United States Mission to International Organizations in Vienna

STATEMENTS

Opening Statement of the Government of the United States of America Before the 55nd UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs

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Thank you, Madam Chairman. It is my great pleasure to be with you here today to represent the United States. This is a critical time in our global conversation about drug policy. This week we are commemorating a century since the initiation of global drug control cooperation. Much has been accomplished, and there is much to be proud of. My Nation, one of the original signatories of the Convention in 1912, has sought over the decades to protect our citizens from drugs, to reduce supply, arrest drug traffickers, and reduce demand. Much good has been done to protect the health and safety of our citizens.

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. We stand ready to share our experience, good and bad, with all partners.

The Obama Administration approach to drug policy is guided by three facts: Addiction is a disease that can be treated; people can recover; and innovative new interventions are needed to fairly and effectively address substance use disorders and drug-related crime. By recognizing drug addiction as a chronic and progressive disease, we can work to prevent and treat the underlying substance use disorder, reduce drug related crime and recidivism, and help people overcome institutional barriers to recovery. We need strong support for programs and interventions that treat underlying substance use problems, particularly at the early stages of abuse, before the condition becomes chronic and more difficult and more expensive to treat. These programs are more successful and less costly than incarceration.

The Obama Administration has moved aggressively to restore balance to our national drug control policy, making evidenced-based reforms that recognize that our global drug problem requires both
a public health and safety approach. In the United States, we are already seeing progress but there are some who argue that the best way to reform drug policy is to scrap or rewrite the Conventions. This is a serious misjudgment. It is not the Conventions that have prevented us from investing in treatment and prevention, it is not the Conventions that have blocked us from developing alternatives to incarceration, and it is not the Conventions that have delayed us from launching evidence-based prevention programs in our schools and communities.

Rather, it is the Conventions, in their current form, that give Member States the flexibility they need to adjust their national policies to best serve their citizens. They form the basis for a truly global effort to reduce drug production, trafficking, and use while also ensuring the availability of internationally controlled drugs for medical and scientific purposes. The Conventions lay the groundwork for a sophisticated approach to a complicated problem—and as we learn more about the science of addiction, about what works in the realms of public health and public safety, we are getting ever closer to achieving the balance between control and licit availability that is envisioned in the conventions. This spirit of innovation should be the hallmark of modern drug policy—a constant effort to find new, effective, and evidence-based ways to implement the conventions in the 21st century.

We must make clear, however, that what we have learned during the past several decades does not point us to legalization as an answer. In fact, it is precisely because we recognize the drug problem as a public health issue that the United States steadfastly opposes the legalization of drugs. There are sound scientific and economic reasons for this. As just one example, my Nation is already facing an epidemic in the abuse of prescription drugs—legal substances that are already tightly controlled and highly regulated by government.

The legal status of prescription drugs has not prevented the tragedy of abuse, addiction, and overdose death. Rather, despite a rigorous control system, increasing levels of prescription drug overdose have now made drug-induced deaths the leading cause of injury death in the United States, exceeding the number of deaths from traffic crashes. Today, I am asking those who seek to dismantle the UN Drug Conventions to join us instead in reforming and updating global drug control policy so we can bring a modern, science-driven approach to implementing the drug control conventions in the 21st century.

So what should drug policy look like moving forward? Surely it should chart a middle course—we do not have to choose between the extremes of harsh punishment and labor camps on the one hand, and acceptance of destructive and dangerous drug use on the other.

Those who commit crimes must be held responsible for their actions, but once they are under the supervision of the criminal justice system, we must be able to recognize those with substance use disorders and ensure they have access to treatment services. It makes more sense to support programs and interventions that treat underlying substance abuse problems before the condition becomes chronic than to just keep filling our prisons and jails with drug offenders. Many offenders with substance use disorders can be directed into programs that are alternatives to long-term incarceration. These programs should include drug treatment and counseling services, re-entry assistance, and intensified monitoring via drug testing and other means to ensure abstinence from illegal drug use. Last year, the United States hosted a CND side event on these innovative criminal justice programs, and this year the United States has proposed a resolution based on
these principles entitled: *Brief Sanctions, Monitoring, and Treatment as an Alternative to Incarceration*. We ask for your support for this resolution.

We must invest in public health services, such as prevention, early intervention, drug treatment, and recovery services. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that drug prevention and treatment reduce drug use and its adverse consequences. Many of these programs have been proven to achieve meaningful results with significant long-term cost savings. Recent research has shown that each dollar invested in an evidence-based prevention program can reduce costs related to substance use disorders by an average of $18.

