



UNODC

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UN drug report notes decline in cocaine and opiates, rise in synthetic drugs

BANGKOK, 26 June (UN Information Service) – Global markets for cocaine, opiates and cannabis are steady or in decline, while production and use of synthetic drugs is feared to be increasing in the developing world, including in South-East Asia, according to the annual United Nations drug report.

The World Drug Report 2009 was launched in the region today by the regional representative of the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Gary Lewis, at an event held at Cafe Doi Tung in Bangkok. The Doi Tung Development Project supports farmers from the Golden Triangle who have agreed to switch their crop cultivation from opium poppy to coffee beans. The revenues from the sale of the Doi Tung coffee contribute to the creation of alternative livelihoods for former opium farmers.

The report had been formally released 24 June in Washington D.C. by UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa and the Director of the United States Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gil Kerlikowske.

Likely decline in opiate use while cultivation stabilizes in South-East Asia

While there has been an overall decline in opium cultivation around the world – principally as a result of a 19 percent decrease in Afghanistan, where 93 percent of the world's opium is grown – levels have stabilized in South-East Asia, where poppy cultivation is concentrated in Myanmar and Lao PDR.

In consumption terms, more than half of the world's opiate-using population is thought to live in Asia. Although heroin is still reported as the main problem drug in much of East and South-East Asia, most countries in these regions reported recent declines in opiate use.

Cannabis remains the most widely cultivated and used drug around the world, although estimates are less precise than for other drugs. In East Asia cannabis remains the most popular drug of use, and is in the top two in South-East Asia. According to expert opinion, while cannabis use appears to be rising in some parts of East and South-East Asia, in others consumption has declined or remained stable.

Probable rise in use and production of synthetic drugs in South-East Asia

While use of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) has leveled off in developed countries, there is a concern that production and consumption of these types of drugs – amphetamines, methamphetamine and ecstasy – may be growing in the developing world, although the data is limited.

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Headquartered in Bangkok, ESCAP is the largest of the UN's five Regional Commissions in terms of its membership, population served and area covered. The only intergovernmental forum covering the entire Asia-Pacific region, ESCAP works to promote sustainable and inclusive economic and social progress. More information is available at www.unescap.org.

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In Southeast Asia, what was once a cottage industry has become big business, with industrial-sized laboratories – particularly in the Greater Mekong Sub-region – now producing massive quantities of methamphetamine tablets, crystal meth and other substances like Ketamine. Consumption patterns in this region are equally as worrying, with rising levels of predominantly methamphetamine use throughout much of East and South-East Asia. The significant dangers associated with this trend are evidenced by the fact that ATS was the primary drug of use for a staggering 80 percent of people treated for drug problems in Thailand in 2007, and for 81 percent in Cambodia.

No trade-off between public health and public security

The Report pays special attention to the impact of drug-related crime, and what to do about it.

In the report's preface, the UNODC chief warns that legalizing drugs as a way of removing this threat – as some have suggested – would be “an historic mistake.” Mr. Costa acknowledges that controls have generated an illicit black market of macro-economic proportions that uses violence and corruption. Yet, “Illicit drugs pose a danger to health. That's why drugs are, and must remain, controlled,” he says.

“Proponents of legalization can't have it both ways,” Mr. Costa adds. “A free market for drugs would unleash a drug epidemic, while a regulated one would create a parallel criminal market. Legalization is not a magic wand that would suppress both mafias and drug abuse.”

He also calls for more resources for drug prevention and treatment, and stronger measures to fight drug-related crime. “Societies should not have to choose between protecting public health or public security: they can, and should do both,” he says.

Mr. Kerlikowske, US Director of National Drug Control Policy, said: “The World Drug Report 2009 demonstrates that drugs are a problem that touches every nation. All of us have a responsibility to address drug abuse within our societies. Internationally, the Obama Administration is committed to expanding demand reduction initiatives to ensure that all those struggling to overcome addiction, especially in developing countries, have access to effective treatment programs. We have learned a great deal about the disease of drug addiction and know that treatment works. Through comprehensive and effective enforcement, education, prevention, and treatment we will be successful in reducing illicit drug use and its devastating consequences.”

How to improve drug control

The Report provides a number of recommendations on how to improve drug control.

First, drug use should be treated as an illness. “People who take drugs need medical help, not criminal retribution,” says Mr. Costa. He appeals for universal access to drug treatment. Since people with serious drug problems provide the bulk of drug demand, treating this problem is one of the best ways of shrinking the market.

Second, he calls for “an end to the tragedy of cities out of control.” In the same way that most illicit cultivation takes place in regions out of government control, most drugs are sold in city neighborhoods where public order has broken down. “Housing, jobs, education, public services, and recreation can make communities less vulnerable to drugs and crime,” says Mr. Costa.

Third, governments must enforce international agreements against organized crime. International crime-fighting instruments like the United Nations conventions against organized crime and corruption are not being used. “Therefore, too many states have crime problems of their own making,” he says. In particular, he says “current instruments to tackle money laundering and cyber-crime are inadequate.”

Fourth, he calls for greater efficiency in law enforcement. He encourages police to focus on the small number of high profile, high volume, and violent criminals instead of the large volumes of petty offenders. In some countries, the ratio of people imprisoned for drug use compared to drug trafficking is 5:1. “This is a waste of money for the police and a waste of lives for those thrown in jail. Go after the piranhas, not the minnows,” says Mr. Costa.

In an effort to improve transparency and the quality of drug data, this year UNODC has introduced ranges into country-level estimates used in the World Drug Report. For many regions and for some drugs (like ATS and cannabis) the ranges are relatively wide since information is more limited. “I urge governments to gather more information. This will provide a clearer picture of drug trends, and, as a result, improve drug control,” says Mr. Costa.

More information on the World Drug Report 2009 is available at www.unodc.org UNODC is leading the World Drug Campaign 2009 to raise awareness about the major challenge that illicit drugs represent to society as a whole, and especially to the young. The goal of the campaign is to mobilize support and to inspire people to act against drug abuse and trafficking. The campaign encourages young people to put their health first and not to take drugs (<http://www.unodc.org/drugs/>).