

## **High Commissioner calls for focus on human rights and harm reduction in international drug policy**

This month, the international community takes stock of progress made in international drug control over the ten years since the Political Declaration of the 1998 UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs. That Declaration recognized not only the grave effects of illicit drug use, but also the imperative for States to respond to the challenges posed by drug use in full conformity with international law, and particularly with full respect for all human rights. In reviewing our progress over the last decade and setting the course for the next, it is timely to again underscore what States' human rights obligations demand of drug control regimes.

Individuals who use drugs do not forfeit their human rights. These include the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (including access to treatment, services and care), the right not to be tortured or arbitrarily detained, and the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of their life. Too often, drug users suffer discrimination, are forced to accept treatment, marginalized and often harmed by approaches which over-emphasize criminalization and punishment while under-emphasizing harm reduction and respect for human rights. This is despite the longstanding evidence that a harm reduction approach is the most effective way of protecting rights, limiting personal suffering, and reducing the incidence of HIV. Let me stress that this is particularly the case for those in detention, who are already vulnerable to many forms of human rights violations.

States have obligations to maintain regimes that control access to and use of dangerous drugs, as well as obligations to ensure that certain drugs are available for therapeutic purposes. These control regimes must, however, operate within the framework of international law, including international human rights law. Among other things, this means that those charged with drug offences must not be extradited (or otherwise sent) to countries where they will face torture. Similarly, the application of the death penalty to those convicted solely of drug-related offences raises serious human rights concerns, not the least of which is whether or not these offences can be said to fall within the category of "most serious crimes" for which the death penalty may be sought in conformity with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We have witnessed progress since the 1998 Political Declaration, progress which must form the basis of our efforts in the next decade. It is too late for us to return to earlier, outdated approaches to drug use. We cannot deny that those suffering from addiction require medical care. We must opt for treatment that is evidence-based, and be responsive to the views of those in need of treatment. We must do our utmost to reduce harm to individuals related to drug use, including exposure to HIV. We must ensure at all times that every individual's inalienable rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.