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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE FIFTH
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL
ORGANISATIONS (NGOs) IN THE PREVENTION AND
CONTROL OF DRUG ABUSE AT HILTON HOTEL
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GLOBAL DRUG ABUSE A LANDSCAPE OF DISASTER

The global perspective of the problem of drug abuse grows grimmer with every passing year. The problem is compounded by lack of economic growth, increasing social and political instability, and cultural confusion. There is the unemployment crisis, the energy crisis, the debt crisis, the Middle-East crisis, the East-West crisis, and so on. No crisis can be regarded in isolation from all the other crisis which plague our planet. Each crisis feeds and nourishes every other crisis.

All this is taking place in the context of an unprecedented population explosion. In 1980 the population of China reached the billion mark - one thousand million people. Heaven knows how many million babies are born in China every year. But the estimate for India is 12 million babies each year - about the population of another Australia! The mounting astronomical debts of several developing countries, in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere is only exceeded by their exploding populations. It is a geometric progression, a tide which no human device seems able to stem.

All this means more production of drugs, more drug traffickers, more people to consume their deadly wares, and the weakening of political and cultural wills to cope with the problems of drug abuse.

Yet there are pockets of people scattered over the world, in Western Europe for example, or even in small oases like Singapore, who seem to believe that God is in His Heaven and all is right with the world, simply because their own little plots of earth are comfortably green (for the time being!), and relatively unencumbered by the social, political and economic anxieties and other plagues of desperation and degradation which afflict the majority of mankind.

It is necessary to paint reality in its true colours so that, among other things, the responses of non-governmental organisations in the prevention and control of drug abuse in all parts of the world prove equal to the size and scope of the challenges they face, in their own societies, as well as in the world at large.

Let us concentrate, for the moment, on drug trafficking and drug abuse, and leave aside all the social, cultural, political and economic factors which are certain to compound our drug-related problems.

A quick survey of the sources of drug supply confirm our worst fears of an expanding rather than a diminishing problem. By a perverse inversion of values, we refer to the widespread areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, where opium is illicitly and ever more copiously produced, as the "Golden Crescent" area. By the same perverse token, the large area where the borders of Burma, Thailand and Laos meet is called the "Golden Triangle". Golden for whom? Certainly not for the millions throughout the world who physically and mentally cripple themselves through drug abuse, with deplorable consequences for themselves, let alone for the economies and for the stability of the societies they live in. Only "golden" for the traffickers in human degradation and death, who derive the raw material from these areas for the manufacture of morphine and heroin. This expanding illicit traffic, which finds its way

into industrialised as well as developing countries, demonstrates the rising pressure of demand. Drug abuse is a contagion which respects neither national borders nor levels of socio-economic development. It percolates insidiously and irresistibly, in all directions and in all continents.

With some exceptions, there seems no ebbing of the drug tide. Dealings in cannabis, grown throughout America, the Middle East, South-East Asia and Africa have reached vast proportions, in response to a world-wide demand. Discoveries of multi-ton consignments of cannabis transported in aircraft and vessels or disguised as international road freight are now more frequent. Going by the dominant place cannabis and its brood of products occupy in drug abuse and trafficking, it is a safe guess that undiscovered multi-ton consignments of the stuff which get through to their destinations, exceed by far the discoveries. The tip of the iceberg conceals its vaster bulk in invisible depths.

It is the same story with cocaine. There is an alarming proliferation in the growth of coca leaves, particularly in Bolivia, Peru and elsewhere in the Andes. Most of it ends up in North America and Western Europe.

Where psychotropic drugs are concerned, the flow is reversed, from the developed to the developing countries. Most of the psychotropic substances abused are manufactured in Western Europe by established pharmaceutical firms and diverted into the illicit traffic, probably via allegedly licit markets, in the developing world.

Reports of the international drug abuse situation make one shudder. Drug abuse in Near and Middle East countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey has registered alarming increases. The number of drug abusers are estimated to have increased several-fold since the mid 70s. Increasingly sophisticated clandestine

laboratories produce heroin of high purity. Heroin seizures in Pakistan alone in 1982 amounted to about one ton. Imagine one ton of soft, finely ground and almost weightless poisonous powder! The abuse of high potency cannabis products remains widespread. Psychotropic substances, especially methaqualone are readily available in the region.

