

Vienna, 17 March 2004

To the delegates to the 47th annual meeting of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Dear delegates,

We write to you as secretariat of the ICN*, a platform of approx. 200 organisations of citizens from across the world who are affected by the drug phenomenon and/or concerned with current drug policies. These citizens are drug users, parents, social workers, peasants, human rights activists, academic experts and former state employees. In short, the people you refer to usually when speaking of 'civil society'.

Last year the CND adopted a resolution that called for governments to enter into dialogue with civil society *in such a way as to enhance the international drug control system*. This dialogue, if ever it would take place, would be a complicated one, as speaking on drug policies without speaking on the current UN Conventions on drugs does not seem to make much sense.

We could accept this dialogue if the UN accepts their obligation under the Conventions to follow the advice of the World Health Organisation. WHO & UN agree that alcohol and tobacco are drugs yet these most dangerous drugs remain uncontrolled by the Conventions.

If we start thinking of drugs as just the substances that cause problems or are abused by people we know, then we are likely to ignore other substances that, for one reason or another, are not thought of as drugs by our immediate communities. A psychoactive substance is any substance people take to change either the way they feel, think, or behave. This description covers alcohol and tobacco as well as other natural and manufactured drugs".

The World Health Organisation points out that "tobacco contributes to 6% of all deaths world wide, followed by alcohol at 1.5% and illicit drugs at 0.2%". Tobacco use is only 6 times more prevalent than illicit drug use suggesting that tobacco use causes 5 times as many deaths as all illicit drug use.

UN Drug Conventions will never be respected or complied with when the UN itself fails to respect and comply with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

As a matter of fact, an increasing part of civil society does not see the current UN Conventions on Drugs as useful anymore. What they see is that UN Conventions are used to justify the global wars on drugs. Wars that are fought openly in countries like Thailand, where thousands of consumers were executed by policemen in 2003, or in producer countries, against the people who grow opium and coca leaves, two substances that have been very useful to human kind for thousands of years.

UN Conventions are also used by national governments in Europe to block the implementation of innovative answers to drug problems, measures that enable the consumption of drugs to take place under conditions that do not harm the health and safety of the consumers and their surroundings.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, many European local authorities have abandoned the war on drugs. In stead, they embraced the principle of harm reduction, establishing needle exchange, consumption rooms, controlled distribution of heroin and a permissive policy towards the use and sale of cannabis. However, as long as national drug policies are tied to the UN Conventions that prescribe prohibition, the most important cause of drug-related harm, the fact that they are illegal, could not be reduced

In recent years, European national authorities are returning to a 'law and order' agenda for the drug issue, announcing their intentions to re-criminalise behaviours that were de-criminalised by the former political generation. Obviously they do this only for electoral motives, as in practice it is impossible to turn the clock backwards. Authorities of cities and regions throughout Europe

now know enough about drug policy to understand that persecution of people worsens the problems.

This year's slogan of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime is: "Let's talk about drugs". But in its statements and reports, the UNODC condemns Western Europe for having a 'liberal climate on drugs'. UNODC's executive director calls people who advocate for legal regulation of drugs "a part of the drugs problem, as they gamble with people's health".

UNODC, the global agency in charge of justifying drug prohibition, is completely out of sink with the opinions of rapidly increasing numbers of citizens around the world who wish to see an end to drugs related health problems, crime, marginalisation, human rights abuses and skyhigh expenses for criminal justice. The agency continues to have a political strategy based on the fear of drugs, repeatedly ignores scientific evidence and common sense. Remember this next time you applaud the UNODC's work.

As representatives of global civil society, we say yes, let's talk about drugs. Let's talk about an end to the unnecessary criminalisation of people, to the useless struggle that only benefits organised crime. Let's find out how to recover control on the production, manufacturing, distribution and purchase of substances that adult people want to use, in order to make sure in the first place they do it under optimal conditions. Let's speak about ways to establish a sound relationship between producers and consumers without the intervention of scrupulous middlemen.

40 years of prohibition has not improved but actually worsened the situation for those most directly affected by drugs. We do not need to replace it with another uniform model; we need decentralisation of powers in applying drug policies. By a simple modification of some key parts of the UN Conventions, every national and regional authority can start to design and implement the policies that specifically fit to their needs and traditions.

Last year during the days of the mid-term evaluation meeting of the UNGASS Strategy, 3.000 members of ICN from over 20 countries marched through Vienna, spreading seeds of peace in the war on drugs. This year, hundreds of marches will take place all across the world, planting the seeds of a legal regulation on drugs. Like in other cases in history, fear and ignorance will sooner or later be replaced by insight and knowledge. We count on you to be among the first officials to realise the potential role you can play in achieving this giant step for human kind.

REFORM THE UN CONVENTIONS ON DRUGS NOW!!!!!!

The International Coalition of NGO's for Just and Effective Drug Policies, ICN

* ICN consists of approx. 200 citizens' associations from across the world. These citizens are peasant producers of drug linked plants in developing countries, drug consumers in developed countries, as well as treatment centres, parents' associations, research institutes, organisations working in the field of development co-operation, environment, human rights, drug policy and drug prevention, proceeding from 38 different countries. ICN came into being in order to denounce the negative impact of current international drug policies and propose alternatives at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs held in New York in June 1998, where some of us participated.

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