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Fourteenth Meeting of Heads of National Drug Law**Enforcement Agencies, Africa**

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Item 5 (c) of the provisional agenda

Consideration of topics by working groups:**(c) Cannabis—the African connection**

Illicit cultivation, trafficking and abuse of cannabis in Africa*

Introduction

1. The Thirteenth Meeting of Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies (HONLEA), Africa, held in Port Louis (Mauritius), from 8 to 12 September 2003, considered that the issue of abuse, trafficking and illicit cultivation of cannabis in Africa should be subject of a special study. There should be a structured presentation by experts on the socio-economic impact, health implications and the environmental impact based on reliable, scientific data. A paper based on the experience of African countries in dealing with cannabis, should be prepared and made available to the Fourteenth Meeting of HONLEA Africa. In response to this request the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime requested from African countries, in December 2003, the information on the extent of abuse, illicit cultivation and trafficking in cannabis. The present report is based on information received from the Governments of Ghana, Mauritius, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe as of 6 April 2004.

Abuse of cannabis

2. Cannabis was the most widely abused narcotic drug in Ghana due to its easy cultivation and low cost. Cannabis abuse had increased in Ghana in recent years due to the deliberate attempts by dealers and pushers to target the youth as main potential abusers. It had become quite common for peddlers to distribute cannabis for free to new users until they became addicted. From 1997 onwards, statistics from three Government Psychiatric Hospitals of Ghana showed a continuous increase in the number of patients admitted for cannabis abuse. Statistics also indicated that that

* This document has not been edited.

most abusers used both alcohol and cannabis. Alcohol and cannabis were widely abused by the youth in secondary schools and by the unemployed. There was also a trend among students to mix cannabis with other herbal preparation or with coffee or tea to make its effect more potent.

3. The levels of drug abuse varied from village to village or from community to community in Ghana. In communities where the people were more ignorant of the dangers of cannabis cultivation and abuse, abuse levels were higher. Such communities usually adopted a laissez-faire attitude to cannabis abuse or cultivation. Furthermore, in those communities cannabis cultivation was regarded as a source of livelihood. In these cases, attempts by the Government to eradicate illicit cultivation of cannabis or to enforce demand reduction or law enforcement measures were fiercely resisted.

4. In South Africa, there was increased abuse of cannabis and methaqualone alone or in combination (cannabis mixed with methaqualone tablets, called a “white pipe”). Patients attending specialist treatment centres in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban had cannabis as their primary drug of abuse. According to the Government’s statistics, treatment for both cannabis and methaqualone had gone up in Cape Town, Gauteng and Mpumalanga. Requests for treatment for both cannabis and methaqualone-related problems was substantially higher for persons under 20 years of age.

5. The South African Police Service, on a national basis, performed substantial numbers of drug-related arrests monthly of which the majority were for cannabis-related offences. However, only a small percentage of cannabis samples were forwarded to the Forensic Science Laboratory for analysis, as South African legislation did not require analysis reports in those cases where the substances involved were not disputed in court. Seizure data on cannabis in South Africa were not readily available.

6. Drug abusers in Zambia were mostly young people. There was an upward trend with regard to cannabis abuse as compared to abuse of other drugs such as cocaine, heroin, methaqualone and benzodiazepines. Statistics also showed that cannabis abuse was highest in urban areas. Of particular concern to the Government was that people who abused drugs and alcohol were more likely to indulge in risky sexual behaviour thereby exposing themselves to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

7. In Zimbabwe, cannabis was the most common and cheapest drug available. It was grown in the country’s hot regions of Mashonaland Central, Western, Eastern, Manicaland, Masvingo and Matabeleland Provinces. Cultivation covered only 20 % of local consumption and imports from Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique accounted for 80 % of the local market.

8. The most common form of cannabis abuse was smoking the herb as cigarettes. The low-cost of cannabis coupled with its ready availability has become a major cause of concern for drug law enforcement authorities. Abuse of cannabis had lately defied age and sex barriers with women and children also abusing cannabis. Traditional healers were also prescribing cannabis to cure ailments ranging from asthma, heart problems and cervical disorders in women. In remote regions of Zimbabwe, cannabis abuse was considered acceptable and remained a major

challenge since only a few cases of its abuse were reported to law enforcement officials.

