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Intergovernmental expert group on the international challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids

Vienna, 3 and 4 December 2018

Report on the meeting of the intergovernmental expert group on the international challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids held in Vienna on 3 and 4 December 2018**I. Organization of the meeting****A. Opening and duration of the meeting**

1. The intergovernmental expert group meeting on the international challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids, convened pursuant to paragraph 13 of Commission on Narcotic Drugs resolution 61/8, entitled “Enhancing and strengthening international and regional cooperation and domestic efforts to address the international threats posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids”, was held in Vienna on 3 and 4 December 2018.

2. At the 1st meeting of the intergovernmental expert group, on 3 December 2018, opening remarks were delivered by the Chair of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. In addition, video messages from the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the President of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the Deputy Director General for Programmes of the World Health Organization (WHO) were shown.

B. Election of officers

3. At its 1st meeting, the intergovernmental expert group elected a Chair, a Vice-Chair and a Rapporteur.

4. The officers of the intergovernmental expert group meeting were as follows:

Chair: Brian Harris (United States of America)

Vice-Chair: Muhammad Mustapha Abdallah (Nigeria)

Rapporteur: Jawad Ali (Pakistan)

* Reissued for technical reasons on 27 February 2019.



C. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work

5. In paragraph 13 of its resolution 61/8, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs requested UNODC, together with INCB and WHO, to convene an intergovernmental expert group meeting before the sixty-second regular session of the Commission on the international challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids, in order to learn more about the challenges and to propose core elements for an international response.

6. At its 1st meeting, the intergovernmental expert group adopted the provisional agenda and proposed organization of work ([UNODC/CND/EG.1/2018/1](#)).

II. General debate

7. At its 1st and 2nd meetings, on 3 December 2018, under agenda item 4, the intergovernmental expert group held a general debate during which Member States were invited to share information on challenges faced at the national level with regard to the non-medical use of synthetic opioids, as well as their experiences in responding to those challenges.

8. Statements were made by the representatives of Canada, Argentina, Norway, the United States, the Russian Federation, China, Spain, Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, Germany, Italy and Mexico. Statements were also made by the observers for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Oman and Nigeria.

9. In addition, statements were made by the observers for the European Commission, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

Deliberations

10. Many speakers highlighted the need to strengthen cooperation to reduce demand for the non-medical use of synthetic opioids and to counter trafficking in those substances. Speakers stressed the importance of continued international collaboration as a key component of addressing the challenge posed by such use. A number of speakers stressed the need for innovative approaches, such as public-private partnerships, to help combat that challenge.

11. Strong support was expressed for a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to address the challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids. Reference was made to the fact that such an approach should balance public health and public safety concerns and should be holistic, encompassing various demand and supply reduction initiatives. Several speakers also referred to the importance of implementing a balanced approach that incorporates human rights and public health considerations, as outlined in the outcome document of the thirtieth special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Our joint commitment to effectively addressing and countering the world drug problem” (General Assembly resolution S-30/1, annex).

12. A number of speakers welcomed the progress made in recent years with regard to the scheduling of the most harmful new psychoactive substances and their precursors with a view to reducing the supply of illicitly used substances, and noted the importance of responding to the threats posed by synthetic drugs, in particular new psychoactive substances. Several speakers highlighted their active control efforts to address the challenge of the proliferation of the non-medical use of synthetic drugs. It was noted that the Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem and the outcome document of the thirtieth special session of the General

Assembly offered a cross-cutting, integrated and balanced framework for Member States to address the non-medical use of synthetic opioids.

13. It was noted that the five pillars of the UNODC integrated strategy on the global opioid crisis reflected the fact that there was no single solution to the challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids and that all policy levers were required to address the harms associated with such use. Moreover, it was noted that the Office's collaboration with WHO in areas such as developing enhanced prescribing practices, ensuring access to medicines and strengthening specialized drug prevention and treatment programmes for the non-medical use of opioids, as well as its cooperation with INCB in relation to leveraging the INCB global Operational Partnerships to Interdict Opioids' Illicit Distribution and Sales (OPIOIDS) project, could increase Member States' capacity, disrupt trafficking in synthetic opioids and leverage the capacities of all relevant stakeholders in jointly addressing the challenge.

