

Today we have an opportunity to measure progress, ponder on what went right and what didn't. We have a special obligation to look ahead and see what more we can do to address the drug abuse problem, with

greater determination and better outcomes.

To contribute to this process, I have submitted a paper to the CND under my executive responsibility, titled: Making Drug Control Fit for Purpose. Building on the UNGASS Decade. I invite you to examine this short note, drafted with the purpose of stimulating debate and promoting fresh thinking, within the parameters and the perimeters of the UN Conventions. The note looks at the performance of the drug control system thus far, and presents a number of propositions on how to move forward.

At the outset of this 51st Commission I wish to put forward some of the paper's salient points, as they constitute the backdrop to our assessment of the world drug situation, presented in the 2008 World Drug Report.

The world drug problem: contained but not solved

Ladies and gentlemen, we have an image problem. Hardly a week goes



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by without another critique of our drug control efforts. Concern is manifested to me here in Vienna as much as when I am on mission in distant locations. Wide media reporting expresses equal apprehension about the status quo:

- too much crime, and too much drug money laundered around the world;
- too many people in prison, and too few in health services;
- too few resources for prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation;
- too much eradication of drug crops, and not enough eradication of poverty.

As a result, we all - the United Nations and Member States - are criticized for falling short of lofty ideals of a safer, healthier and more just world.

I hear these messages loud and clear, and I have some sympathy for them. But they represent only part of the story. What many people do not see, or perhaps intentionally fail to recognize, are the achievements of the drug control system over the last century, and the improvements over the last decade. Generic expressions such as: there are drugs everywhere, or everyone is taking drugs, are simply not true. Here are the hard facts:

- illicit drug use has been contained to less than 5% of the world adult population, as opposed to 5 to 6 times this proportion for people addicted to tobacco or alcohol;
- there are no more than 25 million problem drug users - that's less than 0.5% of the world population. There are more people affected by AIDS;
- deaths due to drugs are limited to perhaps 200.000/yr, namely 1/10 of those killed by alcohol and 1/20 of those killed by tobacco;
- world-wide, drug cultivation has been slashed (with the obvious exception of Afghanistan where the issue is insurgency, more than narcotics);
- adherence to the international drug control regime is practically universal, with the principle of shared responsibility unanimously accepted;
- the regulatory system of production, distribution and use of drugs for medical purposes, functions well.

We should be proud of these achievements and advertise them loud and clear: few United Nations Conventions have delivered similarly impressive results. I do not go as far as claiming that these outcomes, especially the ones that occurred in the past 10 years, are the result of the UNGASS process. Certainly there is a strong statistical and chronological correlation. Whether this is a coincidence, or a cause-effect relation, as a social scientist I cannot tell. Whatever the cause, the result is what counts - and the evidence shows that for all drugs, there are signs of market stability.

Last year I called this outcome: containment of the world drug problem. It still applies. This year I want to move forward, and stress that containing a problem is not the same as solving it. Despite the progress, we still have a long way to go to protect our societies from the health and security threats stemming from drugs.

This is perhaps why, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, the popular perception is that drug policy is not working as it should. The UNGASS review process will redress this, but not unless we are more proactive and imaginative.

(Unintended) Consequences

While assessing the world drug control regime, we should recognize

that the fundamental objective of the Conventions, namely restricting the use of controlled substances to medical purposes, has yet to be reached. Yearly, world markets are still supplied with about 1.000 tons of heroin, another 1.000 tons of cocaine and untold volumes of marijuana, cannabis resin and ATS.

Furthermore, while trying to seize these rogue amounts (with varying degrees of success), the drug control system has created a number of (let's called them) unintended consequences. Confronting this collateral damage, urgently and squarely, will result in even better drug policy. It will also help people appreciate the progress underway and support our call for action.

1. First, is the huge criminal black market. Nobody can deny it, though the diagnosis is less clear than the prognosis. Some people say: legalize drugs and crime will disappear. From an economic vantage point, this is a plausible argument: if there is no market, there is no intermediation - criminal in this case. Yet, legalization is no solution: it may reduce the profits to criminals, but it will certainly increase the damage to the health of individuals and society. Drugs are not dangerous because they are illegal: they are illegal because they are dangerous.

In fact, we have measured a strong correlation between availability of a substance and its consumption. Tobacco and alcohol are freely available, with tragic consequences; drugs are controlled, their use and casualties therefore smaller. In general, a hard-to-tackle problem cannot be spirited away by making it a matter-of-fact. Human trafficking is another crime out of control: should we legalize modern slavery just because it is difficult to stop? As I told a rowdy pro-drug conference in New Orleans a few months ago, legalization of an anti-social behaviour is a poison pill, not a silver bullet. It is a dangerous dialectic to call for a world of free drugs as opposed to a world free of drugs: they come with different degrees of collateral damage. With vision and resources we can enforce the UN drug conventions in a manner that, on balance, represents by far the healthiest and the safest option.

