

Led by Latin America, debate on ending the war on drugs gains momentum while the UN remains closed to change

Commission on Narcotic Drugs gathers this week in Vienna; a Google+ event will assemble an unprecedented online audience of hundreds of millions to discuss drug policy on the 13th

March 12th, 2012 - The 55th annual session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) (1) started today in Vienna, Austria with a focus on strengthening the drug programme of the UN. Government representatives from over 100 countries will discuss international cooperation in combating drugs, and the enforcement of the current prohibition model. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime will invite delegates to celebrate 100 years of successful drug control.

“No changes to the UN conventions or even constructive discussions on alternative policies on drugs are to be expected at this meeting”, said Ms Ruth Dreifuss, former president of Switzerland and member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy (GCDP), a distinguished group of international leaders that has called for the end of the global war on drugs.

Ms Dreifuss is attending the CND together with Professor Michel Kazatchkine, Executive-director of the Global Fund and also a member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, to present recommendations on a health-oriented policy that includes decriminalization of drug users, prevention and experiments with regulation of less harmful drugs such as cannabis to reduce the violence and harm caused by the war on drugs. “We believe that the UN should use science as a basis and seek consistency on its approach to drug issues, listening to bodies such as the World Health Organization and UNAIDS, that call for harm reduction and public health as the guidelines for drug policies”, states Ms Dreifuss.

While the UN seems focused on reinforcing prohibition and remains closed to scientific evidence, a high profile debate around decriminalization and regulation of drugs has taken off in the wake of the taboo-breaking report War on Drugs (2) launched by the Global Commission on Drug Policy in July 2011. “There’s an obvious disjuncture between the increasingly vigorous public debate on alternatives to the war on drugs, and the continuing failure of the CND to meaningfully engage with that debate - or seemingly even acknowledge that it is taking place”, notes Steve Rolles, from UK NGO Transform Drug Policy.

For Mike Trace, from the International Drug Policy Consortium who is following the agenda in Vienna, “given the limited impact, and negative consequences, of traditional approaches to reducing the scale of the global drug market, national governments need to look at options for drug law reform that suit their own situations and legal structures”.

That seems to be the case for countries in Latin America, the region most affected by the perverse side effects of the war on drugs, such as organized crime and violence. Political pressure has been mounting in the region since last November, when president Juan Manuel Santos from Colombia became the first leader in office to declare that market

alternatives to deal with narco-trafficking should be considered. In February 2012, President Otto Perez Molina of Guatemala stirred the discussion by openly calling for a concrete debate on drug regulation to reduce violence in the region, prompting support for dialogue from Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras and Mexico.

USA vice president Joe Biden acknowledged the debate by visiting and meeting with state authorities in Latin America in early March to address the White House position of sticking to the criminal approach. Presidents from the region, including Felipe Calderón, from Mexico, and president Juan Manuel Santos from Colombia, agreed to come to Guatemala on March 24 for a wide-ranging debate on the subject. The meeting will set the stage for a formal discussion at the annual Summit of the Americas, to take place in Cartagena, Colombia in April.

In the midst of rapid increasing awareness on the need for alternatives to the drug war, policymakers will have unique insight into public opinion with the upcoming Intelligence Squared and Google+ debate "It's time to end the war on drugs", scheduled to happen on Tuesday March 13th, from 19h-20h30 GMT, at King's Place in London, UK. The debate will be streamed live to an unprecedented audience for a drug policy reform discussion. According to organizers, on the day of the event, anyone visiting YouTube will automatically watch a trailer of the live transmission, reaching as many as 800 million people.

Structured in three acts and presenting debaters and witnesses, the event will feature a statement by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former president of Brazil and chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, and a panel by Sir Richard Branson, from the Virgin Group and a member of the GCDP. More at www.intelligencesquared.com/events/versus-drugs.

"There is a clear rise in public perception on the flaws of the current approach to deal with drugs in our society", said president Cardoso. "We can no longer afford the levels of violence in Mexico, Brazil, Central America and West Africa, the trillions of dollars spent on this endless war and the obstacles it presents to harm reduction policies. It is about time that the UN and politicians in office engage on a constructive debate towards decriminalization, regulation and public health programs that may reduce violence whilst preventing and relieving the suffering of drug abusers".

Notes to the editor:

- (1) The Commission on Narcotic Drugs was established in 1946 as a functional Commission of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to supervise the application of international conventions and agreements dealing with narcotic drugs. CND it is the principal policy-making body within the UN system on drug control issues.
- (2) Download the Global Commission on Drug Policy report here: <http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/Report>

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