14. Several speakers expressed concern over the risk to public health of the non-medical use of synthetic opioids, including new psychoactive substances with opioid effects. Reference was made to the extent of the challenge in certain parts of the world, where instances of opioid overdose had claimed tens of thousands of lives annually. It was noted that the emergence of dangerous new synthetic opioids, often mixed into supplies of heroin or other illicitly used drugs and trafficked through global supply chains, transformed the challenge into a fatal phenomenon with complex transnational linkages. It was also noted that an increase had been observed in the prevalence of fentanyl and its analogues, both mixed with "traditional" drugs and consumed on their own, leading to an increase in drug overdose deaths. A number of speakers expressed concerns over the non-medical use of tramadol and reported the seizure by their authorities of increasing amounts of substandard, falsified or illicitly manufactured opioids, as well as the involvement of armed non-State groups in trafficking in those opioids. Furthermore, a number of speakers made reference to seizures of tramadol tablets that contained active ingredients far exceeding the authorized medical dosages and thus posing a threat to public health. In that context, some speakers called for the strengthening of international cooperation through information-sharing and capacity-building and underlined the need for enhanced efforts in preventing diversion, while ensuring access for medical purposes.

15. While some speakers noted that synthetic opioids did not represent the greatest drug-related risk or challenge in their countries, they acknowledged important aspects of a response, which were cross-cutting and thus applicable to all psychoactive substances. The aspects included the education of physicians on rational prescribing and the need to monitor the use of analgesics, including opioids, to avoid their diversion and misuse.

16. A number of speakers reported on measures and strategies already in place in their countries to address the challenge of the non-medical use of synthetic opioids. Among those measures were the implementation of guidelines to prevent non-medical use and dependence, campaigns to raise awareness of the risks of such use, and continued monitoring in support of country preparedness. In that regard, many speakers emphasized the need for the cooperation of all authorities and agencies in monitoring the non-medical use of synthetic drugs and opioids, through early warning mechanisms or other frequently used means of communication, including meetings or personal exchanges.

17. Reference was made to the exploitation of global access to information and technology that facilitated trade by traffickers, in particular the anonymity and convenience of the Internet, including the dark web, encrypted peer-to-peer messaging applications and other emerging communications technologies used to directly market and aggressively sell to clients at the global level. It was noted that small quantities of extremely potent synthetic opioids could be trafficked through international mail and express consignment shipments. In that context, a number of speakers highlighted the need for international cooperation and innovative, specialized techniques to disrupt illicit supply chains.

18. Many speakers expressed appreciation for the work and strategic programmatic responses of UNODC, in particular its Laboratory and Scientific Section, WHO and INCB, commending the continued efforts of United Nations agencies and international organizations in developing a response to the proliferation of synthetic opioids. In particular, several speakers mentioned the importance of existing tools for data- and information-sharing, including the UNODC early warning advisory on new psychoactive substances and its toxicology component and the WHO surveillance system, as well as the global projects OPIOIDS and Project Ion and the Project Ion Incident Communication System (IONICS), the Precursors Incident Communication System and the Pre-Export Notification Online (PEN Online) communications platforms of INCB. A number of speakers commended the work done by international organizations to translate high-level discussions into products that are useful at the front line and in the field.

19. Several speakers reaffirmed the importance of information-sharing and the exchange of experiences in addressing the international challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids, which required an international response. In that context, the underreporting of cases related to the non-medical use of such substances as a result of difficulties in identifying and detecting them was acknowledged by a number of speakers. Furthermore, speakers noted the varying capacities of Member States, accentuated the critical need to build forensic capacities and welcomed the continued international dialogue and cooperation, which was essential for sharing good practices and facilitating learning.

20. A number of speakers called for the enhanced coordination and leveraging of existing early warning systems, such as the UNODC early warning advisory and its toxicology component, to make better use of such platforms to exchange information, share trends on new psychoactive substances and understand the challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids and other substances. Speakers highlighted the need to improve the collection of data on trends related to the non-medical use of synthetic opioids and other synthetic drugs, including with regard to consumption trends, the toxicological screening of synthetic drug profiles and the prevalence of toxic adulterants in illicit drug supplies.

