

Global commission brands “drug war” a failure

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An international commission that includes former Latin American presidents and US officials issued a scathing indictment of Washington’s “war on drugs.”

The Global Commission on Drug Policies issued a 24-page report at a press conference in New York City Thursday.

“The global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world,” the report states.

It continues: “Fifty years after the initiation of the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, and 40 years after President [Richard] Nixon launched the US government’s war on drugs, fundamental reforms in national and global drug control policies are urgently needed.”

The commission’s members include former Brazilian president Fernando Cardoso, former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo, former Colombian president Cesar Gaviria, ex-UN secretary general Kofi Annan, as well as former US Secretary of State George Shultz and former US Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker.

The main thrust of the report is the demand for an end to the criminalization of drug use and an approach based on legal regulation of drugs combined with investment in treatment and public health and social programs aimed at preventing drug addiction in the first place.

The report calls upon Washington and other governments to “replace drug policies and strategies driven by ideology and political convenience with fiscally responsible policies and strategies grounded in science, health, security and human rights.”

Individual members of the commission were even more sharply critical of US policies, exposing in part the growing tensions between Washington and Latin America.

“We hope this country [the US] at least starts to think there are alternatives,” former Colombian president Gaviria told the Associated Press. “We don’t see the US evolving in a way that is compatible with our [countries’] long-term interests.”

In a statement released by the Commission, Gaviria said, “We can no longer ignore the extent to which drug-related

violence, crime and corruption in Latin America are the results of failed drug war policies.”

The report’s recommendations drew an immediate and angry response from both US officials and the government of Mexico, Washington’s main client and the current bloody frontline in the US-sponsored global war on drugs.

White House “drug czar” Gil Kerlikowske called the report “misguided.” Office of National Drug Control Policy spokesman Rafael Lemaitre added, “Making drugs more available as this report suggests will make it harder to keep our communities healthy and safe.”

Meanwhile, in Mexico, Alejandro Poiré Romero, an official on the country’s National Security Council, said that the government “categorically rejects the idea that in our country a greater effort to enforce the law by the authorities is responsible for an increase in violence by the narco-traffickers.”

The report, however, refutes such arguments on empirical grounds, pointing out that the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars, the imprisonment of tens of millions of people and the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of lives in the US-backed drug war has done nothing to curtail the supply or consumption of drugs.

The document cites United Nations estimates that between 1998 and 2008, opiate use increased 34.5 percent worldwide, while the use of cocaine rose 27 percent, and of cannabis, or marijuana, 8.5 percent.

It also cites substantial evidence that the militarized repression of drugs has increased levels of homicide and other violent crimes.

Moreover, the criminalization of drug use, the report establishes, serves as an impediment to effective public health initiatives both to curtail consumption and to mitigate its effects, including HIV transmission among those who inject drugs.

“Arresting and incarcerating tens of millions of these people in recent decades has filled prisons and destroyed lives and families without reducing the availability of illicit drugs or the power of criminal organizations,” the report

states.

A background paper issued in conjunction with the main report amplified on its indictment of the US policy of mass incarceration of those convicted of drug offenses.

Entitled “Drug policy, criminal justice and mass imprisonment”, the paper was written by Bryan Stevenson, the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative.

Stevenson points out that the so-called drug war is principally responsible for the United States having the highest rate of incarceration in the world, with the country’s prison population having ballooned from 300,000 in the early 1970s to some 2.3 million today. Over the last 25 years, drug arrests have tripled, he writes, while in the same period, the amount spent on prisons and jails by the federal and state governments has increased 10-fold, from \$6.9 billion in 1980 to \$68 billion in 2006.

“The increasing costs of mass imprisonment have eliminated funds for treatment and counseling services even though some of these services have proved to be very effective,” writes Stevenson. “In 1991, one in three inmates was receiving treatment while incarcerated, today the rate is down to one in seven.” There is little doubt, given the current round of devastating budget cuts, that the percentage being treated will become far smaller still.

The paper also points to a “wealth-sensitive” judicial system, which reserves incarceration on drug charges largely for the poor and the working class, and targets minority communities for drug enforcement. While African Americans comprise 14 percent of drug users in the US, they make up 56 percent of those locked up for drug crimes.

The commission’s report pleads for governments to implement a rational policy on drugs: “Political leaders and public figures should have the courage to articulate publicly what many of them acknowledge privately: that the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that repressive strategies will not solve the drug problem, and that the war on drugs has not, and cannot, be won.”

US President Barack Obama, speaking as a senator in 2004, described the war on drugs as “an utter failure.” As president, however, he has maintained the same drug war model as his predecessor, with roughly double the amount of funding going to law enforcement and criminal prosecution as is allocated for treatment and prevention.

Moreover, his administration has intensified the US drug war intervention in Mexico, where nearly 40,000 people have been killed since the government of President Felipe Calderon launched a militarized crackdown on the drug cartels in 2006.

Under Obama, the US government has extended indefinitely the so-called Merida Initiative, launched in 2007 as a three-year, \$1.5 billion drug war aid program. In fiscal

2011, the administration allocated \$410 million under the Merida Initiative to provide more military equipment and training for a militarized drug war that the majority of the Mexican people oppose.

While the empirical data compiled in the commission’s report are irrefutable, the reality is that Washington’s drug war policy serves definite interests that have nothing to do with curtailing the supply or consumption of outlawed drugs.

In foreign policy, the supposed war on drugs has provided the main pretext for the assertion of US military power in the Western hemisphere, beginning in Colombia under the Clinton administration and now extending from Mexico into Central America under Obama.

At home, the war on drugs has served as a means of social repression and control, particularly over the most oppressed and volatile sections of the population. It has likewise provided a vehicle for the vast expansion of police powers and the emergence of a thriving “prison-industrial” complex.

Finally, the drug trade has provided a lucrative source of profits for Wall Street. A glimpse of the extent of this relationship was provided last year with Wachovia bank’s settlement with the Justice Department of a money-laundering case involving \$378.4 billion dollars from Mexico’s Sinaloa drug cartel. The case was described by the British *Observer* as just “the tip of the iceberg” of the financial dealings between the major drug traffickers and the biggest US banks and finance houses.

In short, behind a seemingly irrational policy of fomenting wars abroad, spending hundreds of billions of dollars and locking up millions at home, while failing to make a dent in drug supplies or use, there lie very definite strategic, profit and class interests of America’s ruling financial elite.



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