

ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters Meeting

26 September 2012

IDPC Speaking Notes (15-20 minutes)

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I am speaking to you today on behalf of the International Drug Policy Consortium—IDPC. My name is Gloria Lai and I work as a senior policy officer for IDPC, based in Bangkok, Thailand.

In the brief time that we have, I will speak on two main points:

- Review of drug strategies that are occurring in different parts of the world, and
- The issues covered by those reviews that may be relevant for ASEAN member states to consider as you conduct the mid-term review of the ASEAN drug strategy.

I'd like to start with commending ASEAN for conducting a structured review of progress made by member states against the objectives set out in its Action Plan

The ASEAN mid-term review is taking place at the same time as other countries and regions are also reviewing their drug policies and strategies—and doing so in an environment where traditional strategies to reduce supply and demand are meeting with limited success.

These strategy reviews have different structures and timetables, and cover different parts of the world, but what they share in common is that they are all trying to find a set of strategies and programmes that are effective and appropriate for tackling an increasingly established and diverse drugs market.

Drug strategy reviews – experiences around the globe

All the drug strategy reviews that are now taking place, are done so within the international framework set by the three United Nations conventions on drugs, and their associated institutional structures.

In 1998, the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs adopted the slogan “A drug-free world, we can do it!” for its ten-year drug strategy. When the strategy ended in 2008, the CND carried out a global review of the strategy—which led to the key conclusion that the drugs market has not been eradicated, nor had it significantly reduced, which led to the move away from envisioning a drug free world to ‘containment’, that is, containing the market for the supply and demand of drugs.

The CND has agreed to carry out another 10 year review in 2019, with a mid-term high-level meeting to review progress in 2014.

The European Union

The EU has had regional drug strategies, agreed by all member states of the EU, since the mid-1990s.

They are currently in the process of reviewing progress made on the last strategy (which covered the period 2004-2012), and drafting a new strategy for the next 7 years in 2013-2020.

Like the UN review, their evaluations have shown little success in reducing the supply of drugs. There are some promising trends in the reduction of demand for some drugs (including cannabis, heroin), but these trends are outweighed by increasing problems with the use of cocaine and a wide range of new psychoactive substances.

But there have been other success stories in Europe over the last 8 years. In relation to its strategies to tackle specific problems associated with drug markets, such as crime, overdose deaths, and HIV infection related to drugs—there have been good results.

As a consequence, the new EU strategy is giving more attention to the objectives of reducing crime, and health and social problems relating to drugs—rather than making arrests, imposing punishment and eradicating supply.

The 27 EU member states aim to agree on a new drug strategy by the end of this year. The strategy document will then be supported by two 4-year action plans that set out more detailed activities for the national governments and European bodies.

IDPC can make these documents available to ASEAN officials if required.

Latin America

In Latin America, the Organization of American States (OAS) held their sixth Summit on drug policy in April this year, in Cartagena, Colombia—where countries held a high-level debate on current drug policy regimes. All member states agreed that there needed to be a review of the effectiveness of current strategies.

One of the main outcomes of the OAS was the decision to conduct a study of current drug strategies in their region, with a view to facilitating discussion on more effective, alternative strategies next year.

The demand for an open debate on existing drug strategies and alternative policy options in the Americas stems from the perception that Latin American societies pay a disproportionate price in terms of lives that have been lost, justice systems that are not able to function properly, abuses in overcrowded prisons, and displaced small farmers.

In the past, many countries in Latin America have enthusiastically engaged in attempts to eradicate crops, disrupt drug traffickers, and deter users by imposing long prison sentences, even up to 40 years. But many of those countries are still suffering from widespread gang violence, overloaded court and prison systems, and social upheaval related to the drug market.

So it is in Latin America where the most fundamental questions are now being asked about current drug control strategies – several of the governments involved in the OAS review have called for it to move away from the strategy of criminalising and punishing all those involved in the drug market, and to look at the option of government regulation of some drug markets. The review they are currently conducting is being done by government, academic and civil society experts, who will

report back in the summer of 2013, after which political leaders will debate the options presented in the report.