21. Many speakers stressed the importance of research, information-sharing and promoting good practices in relation to both trends in use and prevention and treatment interventions. Reference was made to supporting public health messaging on the risks of the non-medical use of synthetic drugs, increasing the implementation of evidence-based prevention, treatment and recovery support services, and fostering the adoption of evidence-based practices to reduce the likelihood of unintentional exposure to dangerous synthetic drugs.

22. It was noted that the INCB list of fentanyl analogues with no known medical or therapeutic use was proving to be a valuable tool for national practitioners and could be further expanded to include related non-scheduled, dangerous substances, including with a view to supporting the development of national legislation.

23. Presentations were made by representatives of INCB and UNODC that showcased current efforts and strategies to address the non-medical use of synthetic opioids. Representatives of INCB provided insight into the Board's global communication platforms, intelligence-sharing activities and projects, and representatives of UNODC presented a situational update on the scope of the challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids and provided further insight into the opioid strategy and proposed toolkit on synthetic drug-related challenges of UNODC.

24. It was emphasized that those efforts, supported by INCB and UNODC, were helping the international community to effectuate a strategic and coordinated international response to the challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids.

25. The representative of WHO delivered a presentation on the procedure for reviewing substances for international control under the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 and the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, including the assessments carried out by the Expert Committee on Drug Dependence and the Expert Committee's efforts to accelerate the rate at which dangerous substances, including fentanyl analogues, are controlled under the United Nations drug convention framework. Speakers emphasized the need for the accelerated international control of dangerous substances, while noting that such control should not impede the access to and availability of substances for medical and scientific purposes.

26. The lack of access to and availability of substances for medical and scientific purposes in some countries was noted, with some participants requesting practical suggestions for addressing that gap. The importance of balancing access for medical use with the international control of substances was highlighted. Reference was made to the international drug control conventions and their pivotal role in controlling narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances while ensuring their availability for medical and scientific use. It was recognized that controls should not prevent access for medical use. In that context, achieving access would require a multifaceted approach that included efforts to strengthen regulatory systems, improve evidence-based selection and the use of medicines and build the capacity of Member States. In that regard, the important expertise of WHO was recognized and its mandate was acknowledged.

27. Strong support was expressed for the Office's efforts to translate the pillars of its opioid strategy into practice through the planned launch of the proposed synthetic drug toolkit and related components at the sixty-second session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, in March 2019. The toolkit would comprise a comprehensive set of technical assistance tools developed by a number of international and regional stakeholders, including INCB and WHO, to be deployed at the national level to support Member States in identifying and addressing gaps in their responses to synthetic drug-related challenges. Further discussions would be needed to operationalize the toolkit, develop advocacy strategies and incorporate capacity-building activities to ensure its effective implementation. In that context, several speakers reaffirmed their commitment to collaborating with UNODC, INCB, WHO and other international stakeholders to support the development and implementation of the toolkit.

III. Thematic sessions (panel discussions) and concluding remarks

28. At its 3rd and 4th meetings, on 4 December 2018, the intergovernmental expert group considered agenda item 5, entitled "Thematic sessions (panel discussions)", which was addressed in two panel discussions.

29. At the 3rd meeting, a panel discussion was held on reducing the supply of synthetic opioids for non-medical use. Participants were invited to focus their discussions on, among others, the following topics: international law enforcement operations to disrupt trafficking; international scheduling; precursor control; reducing diversion and misuse; reducing illicit supply; and strengthening national and international counter-narcotics capacity.

30. The panel discussion was presided over by the Chair and led by the following panellists: Tofik Murshudlu (UNODC), Ain Peil (Estonia), Rossen Popov (INCB), Gilles Forte (WHO) and Mahmoud M. Elhabiby (Egypt).

31. Statements were made by the representatives of Canada, Germany, Mexico, the United States, China and Algeria. Statements were also made by the observers for the United Kingdom, Nigeria, Singapore, Sweden and Slovakia.