2. The second (unintended) consequence has been policy displacement. At a time of budgetary difficulties, spending priorities are needed. Fighting drug-related crime is expensive. So, despite the fact that public health is the first principle of drug control, public security has received much greater investment, at the expense of drug prevention and treatment (3:1 is the prevailing ratio). I fear this is political expediency: to focus on quick wins, like seizures and arrests (that reduce the problem), rather than on agents of slow change, like prevention and treatment (that solve the problem).

3. Another consequence has been geographical displacement. Tighter controls in one region, or on one product, produce a swelling of activity elsewhere. As a result of this balloon effect, the problem is displaced, but not solved.

In the past few years, this has happened to cocaine production, whose supply has moved within the Andean region; to opium cultivation, that moved from South-East Asia to West Asia; to cannabis, displaced from the north-west to the north-east of Africa; and to ATS manufacturing, that is now shifting from Western to Eastern Europe.

It has also happened to trafficking routes, because of a supply push. We have widely documented how Africa is currently under attack by traffickers of Colombian coca (on the Atlantic coast) and of Afghan opium (through the Gulf and the Indian Ocean), because of tighter controls along the traditional routes. Africa, already besieged by dramatic conditions of poverty, pandemic and violence does not need another tragedy - that I fear it is being imposed by foreign forces.

Consumption displacement has also taken place: demand pull causes

drugs to find alternative markets as life-styles migrate, promoted by ever more interactive media, cheaper travels and higher incomes. This is happening in the developing world, tempted by drugs at a time when addiction rates in rich countries are stable or declining.

The paper I have circulated provides evidence of other problems. Substance displacement, for example: when the use of one drug weakens on the market, suppliers and users move on to another substance (from heroin to cocaine, or more generally, from drugs to alcohol). There has also been social displacement: addicts, marginalized and stigmatized, have been physically displaced from one to another part of towns, as their behaviours are found offensive to bourgeois sensitivities - and society moves on convinced that the drug problem is solved by out-of-sight shooting galleries and injection facilities.

Unless we face these (unintended) consequences head-on, we will continue to hear negative comments about the drug situation. And our policies will be inadequate to cope. So, what is the way forward?

The way forward

I suggest that we go back to the two fundamentals of the international drug control system: the *multilateral principle* and the *health principle*.

According to the *multilateral principle* there is no alternative to collegial counter-narcotic work: it is a shared responsibility. Changes over the past few decades have shrunk the boundaries of time and space in ways that were not foreseen by the architects of the drug control regime. Therefore, States must live up to their commitments, not least the UNGASS Declaration. A lax approach in one country or for one type of drug - like cannabis - can unravel the entire system.

UNODC is playing its part to foster cooperation, for example by promoting counter-narcotics intelligence sharing. We have launched a Trilateral Initiative among Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. I have called on the countries of Central Asia to expedite realization of their regional intelligence centre (CARICC) and on the Gulf countries to put in place a similar structure (GCCCI). Confidence-building measures in the Andean are needed to reduce threats to security posed by the drugs trade. I am glad that South East Asian countries are tightening up their mutual law enforcement support. At UNODC we are taking the concept of shared responsibility most seriously, including its funding.

While multilateralism is crucial, I must also most emphatically defend the *health principle*. Drug policy is mainly about saving people from addiction. The drug regime (starting from the 1961 Convention) is rooted on the premise that health is the basic principle of the drug control system, as well as a basic human right. Scientific evidence shows that drug addiction is an illness that can and must be treated. There are no ideological debates about curing cancer or diabetes; left and right are not divided on the need for treating tuberculosis or HIV. So why are there political contrapositions about drugs?

Historically the demand side of the drug control equation, namely health, has not received sufficient attention. To redress the imbalance UNODC is working with the WHO and UNAIDS, to enhance prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. I urge you all to put into practice the UNGASS *Principles of Demand Reduction*.

Fit for purpose

As we plot our course ahead, what else do we need to consider?

1. *First and foremost*, security. Per se law enforcement may not be sufficient, but most certainly it is necessary. I salute the work of drug agencies: from Afghanistan to Colombia, from Mexico to Tajikistan, from the deep seas to the high skies, counter-narcotic agents are

taking profits out of crime, at the risk of their lives. I praise NATO's tough stance against counter-narcotics in Afghanistan, Russia's Kanal exercise, and the drug-control activity in South-East Asia, the Caribbean and Central America. UNODC is strengthening counter-narcotics law enforcement in West Africa, prodded by the Security Council and funded generously at the recent Lisbon Conference.