A similar scenario can be painted for South Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. They also provide transit areas for illicit trafficking. Illicit cultivation of opium poppy and of cannabis also takes place extensively in the region. Heroin abuse is rapidly spreading. And so is the abuse of psychotropic substances.

The abuse of several drugs has markedly increased in Western Europe. In some countries, statistics of persons arrested suggest a correlation between drug abuse, rising unemployment and crime. Heroin is easily available, purity is generally high, prices have fallen and the number of abusers is considerable. Cocaine abuse is also mounting. Cannabis is the most widely abused drug throughout Western Europe and remains in great demand. There is growing abuse of psychotropic substances, while LSD has re-emerged as a favoured hallucinogen in West Germany, France, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Multiple drug availability and abuse continues to increase in both Canada and the United States. A recent survey estimates that in the United States the number of current abusers of cannabis is 22.5 million, or nine times the population of Singapore. Reportedly, cannabis is the third biggest cash crop in the USA. More than four million are hooked on cocaine, half of them in the 18-24 age group. Heroin addicts are estimated at around half a million. Psychotropic drugs are also widely abused.

A brief look at the Asean countries reveals that the availability of illicit opium, morphine and heroin stems from the abundant opium harvests of the last three years

from the so-called Golden Triangle area. Cannabis is cultivated in the region and is widely abused.

Despite the availability of these drugs, the drug abuse situation in Singapore and the Philippines is considered to be under control. In Singapore, over the last six years, the heroin addict population has been more than halved from 13,000 in 1977 to 6,000 in the middle of 1983. You will hear from others how this was achieved. Malaysia and Thailand are gamely grappling with the problem. Malaysia has given top national priority to the anti-drug campaign.

There are variations of approach to drug abuse control by different countries. First, there is what may be called the extremist harsh approach which regards drug addicts as criminals to be executed, rather than patients to be treated and rehabilitated. Examples of countries which adopt this harsh approach are Iran and Taiwan. Reports on drug problems in communist countries are scanty, although unofficial reports suggest that they generally also practise the extremist harsh approach.

Iran was reported to have more than one million drug addicts. Under the new regime in that country, drug addicts as well as drug traffickers are given summary trials followed by execution.

At the other extreme of the harsh approach, we have the so-called liberal approach adopted in Western Europe and the United States. In these areas drug-taking is regarded as a personal choice. In the absence of enforcement action against small-time drug peddlers and of national treatment and rehabilitation programmes to cure drug addiction, drug abuse has reached alarming proportions. Most of the existing treatment programmes are run by concerned private citizens. Some of them do receive financial support from their governments.

The hippy culture of the early 60s popularised the abuse of drugs as a way of life. Its influence was far-reaching. Since then, drug abuse has become widespread in the United States, Canada and West European countries, sometimes assuming epidemic proportions. And their drug problems keep on escalating. The absence of political will in these countries to curb and contain drug abuse further compounds the escalation.

In Spain and in certain states within the United States of America, there are no laws against the consumption of soft drugs. As a result, millions of people indulge in cannabis and in psychotropic drugs. Since the use of soft drugs is socially acceptable, young people in particular easily succumb to the temptation to graduate to hard drugs, like heroin and cocaine. The end result is poly-drug abuse.

Emasculated enforcement officers often do not arrest drug addicts. For there are no provisions in their drug laws to identify drug addicts by blood tests, urine tests, or medical examinations. Essentially, Western drug control policies do not emphasize socio-economic, cultural and legislative means to reduce the demand for drugs. Instead, they concentrate on supply reduction, through suppression of drug trafficking. Here too, they like to palliate. Enforcement officers concentrate only on large-scale traffickers, leaving the street pushers to flourish. Supply reduction is not effective, because demand generates supplies.

Punishment of drug traffickers is not sufficiently severe. Some of these countries have long sentences for drug trafficking. But lenient judiciaries and the prison parole system reduce the effectiveness of the long sentence. Drug enforcement officers often lament that drug traffickers incarcerated after laborious investigations return to the streets all too soon.

