



A historic moment in Vienna – March 2011

Each year in March representatives from the countries in all parts of the world gather in Vienna to oversee global drug policy at the United Nations' Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND). The meeting takes place at the Vienna International Centre where several UN agencies have their offices including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) which manages projects worldwide to counter smuggling and illegal drug production and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) which is a judicial institution that assesses how the countries follow the three UN drug conventions. When changes are to be made in the system of international drug control they are made by the CND.

Under the UN treaties, the nations of the world continue to agree that narcotic drugs should be kept illegal except for approved medical and scientific purposes. There are some disagreements on how to implement drug control but basically there is universal conformity with the UN conventions. Bolivia proposed two years ago that coca leaves should be made legal for chewing, but that proposal has been blocked in the CND by several countries.

The CND meeting of 2009 was a wake-up call for many of us who support balanced restrictive drug policies. A group of countries, mainly from EU, proposed that "harm reduction" should be placed in some of the resolutions at the meeting. This initiative was stopped then by Russia, China, USA, Italy, and Sweden, among other nations.

The countries that support harm reduction nations have often been influenced by strong-voiced NGOs that are financed by billionaire George Soros and his allies. After they failed in their heightened efforts in 2009, their advocacy was muted in 2010 and even more so in 2011. Of course the pro-drug, harm reduction lobby has not given up, but they are no longer as aggressive as they used to be at the CND meetings.

After getting accredited, NGOs can attend the CND to listen and observe. Most NGOs that support balanced and restrictive drug policies are under-funded and cannot afford to travel to Vienna for the annual CND meetings. As a result, the better-funded pro-drug lobby has been more dominant in recent years. This year this imbalance changed. More of the NGOs favoring restrictive policies attended. We were better prepared and better organized. We hosted more side events and attended the side events sponsored by the Soros-funded NGOs at which we asked difficult questions. When the new executive director of UNODC, Yuri Fedotov, met the NGO group, our side dominated the discussion. Mr. Fedotov proved to be an honest listener to what we had to say. This new dynamic is very promising for the future. There were some disturbing statements in his speech from the opening session of the CND meeting, but when we asked about them it was obvious that his staff had written the speech and that he was open for discussions about each of them.

The passage in Mr. Fedotov's speech that caught my attention includes, "...we must draw a line between criminals, drug traffickers, and their victims, drug users; that drug dependence is a disease



not a crime; and that treatment offers a far more effective cure than punishment.”

I asked Mr. Fedotov if he means that all 200 million people who regularly use illegal drugs are “victims.” I said that I can understand that it is possible to see as “victims” those who are addicted but it is important to remember that the majority of those that use illegal drugs are not addicted and that most illegal drug users don’t need treatment. They need a reason to stop using and the criminal law is one good reason to stop. I also pointed out that this statement implies that the UNODC thinks that treatment conflicts with actions from the criminal justice system (CJS). This is not a productive position. Instead the goal of drug policy is to encourage better collaboration of the criminal justice system with the treatment system to achieve goals neither can achieve alone. The future lies in getting CJS and treatment work better together, such as in the HOPE program of Hawaii, a promising evidence based program with remarkable results.

What I did not say was that I think it is very wrong to put the label “victim” on people. This approach implies that the drug users are powerless over drug use. That belittles them. Calling them victims is the opposite of empowering people. The only person that should be in charge of any person’s life is – the person himself, or herself. I also could have added that there seldom is a clear line between users and sellers in the illegal drug field. Most sellers use and many users sell. To talk about two distinct separate groups is not in line with reality.

In my view the most important event at the CND meeting of 2011 was the speech (<http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/7699/a/164335>) at the opening held by Maria Larsson, Sweden’s Minister of Children and the Elderly, also in charge of drug issues. Ms. Larsson’s speech was relatively short but she had a clear and important new message. She used several powerful words repeatedly. Representing the Swedish Government she encouraged all countries to take action. She spoke about the right of the child to be protected from the illicit use of drugs. The child should also be protected from taking part of production and trafficking of illegal drugs. Ms Larsson made the special point that this protection of the child is a human right, based in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 33. CRC is one of nine human rights conventions and the only one that mentions drugs. The key message in Ms. Larsson’s speech was that protecting children from illicit drugs is not an option; it is an obligation under the convention of the United Nations!

While Ms. Larsson was in Vienna on March 21 she had several meetings before she left to return to Stockholm. One important meeting she had with the US White House Drug Czar Gil Kerlikowske. Because he had been to Sweden, he has a good first-hand knowledge of Swedish drug policy. After the Larsson-Kerlikowske meeting a press release from Washington was sent out in which Director Kerlikowske “showcased Sweden’s successful balanced public health approach and opposition to drug legalization as a model for the United States.”

(<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news/press11/032111.html>)

Being from Sweden this international recognition of the success of my country’s drug policy makes me



proud and happy. This year's meeting at the CND of Minister Larsson and Director Kerlikowske was an event of great importance. It means that the United States and Sweden have come forward with the shared goal of helping shape the international debate about drug policy in more positive directions. This new direction includes more effective demand reduction through linking the criminal justice system and treatment and by enforcing effective drugged driving laws, two priorities promoted at the CND this year by Director Kerlikowske.

The Obama administration has declared the "war on drugs" to be over, but has been less clear about what will come next in the United States. This statement by Director Kerlikowske in Vienna made clear that the door towards decriminalization, or even legalization of currently illegal drugs including marijuana, is closed for good in the United States. The Swedish way is a strict and balanced way where there is no legal tolerance for possessing, buying, selling or using illegal drugs. In this model sanctions are relatively mild and treatment is readily accessible. However, treatment is linked to the drug-free standard which is enforced by frequent random drug tests. I view this as a political formula that will gain broad support among the countries in the world. In Vienna at the CND Maria Larsson and Gil Kerlikowske emerged as leaders in the global discussion about the future of drug policy in the world. WFAD is proud to have played a leading role in this powerful new collaboration. What will come next is extremely exciting.

It's not easy to identify a historic event, especially before some time has passed. All the same I believe that what took place at the CND meeting in Vienna this year holds the promise of being historic. The United States has teamed up with Sweden to take the lead in what looks like a new beginning in the international debate about drug policy. These two nations are not alone. They are widely supported within the international community. The "harm reduction" wave may have reached its highest point. After Vienna in March 2011, there is a new breeze blowing. The challenge we now face is showing that a restrictive and balanced policy – where the criminal justice system and treatment work together – is much more efficient than accepting the use of illegal drugs as an inevitable force of nature that can't be stopped and that we have to "learn to live with it".

Mankind, working together, is capable of great things – fighting diseases, eradicating poverty, flying to the moon, building peace after long and brutal wars. Why can't we, working together, push back successfully against illegal drugs? Just like the goals of mankind are to eradicate cancer and poverty, we should aim for no illegal drug use. Zero tolerance is no more unrealistic than no cancer and no poverty. We are working for the drug-free goal – and we are proud of it.

Per Johansson
Secretary of the Board of WFAD