32. The observers for INTERPOL and IFRC also made statements.

33. At the 4th meeting, a panel discussion was held on the public health aspects of the non-medical use of synthetic opioids. Participants were invited to focus their discussions on, among others, the following topics: early warning systems and trend analysis; pain management; prevention; treatment and recovery services; rational prescribing and access to opioids for medical and scientific use; removal of stigma; and research, including on pain, addiction, overdose, epidemiology and policy, and survival assistance, including the availability of overdose-reversing drugs.

34. The panel discussion was presided over by the Chair and led by the following panellists: Angela Me (UNODC), Michael Evans-Brown (EMCDDA), K. V. Ranjith Wickramashinghe (Sri Lanka), Vladimir Poznyak (WHO), Gilberto Gerra (UNODC), Stefano Berterame (INCB) and Kirsten Mattison (Canada).

35. Statements were made by the representatives of the United States, Canada, Germany, Algeria, Mexico, the Russian Federation, Argentina and Colombia. In addition, statements were made by the observers for the United Kingdom and Nigeria.

36. The observers for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission of the Organization of American States and IOGT International also made statements.

37. Also at its 4th meeting, the intergovernmental expert group considered agenda item 6, entitled “Concluding remarks”. Under the item, the Chair delivered a summary of the salient points discussed under agenda item 5.

Summary by the Chair

38. The Chair’s summary of the salient points, which was not subject to negotiation, is presented below:

Thematic session (panel discussion) on reducing the supply of synthetic opioids for non-medical use: international law enforcement operations to disrupt trafficking; international scheduling; precursor control; reducing diversion and misuse; reducing illicit supply; and strengthening national and international counter-narcotics capacity

(a) In the context of reducing the supply of synthetic opioids for non-medical use, speakers highlighted the need to use innovative approaches that achieve rapid results in interdicting and significantly reducing the manufacture and marketing of, and trafficking in, dangerous synthetic opioids and related new psychoactive substances of concern and to limit their supply to consumer markets. Concern was repeatedly expressed about the trafficking in substandard, falsified or illicitly manufactured opioids posing as legitimate medicines, such as tramadol tablets;

(b) It was recognized that initiatives such as those undertaken by INCB could help to achieve the rapid, real-time exchange of operational information and intelligence on the illicit manufacture, marketing and movement of synthetic opioids and related precursors and the equipment used for their illicit manufacture;

(c) Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening multilateral cooperation and communication among relevant sectors, such as collaboration among law enforcement agencies, regulatory bodies and the health sector, as well as other government agencies. The use of available platforms for intelligence-sharing, such as those provided by INCB for new psychoactive substances and their precursors, emerging chemicals and their manufacturing equipment, was recommended;

(d) The need for innovative special investigative techniques, including for the monitoring and disruption of illicit manufacture and of online marketing, sales and distribution and related financial flows via the Internet and dark web, as well as the need for the development and multilateral exchange of intelligence, was acknowledged;

(e) Speakers highlighted the importance of expanding the existing, effective voluntary cooperation with legitimate private sector partners, in particular those in the postal, express courier and shipping industries; and the chemical, pharmaceutical and manufacturing industries; as well as those involved with online sales and marketing at the national and international levels;

(f) Speakers acknowledged the need to enhance existing regional and global collaborations, such as with EMCDDA, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, INCB, INTERPOL, the Organization of American States, UNODC, the World Customs Organization and WHO, and establish new collaborations to exchange information, such as with the INCB-Universal Postal Union partnership. In that context, the importance of UNODC projects in addressing the threat posed by synthetic opioids was mentioned;

(g) A number of speakers recognized the challenges posed by the chemical diversity and rapid emergence of new substances, and the differences in national preparedness to identify such substances and respond to their emergence, as well as the lack of capacity to detect them. Enhancing the capacity of Member States to identify and detect drugs using modern technologies, as well as the provision of training and forensic capacity-building activities, were emphasized;

(h) Several speakers noted that existing tools should be used to exchange criminal intelligence and support backtracking investigations and multilateral operations. In addition, several references were made to the nexus between trafficking in synthetic opioids, organized crime and terrorist activities. Experts acknowledged the importance of inter-agency cooperation and national and international communication mechanisms for enhancing security;

