

INTERNATIONAL CUSTOMS DAY 2008

International Customs Day, on 26 January 2008, is focusing on combating the illicit trafficking in drugs and psychotropic substances for a whole range of reasons.

The current state of affairs is appalling. Not content with distributing their deadly powder even more widely around the globe, with making young people even more dependent on illicit substances and with generating huge profits, drug traffickers are using extreme force and violence. Their aim is to frighten the public and display their power by brazenly defying the authorities and directly attacking representatives of law enforcement services.

Need I remind you that a commando group killed several soldiers, Customs officers, security guards and Mexican Customs brokers in December 2007 following the seizure of half a tonne of cocaine dispatched from Colombia! Unfortunately, such atrocities are quickly forgotten with the incessant tide of violent acts perpetrated by criminal and mafia-type organisations.

Colombian cocaine traffickers are displaying boundless ingenuity and pulling out all the stops. To ensure that their customers are kept fully supplied and in order to smuggle several tonnes of cocaine in one fell swoop, they have opted for submersible vessels to transport drugs. Since 2005, the Colombian Navy has intercepted 18 submarines off Colombia's Pacific coast. The last two were scuttled by the crew in an attempt to destroy their illicit cargo before it could be seized by the authorities. As for the places of concealment, each seizure made by Customs services is mind-boggling in terms of the techniques used to hide the drugs.

This is an insidious danger, and exploiting the lack of resources and political frailties of certain countries is fast becoming the rallying cry of drug smugglers. Many recent cocaine seizures in Africa and Europe have revealed new channels for forwarding these drugs from Latin America to Europe. West Africa appears to be the hub for this trafficking. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has reported that over the first nine months of 2007, cocaine seizures from African countries were 60 times the amount of those made in 2002. This new routing offers traffickers undoubted benefit which can but intensify through the weakening of these countries' economies. Drug money corrupts, debases and destabilises everything in its path. "Narco-states" are posing a threat to the international community.

What international action can be taken by drug enforcement services in the face of such a vast problem?

Even though considerable progress has been made, a great deal still remains to be done. According to internationally available data published in the WCO "Customs and Drugs 2006" Report, seizures of all types of drugs have risen sharply.

According to the UNODC Report, it would appear that almost half the cocaine and 25% of the heroin produced are seized. Of the 200 million individuals taking drugs every year on an occasional or ongoing basis, 80% are cannabis users.

However, we must not allow ourselves to be deluded by these findings, since the situation remains unstable. Are we simply to accept the notion that 8,000 drug users will die in Europe this year? Or the fact that 5% of the European Union's population may have taken cocaine in 2007?

Globalisation of trade has created a surge in supply and demand, both in terms of legal and illegal trade. Whereas legitimate traders are seeking crossing points where they will be granted facilitation, traffickers are seeking the easiest option, namely zones where everything is negotiable, including illegal operations. What is more, we have seen from the news that there is nothing to stop them. They have no qualms about changing the routing, means of transport or using intermediate transshipment. Criminal organisations are consequently taking advantage of problems or sometimes even of a complete absence of co-operation and mutual administrative or legal assistance. They have adapted to economic developments and have infiltrated legal trade channels, especially by using all the new technologies available to derive the maximum benefits and profits. In this way, illegal operations are buried under the daily whirlwind of transactions and it is extremely difficult to unravel the tangle of legal and illegal operations.

No country is now spared from drug trafficking. While in the past we had producer countries on the one hand and consumer countries on the other, we are now confronted by producer countries, transit countries, decoy countries, delivery countries and destination countries, with some meeting several of these descriptions. The term “consumer countries” no longer makes any sense, as all countries have become drug consumers.

We must pool our efforts, heighten co-operation, enhance information sharing and make the best possible use of all the tools and instruments available whilst demonstrating a high level of integrity.

The fight against drug trafficking, a priority for the WCO Secretariat, relies on a global intelligence strategy in which the role of each of the players, and especially that of the WCO, is defined, and in which more effective use of existing tools together with proposals for implementing new instruments and methods are suggested.

The WCO's action in this domain hinges on effective tools. The Customs Enforcement Network (CEN), which went live in 2000, links over 155 WCO Member administrations: to a database containing over 175,000 items of information relating to Customs offences; to an information and communication system; to a dedicated Web site; and to a photo database listing places of concealment. The growing number of Customs officers using this network on a daily basis bears witness to its effectiveness.

Likewise, the success of regional or international operations to combat drug trafficking using the CEN COMM2 communication tool has increased since 2005, the year this tool entered into service, and further actions are scheduled. Thirteen operations covering various criminal activities, but especially drugs, were carried out using CEN COMM in 2007. That equates to twice the number of operations in 2006.

As an effective complement to this enforcement mechanism, the WCO plays host to the Operational Co-ordination Unit (OCU). This independent Secretariat Unit, fitted out with all the requisite equipment (computers with Internet, telephone and fax connections), ensures co-ordination between WCO Members participating in a given operation as well as with other non-Customs services involved.

There is a pressing need for action, and it is our shared duty to take a stand against large-scale drug trafficking not merely on International Customs Day or throughout this year, but in an ongoing and sustainable manner. For 2008, the Secretariat has scheduled a whole series of activities on this issue which remains one of vital importance to the development of our societies.

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