2. We also need to pay more attention to development -- to give farmers an alternative to cannabis, coca, and opium. The Doi Tung development projects in Thailand, and subsequently in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and now Indonesia, are inspiring. But the idea of shared responsibility needs to be more generously applied and funded, so that eradication of poverty goes hand-in-hand with the eradication of drug crops. Let us employ at least half of all coca and opium farmers in alternative livelihood projects, within the next few years. This would not only reduce the supply of illicit drugs and promote development: it will protect the environment.

Allow me to suggest other areas of policy, that so far have not received adequate attention: crime prevention, harm reduction, grass-root mobilization and human rights, in no order of priority of course.

3. Let's start with crime prevention. The logic behind merging the anti drugs, crime and terrorism functions at UNODC in 2002 is unchallenged. There is evidence of links between these three sinister forces in so many theatres, from Asia to South-East Europe and Latin America. Now Africa is being infiltrated by smugglers of drugs, guns and people who have close links to insurgents and terrorists. UNODC has documented how the Caribbean, Central America, West Africa and the Balkans are caught in the cross-fire of illicit trafficking, money-laundering and violence: these regions are all paying a heavy price. We have equally documented the importance of strengthening criminal justice as a centrepiece of security, especially in post-conflict situations. We welcome a greater push on your side, for policy that considers drugs, crime and terrorism as a single concern, not as disjointed threats.

4. Next I wish to invite you to count more effectively on targeted grass-root mobilization. A number of civil society organizations are present here: I salute them. Together with others (not represented here), they are contributing to the UNGASS assessment and we all welcome their views. In a separate exercise, meant to oppose the illegal trade in human beings (we called this UN.GIFT - acronym of Global UN Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking) we have been able to mobilize institutions and individuals - including celebrities from show business, the arts and the media -- in a gigantic effort that, I am sure, will make a difference.

Regarding drugs, I have noted lots of good will around the world, but also the damaging results of celebrities smoking, snorting, shooting and swallowing drugs - and being proud of their mischief. Time to react? I believe so. I was therefore pleased to hear of civil society and media campaigns to promote consumers' boycott against the fashion houses, recording companies, and sport enterprises that hire celebrities proud, rather than shameful, of their addiction. Class actions suits and other legal initiatives are a powerful means of discipline: let's confront the army of lawyers these celebrities can afford paying, with an equal number of volunteers fighting for the right of the weak, the poor and the addicts. These perverse role models need to learn fast, at their expenses, that their behaviour is harmful.

5. Next in my list is harm reduction. To begin with, I urge you not to get caught up in sensitivities about words. Everything we do at UNODC is meant to reduce harm: helping farmers switch to licit crops; assisting countries identify, monitor and disrupt drug trafficking; developing educational campaigns in favour of drug

prevention; helping governments to deal with drug law offenders in a humanitarian way. Let us not shy away from this jargon -- harm reduction - just because it has been appropriated by a vocal minority that has given to it a narrow and controversial interpretation.

Most certainly, priority must be given to prevention, through education, public awareness, and law enforcement. At the same time, we must deal with the harsh reality of the 25 million hardcore drug addicts, unable and/or unwilling to leave drug addiction and look for treatment. We must reach them and reduce the harm they cause to themselves and to society.

I see no contradiction between prevention and treatment on the one hand, and reducing the health and social consequences of drug use on the other. They are complementary. I invite you to read our discussion paper: *Reducing the health and social consequences of drug abuse*, posted on our website. It reviews the pragmatic and comprehensive approach already in place in many developed (Australia, Canada, the EU) and developing countries (in Asia and Latin America).

6. Finally, last but certainly not least, *human rights*. Our work is guided first and foremost by *the UN Charter* that commits signatories to fundamental freedoms, and by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 60 years old this year.

In Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration*, health is listed as a basic human right. As we emphasize the health aspects of drug control, it stands to reason that implementation of the drug Conventions must proceed with due regard to human rights. Thus far, there has been little attention paid to this aspect of our work. This definitely needs to be amended. Although drugs kill, I don't believe we need to kill because of drugs. The UN drug Conventions have left it to individual states to deal with health care and crime retribution, in relation with the specific cultural and judicial contexts. Mindful of this, today I propose that Member States extend the concept of harm reduction to include the need to give serious consideration to whether the imposition of capital punishment for drug-related crimes is a best practice.

The recent General Assembly moratorium suggests a way forward. More must be done to bridge the gap between international standards and the right of individual nations to decide in this difficult area. As the custodian of the judicial standards and norms set by the World Crime Congresses, UNODC insists on the importance of translating them into national laws and practice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The views I have expressed may cause debate: they were offered with this precise intent. The citizens of the world expect not only a debate about health, but also a healthy debate, divided as people are on the question of how effective drug control is today. Let us use this Commission to have a constructive dialogue -- to listen to views, even if divergent, and to ask ourselves how implementation of the international drug control regime can be made fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Thank you for your attention.

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