



Press release

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Time for UN to open up dialogue on drug policy reform and end counter-productive blame-game

Swansea/Amsterdam, 3 March 2014 – As the UN International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) launches its annual report on Tuesday, 4 March, amidst an unprecedented crisis in the international drug control regime, leading drug policy reform experts have called on the INCB and related UN institutions to urgently open up a constructive dialogue on international drug policy reform.

Approval of legally regulated cannabis markets in the states of Colorado and Washington and in Uruguay have caused breaches in the UN drug control regime and shakes the foundations of the prohibitionist “Vienna consensus” that has dominated international drug policy for several decades.

Yet rather than seek to learn from or understand the growing political support for alternative drug policies, the UN drug apparatus - and particularly the INCB – has responded mainly with shortsighted hostility and narrow-minded rejectionism. It has refused to countenance any reforms, treating the set of conventions like a perfect immutable constitution rather than a negotiated settlement that needs reforming and modernising as science advances or political and social conditions change. This came to a head recently, when Raymond Yans, President of the INCB denounced Uruguay’s “pirate attitude” for its cannabis regulation laws, causing a diplomatic uproar and raising questions about his position.

A forthcoming report by the Transnational Institute and the Global Drug Policy Observatory to be released in the advance of high-level UN drug policy meetings in Vienna in mid March 2014, tells the hidden story of how the inclusion of cannabis in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs as a psychoactive drug with “particularly dangerous properties” was the result of dubious political compromises, questionable decision-making procedures and with little scientific backing.

Growing numbers of countries such as the Netherlands and Spain, but also states in the U.S. and India have shown discomfort with the UN drug control treaty regime through soft defections, stretching the inbuilt legal flexibility to sometimes questionable limits. The regulated cannabis markets in Uruguay, Washington and Colorado however are clear breaches with the treaty, and mean that a discussion on the need for fundamental reform of the UN drug control system can no longer be avoided.

Martin Jelsma of the Transnational Institute said, “We are at a tipping point now as increasing numbers of nations realise that cannabis prohibition has failed to reduce its use, filled prisons with young people, increased violence and fuelled the rise of organised crime. As nations like Uruguay pioneer new approaches, we need the UN to open up an honest dialogue on the strengths and weaknesses of the treaty system rather than close their eyes and indulge in blame games. The moral high-ground that Yans claims in name of the Board to condemn such “misguided” policies, are completely out of place and unacceptable”.

Dave Bewley-Taylor of the Global Drug Policy Observatory said, “For many years, countries have stretched the UN drug control conventions to their legal limits, particularly around the use of cannabis. Now that the cracks have reached the point of treaty breach, we need a serious discussion about how to reform international drug conventions to better protect people’s health, safety and human rights. Reform won’t be easy, but the question facing the international community today is no longer whether there is a need to reassess and modernise the UN drug control system, but rather when and how.”

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