

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Statement by Ambassador Peter van Wulfften Palthe, Permanent Representative of the Netherlands, Vienna, on the occasion of the UNGASS Segment of the 58<sup>th</sup> Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND).**

*Vienna, 9 March 2015*

Thank you Mr Chairperson,

The Netherlands associates itself with the statement made by the Latvian Presidency on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.

The drug phenomenon is dynamic and constantly raises new challenges for us to address. The UNGASS-preparations put a spotlight on drug policy around the world, its successes, its challenges or even its failures. Politicians, academia, media and civil society around the world are preparing their inputs for the debate. In The Netherlands, the Government has recently sent a letter to Parliament outlining its aims for UNGASS. This letter is available in several languages on the website of the Netherlands Mission in Vienna.

Mr Chairman,

The UN drug control system is based on three international Conventions. However, in a number of countries, different stakeholders are expressing dissatisfaction about the way in which the conventions are interpreted. The practice of strictly monitoring compliance with the 50-year-old treaties impedes efforts to find solutions to drug problems that countries face today. For example, restrictions limit access to and the availability of essential medicines such as morphine for pain control and prohibit preventive interventions, such as providing drug education at schools, because the topic of drugs is taboo due to complete criminalisation. There is also a growing debate about the effectiveness of the current criminal-law approach, which often has socially disruptive effects in production and transit countries. At the same time, there is a growing interest in measures to protect health and limit the social harm that accompanies drug use.

For The Netherlands, UNGASS 2016 is an opportunity to present its experiences and tried-and-tested interventions in drug policy. I would like to highlight three priorities:

Firstly, the Netherlands has years of experience with drugs policy that focuses in the first place on the public health aspect. This policy is based on five key principles. The first principle is to prevent people from using drugs. Secondly, when people decide to take drugs, it is important to provide them with information about risks to their health and their ability to function in society. The third principle is early detection and brief interventions to prevent people from developing an addiction. Fourthly, accessible addiction care is available so that those who develop an addiction can receive treatment. The fifth principle is harm reduction. The policy is successful: the number of drug addicts in the Netherlands is quite low.

Let me focus briefly on harm reduction. As an important part of the public health perspective, harm reducing measures such as pill testing, needle exchange, methadone and heroin treatment, and drug consumption facilities have proven effective in preventing fatal overdoses and limiting damage to the health of drug users, particularly with regard to infectious diseases related to drug use, like HIV/Aids. In many countries, especially in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, intravenous drug use is the driving force behind the HIV/Aids epidemic. Broader acceptance and implementation of harm reduction measures is needed to stop the spread of the virus. UNODC is doing important work in the field of harm reduction around the world. Unfortunately, also due to financial constraints, harm reduction programmes are under threat. The Netherlands, as a major donor of harm reduction programmes, calls on governments and donors to continue to support these effective and life saving interventions.

The second Dutch priority towards UNGASS is guaranteeing access to medicine. Overly strict interpretation of the UN Conventions, complex import and export rules, and fear of addiction mean that some important medications are unavailable in hospitals in developing countries. We are dealing here with a very topical subject, since a proposal was made this CND to bring ketamine under control of the drug conventions. Ketamine is on the WHO list of Essential Medicines, and is the anaesthetic of choice in many poor regions and emergency situations. Often there is no alternative available. Use of essential medicines should not be unduly restricted according to the 1971 Convention. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the worlds largest humanitarian network, and many other organisations from around the globe who are using ketamine because it is safe, cheap and effective and helps to save many lives, oppose international ketamine control. The Netherlands also opposes the proposal to bring ketamine under control of the international drug Conventions.

Thirdly, the Netherlands strongly advocates decriminalising drug use. In and of itself, drug use is not prohibited in the Netherlands. This is not the case in many other countries. Prohibition may make users fearful of asking for help, which means the health risks become greater. Therefore, a question rightly being asked with increasing frequency is whether prosecuting people for using drugs is proportionate and effective. Human rights is an important component of this debate: for drug users themselves, because in some countries so-called treatment practices in prisons and rehabilitation centres actually constitute serious human rights violations, but also for people whose lives and communities are devastated by cocaine and heroin production, trade and consumption or by disproportionately repressive approaches to these problems. The Netherlands strongly advocates a humane drugs policy. As an opponent of the death penalty, the Netherlands will continue to raise this issue in all circumstances.

Mr Chairman,

UNGA Special Sessions can create a spirit worldwide that brings positive change. This is what happened in 2001: the UNGASS session on HIV/Aids marked the start of a stronger global response against HIV/Aids. Let's make UNGASS 2016 another event that will contribute to improving the lives of millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