Extent of cannabis cultivation

9. Cannabis cultivation was having a very negative effect on the subsistence economy of Ghana in the past few years. Cannabis cultivation was widespread and a large number of farmers in rural areas were turning to cannabis cultivation. The price of cannabis destined to be exported to Europe had gone up significantly in recent years making it more economic for farmers to grow cannabis on their lands rather than food crops. Farmers were consistently financed by traffickers who would pay for the cannabis crop upfront even before planting. Incentives from traffickers had made it difficult for the Government to induce farmers to produce certain essential crops. Alternative development programmes could be a viable means to counter the increase of cannabis cultivation in Ghana. UNODC was requested to support the Government in the development and implementation of such programmes and to undertake a sustained awareness programme with regard to the dangers of cannabis abuse.

10. There was no “farm cultivation” of cannabis in Mauritius. Cannabis plants had been detected on small plots of land, in forests, mountainous regions, sugarcane fields and backyards. The extent of the cultivated areas could not be estimated.

11. In South Africa cannabis was cultivated mainly in arable, relatively water-rich areas, and especially on the mountains. It was traditionally grown in the mountainous and inaccessible areas of the Drakensberg mountain range in the Eastern Cape, Kwazulu Natal, Northern Province and Mpumalanga. Cannabis was also reaching South Africa from Swaziland and Lesotho. Estimates on the extent of cannabis cultivation in South Africa were based largely on aerial surveys. The current estimation was 1247 hectares of illicit cannabis cultivation.

12. Regular aerial spraying had been carried out by the South African Police Service Air Wing, in conjunction with the SA Narcotics Bureau. Aerial spraying had been developed in the early 1990’s to a very high degree of sophistication to ensure that chemicals were applied to the target areas. The main objective of cannabis eradication programme was to break the seed-cycle. Without seeds to plant, potential growers would have to import cannabis seeds at great expense. Previous experience had shown that once the seed-cycle was broken, most of the farmers returned to cultivating food crops. Spraying by helicopter was much cheaper than the slash-and-burn operation previously utilized by the police and far more effective.

13. Cannabis was widely grown in Zambia. Cannabis was cultivated in almost all parts of the country, though the largest seizures of 2003 were made in the Central, Copperbelt, Southern and Western Provinces. This trend was extremely worrying for authorities as some farmers were growing cannabis instead of food crops. Cultivation of cannabis was also growing rapidly and this translated into an upward trend in its trafficking and abuse. Seizures of cannabis had doubled in 2003 indicating that Zambia was not only consuming but also exporting cannabis to other countries of the region and even to the European and American markets. According to Government’s estimates, Zambia was likely to emerge as one of the largest cannabis producers in the Southern African region and for this reason, the

Government has vigorously campaigned against the decriminalisation/legalization of the drug.

14. The Government of Zimbabwe indicated that cannabis was mainly cultivated in the mountainous regions of the country that were generally inaccessible for vehicles of law enforcement patrols. Such areas were so isolated that chances of detection of illicit cultivation by law enforcement officials on rural routine patrols were minimal. Detection was only possible when specific information on illicit cultivation was being transmitted to law enforcement officials.

15. The agrarian reforms currently being introduced in Zimbabwe had contributed to an increase in the number of cultivation of cannabis, including in the peri-urban areas surrounding Harare. New farmers were increasingly growing cannabis in their fields. Law enforcement measures were not practicable due to the absence of proper infrastructure in these new areas of illicit cultivation.

Trafficking in cannabis

16. Cannabis accounted for the bulk of narcotic drugs trafficked in and out of Ghana, as indicated by seizures made in the last five years. Seizures of cannabis were made in all ten regions of Ghana unlike seizures of heroin and cocaine which abuse and trafficking was restricted to big cities and to the country's entry and exit points. Trafficking of cannabis was mainly taking place between rural areas (cultivation areas) and towns and cities (marketing/consumption centres). Trafficking also involved converting cannabis into compressed cannabis for export to other neighbouring African States, to the United States and Europe. In the past three years, trafficking had increased especially towards European countries. As a result of lenient policies adopted by some European countries towards cannabis abuse, more farmlands in Ghana were now cultivated with cannabis rather than with food crops.

17. Aggressive eradication campaigns in Mauritius had bore positive results, compelling traffickers to turn to trafficking of cannabis from the neighbouring island of Reunion and from Madagascar.