The USA

The USA has for decades been the main voice speaking out for a 'war on drugs' – by which they have meant the widespread use of law enforcement and punishment in an effort to reduce, and eventually eradicate, supply and demand. More recently, the US administration has changed its position – and is now urging domestic and international partners to see drug use as more of a health and social problem, rather than a crime.

At the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in March this year, the Director of National Drug Control Policy for the United States, Mr Gil Kerlikowske made an opening statement on the need to reform drug policy. He said that given this year marks 100 years since the beginning of global drug control cooperation, "This is a critical time in our global conversation about drug policy." He went on to say, and I will now read a slightly long quote: "But we must be candid—some aspects of our approach need to change. Speaking for the experience of the United States, I believe we have historically been over-reliant on incarceration and too slow to build a robust treatment and prevention system. We have not provided enough support to those in recovery and we have too often employed harsh rhetoric that divides instead of unites.

It is this understanding, now almost three years ago, that has led us to chart a new and different approach to drug policy in America—one that sees drug addiction as a disease and that views the criminal justice system as a mechanism that can be improved to help break the cycle of drug use, crime, incarceration, and re-arrest. All of us must continue to examine our policies to ensure that they meet the needs of our citizens."

Mr Kerlikowske has since continued to talk about the need to reform drug policies, to move away from relying on arrest and incarceration as the solution to drug problems—adopting instead, a health-centered approach to drug use and drug dependence.

The current US administration is also engaging in the review being conducted by the Organisation of American States with an open mind.

Africa

The continent of Africa has not had a long history of large scale drug trafficking and drug use, but is now starting to experience some of the worrying trends that have been seen previously in other regions:

- A rise in the wealth and power of trafficking organisations, originally built upon the trafficking of drugs from Latin America to Europe, but now increasingly focusing on consumers in Africa.
- A rise in patterns of drug use previously identified as 'European' – that is, use of heroin and cocaine—Instead of indigenous psychoactive substances; and
- Increasing links between drug-related activity and poverty, urbanisation and conflict.

- Increasing fears that injecting drug use will drive a new epidemic of HIV infection in the region, just as the trends in sexual transmission of HIV seem to be going down.

In 2 weeks' time, African leaders will gather in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to consider a new Action Plan to tackle drug problems in the region. They are well aware that they do not have the resources to confront and defeat the organised criminals who control much of the market – many of whom have close links to government or rebel movements – so they are looking at alternative strategies to manage the security, health and social problems that are starting to emerge.

The ASEAN drug strategy review

After taking you on a global tour of drug strategy reviews around the world, I will end by speaking on a few points that could be relevant for ASEAN's drug strategy review:

- It can be seen that policy makers all around the world are accepting the reality that drug markets cannot be totally eradicated, and that we need to manage them more effectively to minimise the impacts that drug markets can have on security, crime, health and society.
- This has important implications for the ASEAN strategy, where the objectives and activities set out in the workplan seem very much focused on reducing the supply of drugs.
- IDPC makes recommendations to all policy makers around the world on the need to review their drug policy objectives, and the activities used to achieve those objectives. This includes focusing not on the distant, and ultimately unachievable, goal of ultimate victory in eradicating drug markets, but on more specific problems that can be tackled, for example reducing the violence and corruption associated with drug markets, reducing street crime committed by people dependent on drugs, reducing drug-related deaths, and reducing the transmission of HIV amongst people who inject drugs. These are achievable goals, and have a definite positive impact on the security and health of communities.
- Continuing the fight against organised crime is an important part of this agenda, but in order to improve the security of citizens by reducing violence and intimidation, we need to rethink about emphasizing our efforts and resources on seizing shipments of drugs, and arresting drug couriers and low-level dealers who can quickly be replaced with more drug couriers and dealers—we can pursue objectives that can be achieved and activities that will definitely have a positive and measurable impact.
- There are proven strategies that can achieve these objectives, that are now being considered as a priority in many parts of the world. We hope that ASEAN leaders could also consider those strategies and better position ASEAN to report positive progress in a range of areas by 2015 and beyond.