MEDIA STATEMENT

SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking
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UN Experts Call for humane drug policies to uphold human rights for all

Building on our previous statements, we, the UN human rights experts, reaffirm our call for drug policies that are firmly grounded in human rights, emphasizing rehabilitation and mental health support over punishment and criminalization. On World Drugs Day 2025, we urge States, the United Nations system, and civil society to continue pursuing humane drug policies that advance all human rights.*

The "war on drugs" has failed, and led to grave human rights violations including arbitrary detentions, enforced disapperances, police abuses, extrajudicial executions and the use of death penalty, discrimination, torture and other ill-treatment, as well as violations of social, cultural and economic rights, including the right to a healthy environment. Reports from the OHCHR and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention have clearly shown that these punitive policies have disproportionately harmed the poorest and most marginalized groups including and particularly men and boys of African descent, and lead to, mass incarceration and prison overcrowding. Men, in particular, have been subjected to frequent extrajudicial killings in this context. Laws criminalizing activities related to drug use that occur at the intersection of homelessness and poverty similarly impact the most marginalized.

Women in particular have been subjected to harsh and often disproportionate sentencing, frequently for low-level, non-violent drug-related offenses. Many are incarcerated due to coercion, poverty, or dependency of male partners. The criminalization of minor drug offenses has exacerbated gender-based discrimination, disrupted families, and exposed women to further violence and stigma—both within and outside of the prison system.

The call for less punitive strategies and harm reduction is not new. The 1961 UN Single Convention stated that the ultimate objective of drug control was improving the 'health and welfare of mankind'. In practice, however, States have measured success through arrests, drug seizures, and harsh punishments. These metrics may show how tough policies are, but they do not indicate whether health and welfare are actually improving.

Harm reduction services have played a vital role in supporting affected communities and advocating for more humane, evidence-based drug policies. However, increasing underfunding now threatens the ability of these services—particularly those run by civil society organizations reaching marginalized groups—to continue providing lifesaving support.

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities ahead to advance more effective and equitable drug policies. We welcome the forthcoming independent review of the international drug control system, mandated by the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in March 2025 and previously recommended by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health. This review is a crucial step toward aligning global drug policies with international human rights standards.

We also commend the development that The World Health Organization's Expert Committee on Drug Dependence is undertaking a critical review of the coca leaf. This process is an important step towards ensuring that international drug control respects the rights and traditions of Indigenous Peoples, and protects against the release of toxic chemicals into the environment.

The UN human rights system has played a pivotal role in shaping drug policy discussions. Through expert reports, consultations, and advocacy, the system has amplified the voices of victims and affected communities, and reinforced the imperative for rights-based, non-punitive approaches to drug policy.

Echoing the theme of this year's International Day against Drug Abuse 2025, "Breaking the Chains: Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery for All!" we collectively urge Member States and all UN agencies to shift from punishment measurers and adopt more harm reduction policies like decriminalization of minor drug offenses, expanding rehabilitation programs, and strengthening mental health support. As in previous years, we call on Member States and all UN agencies to ground their drug policy responses in international human rights law and standards, including the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy and the UN System Common Position on drugs. These policies must be gender-responsive and actively uphold and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. We urge retentionist states to ensure that, at a minimum, the death penalty is not imposed for drug offences.

We urge the UN Member States, and the international community to address drug dependency with empathy, dignity, and respect for human rights. Rehabilitation and support must take precedence over punitive measures, focusing evidence-based, harm-reduction programs, policies and practices for *all,* regardless of socioeconomic status, and anchored in human rights. Furthermore, we emphasize the urgent need to invest in effective prevention, eliminate stigma, and move away from criminalization of drug dependency. Only through these collective efforts can we build a future where drug policies genuinely protect and promote the rights and well-being of all.

ENDS

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