18. According to the South African authorities, Europe was the main export market for cannabis, as well as countries in the Far East Asia. Large quantities were smuggled to and from neighbouring countries, including Botswana and Namibia. Cannabis originating from the landlocked Kingdoms of Lesotho and Swaziland were brought into South Africa for onward smuggling to the international market. West African criminal networks were controlling the illicit trade of cannabis. Numerous routes and methods were used to smuggle cannabis to Europe and the proceeds were used to finance cocaine trade with South America. Compressed cannabis was brought into the metropolitan areas, from where it was distributed to couriers, or concealed in containers or post parcels in legitimate cargos for onward smuggling. According to the South African Narcotics Bureau statistics, large numbers of couriers and airfreight were being sent through Johannesburg International Airport to Europe and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

19. In Zambia the majority of people involved in cannabis cultivation and trafficking were Zambians, though recently nationals of other countries had

imported cannabis into the country from Malawi (i.e. a cannabis brand commonly known as “Malawi Gold”). Most Zambians who cultivated cannabis, “exported” it to neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, where the drug fetched high prices. Intelligence information gathered by the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC) had established that Zambia was also being used as a transit country for shipments of cannabis from Malawi and Mozambique to South Africa. Several people transporting cannabis originating from those countries had been arrested in the Eastern Province after the year 2001, when law enforcement authorities had intensified their interdiction operations aimed at preventing illicit trafficking of cannabis through the country’s Eastern provinces.

20. Cannabis was illicitly smuggled into Zimbabwe from Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi. The drug was transported with trucks, concealed on board and brought into the capital, Harare. Locally cultivated cannabis (dagga) was also mainly trafficked by road. The Malawi brand of cannabis, Malawi Gold, was in great demand locally and internationally. It was usually compressed into briquettes which were later concealed in baggage and trafficked by air to Europe. Its detection at exit points in Zimbabwe was difficult due to the inadequate equipment and resources of Customs authorities. Cannabis markets supplied by Zimbabwe included Botswana, South Africa, the UK and other European countries.

21. In Zimbabwe, intelligence reports indicated that airline staff and even law enforcement officials were being recruited and paid by organized drug syndicates to provide inside information in order to let consignments of cannabis through the country’s exit points. Airline staff was also sometimes recruited as couriers.

Conclusions

22. An intricate network of cannabis traffickers operated in Southern African countries. The volume of cannabis cultivated and trafficked was likely to be much larger than estimated by law enforcement seizures. The involvement of skilled and well-organized criminal groups working often in collusion with international networks was making the illicit trade of cannabis escalate. Due to the vast profits being made, cannabis cultivation and trafficking were expected to expand further unless concerted eradication efforts are made.

Abuse of cannabis

23. Since 1998, the overall trend in cannabis abuse was clearly increasing in most regions of the world, and particularly in Africa. Cannabis remained the most abused illegal drug in most of the reporting countries. Most of the cannabis abused was cannabis herb and was produced locally. The particular climate in Southern Africa, the value of cannabis as a cash crop, the social acceptability of cannabis abuse, the inaccessibility of the cultivation and the resource limitation of local law enforcement agencies had made the control of cannabis in Africa extremely difficult.

24. Although precise epidemiological information was not available, consistent increases in cannabis abuse were reported by the majority of the reporting countries, suggesting that cannabis had become more and more popular especially among young people. This trend was confirmed by school surveys, data from treatment

services and psychiatric admissions and from police data on arrests for possession of cannabis in the reporting countries.

Extent of cannabis cultivation

25. Cannabis continued to be the most widely cultivated plant-based drug in Africa. In Southern Africa particularly, because of the global spread of cannabis cultivation and the virtual absence of monitoring systems, precise estimates of cannabis production were not currently available. The rising levels of cannabis seizures, however, indicated a continuing increase in cannabis cultivation.

26. According to the reporting Governments, there was a need to expand cooperation among States and with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in order to make eradication efforts more effective. An important incentive was the implementation of alternative development programmes as an encouragement for farmers to switch from cultivating cannabis to the cultivation of food crops.

Trafficking in cannabis

27. Cannabis remained the most seized drug in Southern Africa. Law enforcement authorities reported that there had been an overall increase of trafficking in cannabis herb, although exact estimates were not available. The majority of the Governments reported local sources and neighbouring countries in respect of the origin of the seized cannabis herb. The cannabis seized was mostly destined for Europe, but also the United States and the Far East Asian countries.

28. The low volumes of cannabis reported as having being seized were not necessarily an indication of low trafficking levels. The reporting Governments indicated that in Southern Africa, well-organized criminals with international networks were making the illicit trade of cannabis escalate to an unprecedented level, never known before. The underreporting of seizures was most likely a reflection of the insufficient resources being assigned by African countries and by the international community to increase interdiction capacities of law enforcement agencies in the region. Most of the reporting Governments noted that the international community should give greater priority to supporting the African countries in stopping cannabis cultivation and in combating cannabis trafficking.