(i) Participants highlighted the importance of making better use of global and regional early warning systems, such as the UNODC early warning advisory and the EMCDDA early warning system, by sharing international and regional information on the non-medical use of synthetic opioids and new psychoactive substances of concern;

(j) The importance of developing and enforcing national legislation aimed at preventing the diversion and illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals used in the manufacture of synthetic opioids was also stressed. Many speakers recognized the need to adopt more rapid and improved domestic and international scheduling approaches, which would provide law enforcement and regulatory agencies with the basis for controlling dangerous emerging substances;

(k) Some participants recognized the importance of a balanced approach to ensure proper access to controlled medicines for those in need while preventing their diversion. Monitoring and supply management systems were considered important elements. In that context, the development of strategies and interventions to monitor and manage the marketing of opioid medicines was recommended;

Thematic session (panel discussion) on public health aspects of the non-medical use of synthetic opioids: early warning systems and trend analysis; pain management; prevention; treatment and recovery services; rational prescribing and access to opioids for medical and scientific use; removal of stigma; and research, including on pain, addiction, overdose, epidemiology and policy, and survival assistance, including the availability of overdose-reversing drugs

(l) Addressing the challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids will not be accomplished with a “one size fits all” solution but will be contingent on the specific situation of each Member State, thus there is a need to tailor the approach to each Member State’s local and national needs. There is also a need for Member States to understand their own situations, for instance by utilizing early warning systems or other communication mechanisms, in order to comprehend the extent of the challenge in their countries;

(m) Speakers stressed the importance of developing and/or further enhancing global and regional early warning systems, and emphasized the critical role played by such systems in monitoring and early detection and in providing timely responses to the emerging threats of synthetic opioids and new psychoactive substances, including their potential harms to public health. Speakers recognized the need to enhance data collection and timely information-sharing at the national, regional and international levels to better identify the scope of the challenge posed by synthetic drugs so that efforts could be more precisely targeted and effective;

(n) In addition, many speakers suggested that global and regional monitoring and surveillance systems for new psychoactive substances should be strengthened and integrated and that collaboration among them should be intensified. Speakers noted the need to enhance support to Member States for the development of national surveillance mechanisms, and to address the challenges related to their implementation, such as the limited collaboration between the law enforcement and health sectors, the lack of forensic laboratories and capacities, and the limited financial resources available;

(o) It was noted that people who use drugs should have adequate access to prevention and treatment services, including medicines such as naloxone, to reverse overdoses, and harm reduction services, such as needle exchange programmes and opioid substitution therapies, to prevent transmission of HIV, viral hepatitis and tuberculosis. Reference was made to the importance of reducing stigma and to the complexity of gaining access to pain relief medicines. Furthermore, speakers noted the importance of access to opioid substitution therapy for marginalized populations, social responsibility on the part of pharmaceutical opioid manufacturers and considering human rights due diligence;

(p) A number of speakers also noted the importance of updating and implementing existing UNODC and WHO guidelines and tools on prevention and treatment, and of expanding the scope of the guidelines and tools to address the challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids;

(q) Moreover, UNODC, INCB and WHO were very concerned that 75 per cent of the world population, predominantly in lower-income countries, did not have adequate access to opioid analgesics for pain relief and palliative care. In that context, a number of speakers recognized that special attention should be paid to reaching and providing services to marginalized populations. Speakers also stressed the need for rational prescribing of opioid medicines for the management of pain and the need to train health professionals in rational prescribing in line with evidence-based guidelines;

(r) Speakers emphasized the need for cooperation among UNODC, INCB and WHO to lead a coordinated response to tackle the serious public health challenge posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids and to promote evidence-based, balanced, comprehensive and multidisciplinary approaches that address both public health and supply reduction responses to the world drug problem, in line with the outcome document of the thirtieth special session of the General Assembly.

IV. Closure of the meeting

39. At its 4th meeting, on 4 December 2018, the intergovernmental expert group heard closing remarks by the Chair. The expert group was informed that the report on the intergovernmental expert group meeting would be prepared by the Secretariat, in close consultation with the Rapporteur and the Chair, and would be brought to the attention of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs at its sixty-second session, in March 2019.