



THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

NR. 22. OCTOBER 2006

THE ROAD TO VIENNA

Nothing less than the moral reputation of the Western world will be at stake at the meeting of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in March 2008 in Vienna, Austria. It will be the next opportunity to repair the tragic mistake made 47 years ago, when US and other Western governments used their dominant position in the world to establish a UN Convention that criminalises the culture of cannabis, coca and opium, among others.

In 1961, this mistake was still understandable. Awareness about human history, in which the use of these three plants had played a crucial role for thousands of years, was still underdeveloped. People did not question authorities, and could easily be led to believe that these plants could only be considered as something dangerous and harmful.

Who continues to believe this today, however, such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) does, has lost its innocence. Not only have the medicinal, therapeutic, nutritional and other values of the three plants been broadly demonstrated. It has also become sufficiently clear that the criminalisation of these crops has had nothing but counterproductive effects.

On 2 september, Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of UNODC, had to admit that Afghanistan is now producing 30 % more opium than is needed to produce the entire quantity of heroin that is consumed globally each year.

Frustrated by this result, Costa blamed everybody else: the Afghan government for not doing enough to arrest the drug lords, and certain governments for not doing enough to reduce the demand for heroin of their citizens. In fact, the UN eradication strategy itself, together with the Western invasion of 2001, has not left any other option to the Afghan farmers than to produce opium for the black market.

In Bolivia, the government in principle does not eradicate coca fields by force anymore. It was precisely to stop the violent confrontations with the authorities that motivated Evo Morales to enter politics. Being president, Morales obviously wishes to collaborate with his former colleagues in an effort to limit the cultivation of coca to 20.000 hectares. Bolivian coca production is estimated at 27.000 hectares, which is small compared to Peru (50.000) and Colombia (80.000 has.)

The US government has already expressed its "very serious concerns" about this policy. If Bolivia does not commit itself to eradicate following the instructions of the "international community", it could lose 80 million EURO in governmental aid from Washington. So Morales needs to win time. In the General Assembly of the UN on 18 September, he once again explained the difference between coca and cocaine. At least the European governments cannot say anymore that they did not know that difference existed.

In the Netherlands, the war on cannabis cultivation is also obtaining absurd dimensions. In the cannabis country par excellence, many small growers have stopped their activity because of fear for the police. This has increased the share of large scale growers, many of them with a criminal background. As a consequence, the quality of the weed sold in coffeeshops has fallen, while the price has increased. Thirty years after the installation of a policy that facilitated the coffeeshop model, the current Dutch government does not leave the consumer another option than to start organising its own production.

On 6 and 7 November, in a conference in the European Parliament in Brussels that is co-organised by ENCOD, you will have the chance to send a signal to the European governments in relation with the Vienna meeting. Together with politicians and local authorities who have learned to treat the drug issue in a responsible way, civil society representatives will present courageous and non-conformist initiatives to carry out sensible drug policies. This conference is open to the public, but interested persons should register to attend (deadline is 1 November, see our website)

The Vienna Meeting will be a point of agenda in the dialogue between civil society and European Union authorities on drug policy that, if the European Commission keeps its promises, is bound to start in 2007. In the Green Pepper, ENCOD's response to the Green Paper released by the Commission on this issue in June 2006, we have made clear that the issue of the Conventions cannot be avoided in any dialogue on drugs.

Perhaps ENCOD will benefit from at least a tiny part of the budget that will be made available for this dialogue. The total amount of this budget is still unknown. We have asked Members of European Parliament to propose a definitive budget of 1 million EURO for the first year of this dialogue. The final decision will probably be taken in November.

For the time being, ENCOD relies on the support of every member to survive. For 2006, we have almost managed to obtain the absolutely minimum amount that is necessary for this purpose. But in the future, it seems unavoidable to apply commercial strategies to finance this work. This could enable us to build the road to Vienna, so hopefully in March 2008, many thousands of European citizens will be there to show their opinion about current UN drug policies.

By: Joep Oomen (with the help of Peter Webster) - www.encod.org