

Cannabis pandemic blamed on soft UK drug policy

Britain's 'cannabis pandemic' has been caused by the Government's failure to treat it as a serious threat, the UN narcotics chief warned today.

The British Government's decision to downgrade cannabis to a Class C drug was criticised by executive director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Antonio Maria Costa, who said that countries got the "drug problem they deserved" if they maintained inadequate policies.

In an unusual statement, he suggested cannabis was as harmful as cocaine and heroin - a stance which differs wildly from the British attitude of treating cannabis far less seriously than Class A substances.

Although he did not specifically name and shame the UK, Mr Costa said at the Washington DC launch of the UNODC's 2006 World Drug Report: "Policy reversals leave young people confused as to just how dangerous cannabis is.

"With cannabis-related health damage increasing, it is fundamentally wrong for countries to make cannabis control dependent on which party is in government.

"The cannabis pandemic, like other challenges to public health, requires consensus, a consistent commitment across the political spectrum and by society at large."

Mr Costa suggested that cannabis was now "considerably more potent" than a few decades ago and that it was a "mistake" to dismiss it as a soft, relatively harmless drug.

"Today, the harmful characteristics of cannabis are no longer that different from those of other plant-based drugs such as cocaine and heroin," Mr Costa said.

The report estimated 162million people used cannabis at least once in 2004, the equivalent of four per cent of the 15 to 64-year-old global population.

Mr Costa said: "After so many years of drug control experience, we now know that a coherent, long-term strategy can reduce drug supply, demand and trafficking.

"If this does not happen, it will be because some nations fail to take the drug issue sufficiently seriously and pursue inadequate policies.

"Many countries have the drug problem they deserve."

Former home secretary David Blunkett downgraded cannabis from Class B to Class C in January 2004, meaning possession of the drug was normally no longer an arrestable offence.

The UNODC's report showed showed global opium production fell five per cent in 2005 while cocaine production was broadly stable.

In Afghanistan, the world's largest opium producer, the area under opium poppy cultivation fell 21 per cent to 104,000 hectares in 2005, the first such decline since 2001, it said.

But Mr Costa warned: "Afghanistan's drug situation remains vulnerable to reversal because of mass poverty, lack of security and the fact that the authorities have inadequate control over its territory.

"This could happen as early as 2006 despite large-scale eradication of opium crops this spring."

The director repeated former UN warnings about growing cocaine use, particularly in western Europe where demand was reaching "alarming levels", Mr Costa said.

He went on: "I urge European Union governments not to ignore this peril.

"Too many professional, educated Europeans use cocaine, often denying their addiction, and drug abuse by celebrities is often presented uncritically by the media leaving young people confused and vulnerable."

His comments come less than two weeks after supermodel Kate Moss escaped prosecution for drug-taking, despite video evidence, because of a legal loophole.

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