In the area of prevention, I am proud to report that the community coalition movement has increasingly found success around the globe, thanks to the leadership of CADCA (Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America), which is with us this week in Vienna. CADCA has 20 years of experience in bringing together leaders from local schools, faith communities, sporting groups, parents, and government officials to assess and then address the specific drug problem that threatens their communities.

In the health care system, Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (or SBIRT) can enable health care professionals to guard against possible drug interactions and start a conversation about the negative effects of illicit drug use on health. Along the same vein, we must work to ensure that substance use disorder treatment services are integrated into broader health care systems. We must work to ensure that public health and safety personnel are trained in how to recognize overdoses and administer life-saving techniques and overdose reversal medications such as naloxone.

We must also pay special attention to the sometimes overlooked area of recovery, bringing together all sectors of the community to support the millions of individuals that are recovering from the disease of addiction. The Obama Administration has committed itself to enhancing recovery support in the United States, establishing a dedicated branch within the Office of National Drug Control Policy to oversee our efforts to

- foster the development of systems and services that effectively support recovery;
- increase public awareness and understanding of addiction and recovery; and
- eliminate legal and regulatory barriers to recovery.

This last point is key: I encourage my fellow delegations to take a new look at relevant laws, rules, and policies that might have the unintended consequence of preventing individuals in recovery from becoming successfully reintegrated into their communities.

This comprehensive approach is not only a staple of U.S. domestic programs but mirrors assistance provided by the United States internationally. Notably, the United States provides training on a global basis to disseminate the latest science-based information on effective methods to prevent and reduce drug use and related violence, as well as to address the unique addiction problems affecting women and children. The United States also continues to support drug demand reduction efforts of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and other regional organizations. In particular, UNODC deserves special mention for its leadership role in addressing
the child addiction crisis in Afghanistan by expanding access to much-needed treatment services and to prevent illicit drug use with at-risk children.

In the area of law enforcement, I consider robust enforcement of drugged driving laws to be a highly effective way to both save lives and prevent drug abuse. It is better to direct drug users to seek treatment through highway enforcement than to wait for a fatal accident on the road. This afternoon at 1:00 I am hosting a side event on drugged driving with our partners from Europe that I hope your delegations can participate in.

As strongly as we advocate for alternatives to incarceration for drug-involved offenders, we support tough penalties for drug kingpins who produce, traffic, or distribute drugs or use violence or corruption to undermine our governmental institutions. We must recognize that the traditional distinctions among drug producing, transit, and consumer countries are no longer appropriate, and perhaps never were. We must understand that drug dealers do not discriminate when it comes to their illicit business—they will sell to anyone, regardless of income or nationality. We all share the responsibility to build strong and capable law enforcement capacities and engage in effective information sharing to combat transnational criminal threats moving forward. Transnational organized crime poses a severe threat to international security by:

- taking advantage of failed states or contested spaces;
- fostering systemic corruption and undermining the bond of trust between citizens and their governments;
- destabilizing political, financial, and security institutions in fragile states;
- undermining competition in world markets;
- using cyber technologies and other methods to perpetrate sophisticated frauds;
- creating the potential for the transfer of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to terrorists; and
- expanding narco-trafficking and human and weapons smuggling networks.

In July 2011, the Obama Administration released a new Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime that addresses the expanding size, scope, and influence of transnational organized crime and its impact on international security and governance. As the President writes in his cover letter, "While this Strategy is intended to assist the United States Government in combating transnational crime, it also serves as an invitation for enhanced international cooperation. We encourage our partners and allies to echo the commitment we have made here and join in building a new framework for international cooperation to protect all our citizens from the violence, harm, and exploitation wrought by transnational organized crime." We look forward to working with our partners in this room and UNODC to advance this common cause.

Just as what we do to address the world drug problem is important, how we do it is also critical. If we do not hold to the highest standards of integrity we do not serve our cause or honor those who have come before us. For this reason we believe that human rights must be an integral part of drug policy. Citizens, especially children, have the right to be safe from illegal drug use and associated crime and violence. Illicit drug users who have contact with the criminal justice system must be supervised with respect for their basic human rights.
In conclusion, to those who say we can do better on drug policy, I say yes, not only can we do better, we must do better, and we will do better. We have already begun this work. Let us move forward together, building on the strong foundation of the past century with modern policies that work to reduce drug use and thereby protect the health and safety of our citizens.