It might be said for the Asean countries and for Japan that we have nothing in common with the extremist harsh approach. But it needs to be stressed that neither are we admirers of the pernicious results of the soft-headed liberal approach. A few comments on this Western approach may be appropriate at this juncture.

The Rights of Man are properly extolled by civilised societies. However, a diabolical mutation in social psychology has taken place since the days of Tom Paine, which enables some permissive gentlemen (and ladies!) to enshrine within the "Rights of Man" the "rights of devils" to purchase, propagate or pursue human degradation, misery and death. Such "soft-headed" societies have called down on their heads ghastly social revenge in terms of an escalating problem of drug smuggling, production, distribution and consumption, propped up by literature, magazines, arts and music which extol the drug-taking culture.

There are shops in some Western countries which legally sell some drug paraphernalia used in drug consumption. There are even interested groups who lobby for drugs like cocaine and cannabis to be legalised since their use is so widespread. All these have caused confusion, particularly among the young, and as a result, millions of them have become dependent on drugs. Many are in fact poly-drug abusers. Drugs constitute the single largest business in the United States and accounts for over US\$80 billion annually. As a consequence, organised syndicates are involved in the smuggling and distribution of drugs. In Europe, evidence of the deepening involvement of the primarily Italian Mafia, is causing deep concern. In the face of all this, apologists of the drug-taking culture ask us to believe that freedom in Heaven also includes liberty for the Devil to run wild and sow pollution in the fields of God.

A more hard-headed, practical and conservative approach is adopted by countries like Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore. Unlike the extremist harsh approach, drug addicts are not regarded as criminals to be executed, but as persons to be treated and rehabilitated. But unlike the liberal approach, we do not regard things like drug abuse and pornography as sacred human rights. Those who believe in drug abuse, hallucinogenic trips and sex shops as human rights are welcome to their delusions. We make no bones about drug abuse being an offence, and this is reflected in strict laws against drug trafficking and drug abuse. The cultural climate in these countries is conducive to the political will to eliminate drug abuse as an individual and social evil.

No fine distinctions are made between hard and soft drugs. The drug laws provide for the identification of drug addicts by way of urine tests and medical examination. Hence enforcement officers are able to both identify and arrest drug addicts as sick persons who require treatment and rehabilitation. This is taken as a serious national responsibility, and these countries spend large sums of money on national treatment and rehabilitation programmes aimed at bringing drug addicts back into the normal stream of life. The national treatment programmes of Japan and Singapore have achieved notable successes. The vigour with which nations like Malaysia are attacking their drug problems also promise equally good results.

A hard-nosed approach is essential. Magazines literature and music which extol the permissive drug-taking culture are confiscated and destroyed. There is no namby-pamby about drug traffickers either. They are seen for what they are, soulless peddlers and purveyors of individual and social degeneration and of death. Enforcement against large-scale traffickers and street pushers is equally intense. In addition, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines make the death penalty mandatory for drug traffickers.

Non-governmental organisations have a special role to play in all countries in the elimination of drug abuse. Punitive measures, in and by themselves, are not enough. The shortcomings in the social, cultural, spritual and economic milieus in which we live, and which clearly drive people to seek escape in drug trips, need to be identified and eliminated.

Drug addicts are not merely the targets and victims of drug traffickers. They are persons, mostly young people, who have lost their roads in the social, cultural and spiritual voids which exist in so many societies today.

The apologists of the drug culture in some Western countries, who clamour for the legalisation of soft drugs and soft porn evade the real question we should all ask ourselves. As we survey the millions upon millions of drug addicts the world over, the question we should ask of the drug addict as well as of ourselves, is the question asked by a poet: "In what landscape of disaster has your unhappy spirit lost its road?"

Perhaps the primary culprits are not the drug abusers, or even the drug traffickers, but the cultural and spiritual landscapes of disaster which permit them to breed. Perhaps, after all, drug abusers and traffickers are merely secondary results of far deeper underlying causes. And perhaps each one of us has a small role to play in probing the real first causes of the drug plague.
