

toespraak

**Statement of the Netherlands at the 52nd
session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs,
Vienna, 11 – 12 March 2009.**

**delivered by Ms. Annemiek van Bolhuis,
National Drug Coordinator**

Madam chair, your excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

We associate ourselves with the statement made by the Czech Republic on behalf of the EU.

At this high-level meeting, we are looking back on the efforts and achievements of the past ten years. However, I believe there is good reason to look back somewhat further. After all, it is now exactly a century since the foundations of our international drugs control system were laid, when the International Opium Commission convened in Shanghai. Adopting the historic perspective allows us to take a more dispassionate view, and perhaps to learn from the past. Ideally, the 'lessons learned' will be reflected in the political statement that we intend to adopt at this meeting.

A review of the past century reveals both continuity and change.

This continuity derives from the realization that we have a common responsibility to reduce the world drugs problem, while guaranteeing the availability of legitimate, controlled substances for therapeutic use.

We have a common responsibility to counter the production of illegal drugs and the trade in those drugs, taking an appropriate and proportionate response to criminal activity, while also respecting human rights. Most importantly, we have a common responsibility to adopt a humane approach to those who have fallen prey to drug addiction, to offer appropriate help and treatment, and to prevent disease and death. Supply *and* demand reduction: a balanced approach!

The drugs problem is dynamic and is constantly raising new challenges for us to address. To do so effectively demands a flexible, innovative and creative approach whereby we make full use of the insights offered by scientific research and evaluation. A response that was considered adequate in the past may be of little use today. Similarly, an approach which is seen as a waste of time and resources today could become absolutely essential tomorrow. We must all rise to the challenge of finding solutions which are appropriate to the problems of the 21st century.

Madam chair,

Regretfully, I must conclude that the objectives we agreed on ten years ago have not been attained.

True, there have been some successes, not least in the field of judicial cooperation. Also the Netherlands plays his part in it. For example, we offer extensive international cooperation in tracing criminal financial transactions.

However, we cannot claim to have made very much progress on a world scale towards the elimination of the trade in illegal drugs, or even a substantial reduction. Far from it. In many cases, the problems have merely shifted elsewhere, the increased traffic into West Africa for example, or have taken on a different form, as in the emergence of synthetic drugs. A drugs-free world is now farther away than ever. Such a world would, of course, would be ideal but we must use that word – 'ideal' – in its proper sense. It is a Utopia, which must not be allowed to distract us from the task in hand, that of finding solutions to the drug-related problems that exist here in the real world. But neither should it be allowed to detract from the successes that we have indeed achieved. If our efforts have led to a reduction in supply and demand, to fewer deaths, to

a decrease in the incidence of HIV and to less drug-related crime, we can justly claim that we have indeed achieved progress. It is that progress which should now be highlighted and celebrated.

The last ten years of UNGASS have taught us that a balanced approach to supply and demand reduction can indeed be effective. We have also learned that there are effective responses to the new issues and problems. Nevertheless, flexibility is required in order to apply those responses effectively. The World Health Organization and the UNAIDS partners have already demonstrated that measures such as needle exchange, substitution treatment and low-threshold counselling services can be highly effective in countering the adverse effects of drug abuse, both to individual health and to society as a whole. Such measures fall under the general heading of 'harm reduction'.

The scientific debate on whether harm reduction is actually effective is now at an end. We have shown that it is. Unfortunately, however, the political debate continues. Given the aim of achieving 'system-wide coherence' between UN organizations, I find it regrettable that, although WHO and the

UNAIDS partners have fully embraced harm reduction, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs still seems to consider it 'a bridge too far'. In a sense, this detracts from the work of all those dedicated professionals who devote their time and energy to tackling the real drug-related problems of real people.

I cannot help but notice that the political declaration now under consideration shows some remarkable similarities to that of 1998, eleven years ago. In fact, they are virtually interchangeable. If we look at these declarations alone, it would seem that there has been absolutely no progress in the meantime. Of course, that is not the case. As I have already stated, there has been progress in both the quality and quantity of demand reduction and, more especially, *harm* reduction efforts.

I earnestly hope that the member states, international organizations and NGOs will continue to develop and implement evidence-based demand reduction measures, and will continue to do so with the flexibility and creativity they have shown thus far. Further pursuit of the existing effective measures, in combination with the development of

alternatives, will allow us to achieve a genuinely balanced overall approach. By working together, we can indeed make a difference. I wish to assure you that the Netherlands will continue to make the fullest possible contribution.

Thank you for your attention.