

NOTE

WAR ON DRUGS

Anand Grover writes :

That human rights abuses are widespread is no secret. Nor is frivolous rejection by many governments of proven, effective strategies to protect the health of drug users and communities. Both have been well documented.

In 2003, law enforcement officials in Thailand killed more than 2,700 people in the government's "war on drugs." More than 30 UN member states, including China, Indonesia and Malaysia, retain the death penalty for drug offences—some as a mandatory sentence—in violation of international law. In Russia, untold thousands of heroin users cannot obtain opioid substitution treatment because the government has banned methadone, despite its proven effectiveness.

In the United States—and many other countries—prisons are overflowing because drug users are routinely incarcerated for nonviolent, low-level drug offences. These prisoners often have no access to effective drug treatment or basic medical care. In Colombia, Afghanistan and other countries, crop eradication has pushed thousands of poppy and coca farmers and their families deeper into poverty without offering them any alternative livelihood and has damaged their health.

In China, hundreds of thousands of drug users are forced into drug detoxification centres, where they can be detained for up to three years without trial, treatment, or due process. In India people are dying in uncontrolled detoxification programmes.

The "war on drugs" has distracted countries from their obligation to ensure that narcotic drugs are available for medical purposes. As a result, 80 percent of the world population—including 5.5 million cancer patients and 1 million terminally ill AIDS patients—has no access to treatment for severe pain. Strong pain medications are almost unavailable in most African countries. In India alone some 1 million cancer patients endure severe pain; most have no access to appropriate medications because of restrictions on prescribing them.

This is not only a human rights problem : It is a bad public policy. Research shows that abusive drug control practices, including mass incarceration, are ineffective in controlling illicit drug consumption and drug-related crime, and in protecting public health.

Scientific evidence has shown that more supportive "harm-reduction" programmes prevent HIV among injection drug users, protect people's health and lower future health costs. And for those with untreated pain, ignoring their needs removes them and their caregivers from productive life.

In March 2009, the United Nations met in Vienna to set new drug policies for the next 10 years. Sadly, the strategy adopted by member states contains scant human rights commitments. It congratulates the international community for what it says are successes of the past 10 years of drug policy, without mentioning its collateral damage. It proposes to continue those policies, with little change, for the next 10 years. □□□