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UN Backs Drug Decriminalization In World Drug Report

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In an about face, the United Nations on Wednesday lavishly praised drug decriminalization in its annual report on the state of global drug policy. In previous years, the UN drug czar had expressed skepticism about Portugal's decriminalization, which removed criminal penalties in 2001 for personal drug possession and emphasized treatment over incarceration. The UN had suggested the policy was in violation of international drug treaties and would encourage "drug tourism."

But in its 2009 World Drug Report, the UN had little but kind words for Portugal's radical (by U.S. standards) approach. "These conditions keep drugs out of the hands of those who would avoid them under a system of full prohibition, while encouraging treatment, rather than incarceration, for users. Among those who would not welcome a summons from a police officer are tourists, and, as a result, Portugal's policy has reportedly not led to an increase in drug tourism," reads the report. "It also appears that a number of drug-related problems have decreased."

In its upbeat appraisal of Portugal's policy, the UN finds itself in agreement with [Salon's Glenn Greenwald](#).

The report, released at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., also puts to rest concerns that decriminalization doesn't comply with international treaties, which prevent countries from legalizing drugs.

U.S. Drug Czar Gil Kerlikowske is scheduled to appear at the announcement of the report. (He has said "legalization" is not "in my vocabulary.")

"The International Narcotics Control Board was initially apprehensive when Portugal changed its law in 2001 (see their annual report for that year), but after a mission to Portugal in 2004, it "noted that the acquisition, possession and abuse of drugs had remained prohibited," and said "the practice of exempting small quantities of drugs from criminal prosecution is consistent with the international drug control treaties," reads a footnote to the report.

The UN report also dives head first into the debate over full drug legalization. Last year's World Drug Report ignored the issue entirely, save for a reference to Chinese opium policy in the 19th Century. This year's report begins with a lengthy rebuttal of arguments in favor of legalization. "Why unleash a drug epidemic in the developing world for the sake of libertarian arguments made by a pro-drug lobby that has the luxury of access to drug treatment?" argues the report.

But the UN also makes a significant concession to backers of legalization, who have long argued that it is prohibition policies that lead to violence and the growth of shadowy, underground networks.

"In the Preface to the report," reads the press release accompanying the report, "[UN Office of Drugs and Crime Executive Director Antonio Maria] Costa explores the debate over repealing drug controls. He acknowledges that controls have generated an illicit black market of macro-economic proportions that uses violence and corruption."

Jack Cole, executive director of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) and a retired undercover narcotics detective, objected to the report's classification of current policy as "control."

"The world's 'drug czar,' Antonio Maria Costa, would have you believe that the legalization movement is calling for the abolition of drug control," he said. "Quite the contrary, we are demanding that governments replace the failed policy of prohibition with a system that actually regulates and controls drugs, including their purity and prices, as well as who produces them and who they can be sold to. You can't have effective control under prohibition, as we should

have learned from our failed experiment with alcohol in the U.S. between 1920 and 1933."

Ryan Grim's book, [This Is Your Country On Drugs: The Secret History of Getting High in America](#), is now on sale

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