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U.N. Meeting Examines Drug Trafficking

by LADB Staff

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The UN General Assembly's special session on drug trafficking, held June 8-10 at UN headquarters in New York, produced few surprises. Consumer countries called on producer countries to do more toward eradication and interdiction; producer countries, in turn, called for more financial aid to fight the problem, but that call received little response. Although indications are that most government and multilateral efforts will tend to be more of the same, some voices are calling for new approaches.

Elaborate and ambitious plans are the hallmark of UN special meetings. The goal of this "drug summit" is to eradicate crops used to produce cocaine, heroin, and opium within the next decade. Although representatives set the goal, they did not determine how it would be financed. "Unfortunately, no country made the commitment to give cash" to poor countries or their alternative-crops program, said Hamid Ghodse, president of the International Narcotics Control Board. Developing countries, he added, need financial and technical aid to fight drugs or the commitments made at the conference will be just words on paper.

In the Political Declaration and Plan of Action, adopted June 10, the representatives of 158 countries committed to substantially reduce both drug production and demand within ten years, to increase cooperation to stop drug trafficking and money laundering, and to strengthen rehabilitation programs for drug addicts. The documents focus on developing alternative crops, controlling chemical sales, reducing illegal use of amphetamines, and reinforcing national legislation and international legal cooperation.

Leaders of producing countries urge respect and aid Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo used the UN forum to stress respect for sovereignty and to criticize the US undercover Operation Casablanca, carried out partly in Mexico without notifying Mexican authorities (see SourceMex, 06/10/98). "We must all respect the sovereignty of each nation," said Zedillo, "so that no country assumes the role of judge of others, nor feels it has the right to violate the laws of other countries for the sake of enforcing its own."

Peru's President Alberto Fujimori said, in the past five years, Peru has made significant gains in reducing the amount of land under coca cultivation and in reducing the illegal flow of chemicals used to process coca leaves into basic paste. To help finance the war on drugs, Fujimori suggested a variation on the "debt for nature" swaps used in environmental-protection programs. "In that way, a considerable part of the annual debt-service obligations could be channeled to specific programs to carry out a global strategy to combat illegal drug trafficking," said Fujimori.

Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru need US\$3.5 billion to carry out alternative-crop programs, said analyst Ricardo Soberon of the Comision Andina de Juristas (CAJ). For Soberon, a Peruvian specialist on drug trafficking, governments have not adequately connected alternative-development policies with the need to control drugs. He said without a comprehensive plan for rural development, the

campesino and indigenous populations will continue to be drawn into the most risky and least profitable part of drug production: cultivation and initial refinement of coca leaves.

Colombian President Ernesto Samper also said the elimination of coca fields cannot have long-term success without effective programs to provide campesinos with alternative crops. "Our experience indicates that forced eradication, if not accompanied by crop-substitution programs, fails, and the same fields are replanted," said Samper, adding that the problem is economic viability. "To ask campesinos to plant a crop that they cannot sell when they have an option ten times more profitable is not practical. I hope the US Congress understands this."

Bolivian Government Minister Guido Nayar said, although President Hugo Banzer's pledge to extricate Bolivia from the drug industry met violent opposition, the government is committed to enforcing its drug policies, including cutting off subsidies for voluntary crop eradication. "The greatest incentive to plant coca has been the compensation paid to eradicate it," said Nayar, adding that the government has spent almost US\$100 million on compensation without reducing production levels. "The most important partner of the drug traffickers in Bolivia is poverty."

Alternative viewpoints sent to meeting

Nearly 1,000 prominent world figures, including former UN secretary general Javier Perez de Cuellar, sent an open letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan criticizing current anti-drug strategy. "We appeal to you to initiate a truly open and honest dialogue regarding the future of global drug-control policies- -one in which fear, prejudice, and punitive prohibitions yield to common sense, science, public health, and human rights," said the letter. It said that the multibillion-dollar drug industry gives power to criminal organizations, corrupts all levels of governments, undermines internal security in the countries involved, stimulates violence, and distorts economic markets and moral values. "These are not the consequences of drug use per se, but of decades of failed and futile drug war policies."

The signers said that the increase in drug consumption should be seen as a public-health problem not as a police problem. "Realistic proposals to reduce drug-related crime, disease, and death are abandoned in favor of rhetorical proposals to create drug-free societies." Just prior to the UN session, the New York Academy of Medicine hosted the first international conference on heroin maintenance, which included the first US data presentation from a three-year Swiss study that prescribed heroin maintenance for more than 1,100 long-term addicts with significant positive results. "

"A world free of drugs is an illusion and only strengthens repressive actions, which exacerbates the situation of violence and has put in prison more than a million people throughout the world, while failing to prevent the problem from growing," said Fabio Mesquita, a Sao Paulo physician who specializes in treating addicts.

The New York-based Lindesmith Center, which coordinated the letter to Annan, says international anti-drug aid reinforces abusive police and military forces in the Andean region and Mexico. "International drug-enforcement policies stimulate armies to meddle in law enforcement and undermine Latin America's efforts to promote human rights, democracy, and regional security,"

says a report by the research center. "In the name of the war on drugs in Peru and Colombia, the US and other governments provide assistance to the military and intelligence services considered the worst human rights violators in the hemisphere."

The international Human Rights Watch (HRW) urged the UN to affirm unequivocally the determination of the international community not to sacrifice human rights in the name of fighting drug trafficking. HRW said many strategies in the war on drugs violate the right to life, to liberty, to privacy, to a fair trial, and to freedom from cruel and inhuman or degrading punishment. The violations are often authorized by national laws and, although illegal, are common and committed with impunity by state agents, said HRW.

The London-based Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) called for all programs of the UN International Drug Control Program to be subject to effective control, especially attendant to human rights and the rights of women. "To be successful, these processes must facilitate the participation of civil society, especially those that affect poor farmers," said CIIR spokesperson Ken Bluestone.

Nongovernmental groups see little positive outcome

Several nongovernmental organizations were skeptical about the value of the special session. "Like the drug war itself, the UN drug summit was a failure it was a bad pep rally for a bad policy," said Ethan Nadelmann of the Lindesmith Center. "President Clinton should concede the obvious: After decades of relying on failed ideas like interdiction and training foreign armies, prices are down, drug use is up, more governments are corrupted and more ecosystems are in jeopardy. Increasing spending on failed policies of the past won't achieve a better result in the future."

Bluestone said the UN's plan to get poor farmers to grow alternative crops in place of coca will not work. "We are concerned that poor farmers will continue to pay the price for our policies if the new plan goes ahead," he said. "What is needed is real development, free from intimidation, violence, and abuse. UN member states need to give more than promises to make this a reality." Meanwhile, several NGOs accused the world body of shutting them out of the current discussions. "The United Nations kept off the program virtually all the citizen's groups and experts who wanted to speak," a New York Times editorial said. "There is no discussion of some interesting new ideas such as harm reduction, which focuses on programs like needle exchanges and methadone that cut the damage drugs do."

The Times said that, like previous UN drug conferences, the current special session "seems designed primarily to recycle unrealistic pledges and celebrate dubious programs." [Sources: Clarin (Argentina), Spanish news service EFE, 06/09/98; CNN, 06/10/98; Associated Press, 06/09/98, 06/11/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 06/11/98; Notimex, 06/09/98, 06/12/98, 06/14/98; Inter Press Service, 06/08/98, 06/09/98, 06/11/98, 06/14-16/98]

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