

DISUNITED NATIONS

Behind the scenes at the UN's latest drug summit, frantic negotiations took place in order to acknowledge the changing nature of the drug debate. But as **Max Daly** discovered in Vienna, all the world could do was agree to disagree.

The UN's High Level meeting in Vienna (March 13-14) marked the midway point in its 10-year action plan to reduce or eradicate the use and production of illegal drugs by 2019.

The aim of the meeting was to track progress, acknowledge new challenges and look to the future before a special session of the UN General Assembly in 2016. Discussion was to be concluded with the publishing of a joint ministerial statement (JMS), a consensus on what needs to be done.

At first glance the meeting, attended by 1,300 delegates from 137 member states, simply involved countries updating each other in an often robotic fashion, on how they were doing in terms of tackling their own drug problem and the latest issues they were facing. They were all dutifully seizing drugs, helping users and noted the rise of NPS. Alongside this, there were three roundtable sessions, during which countries explained where they were in terms of reducing demand, reducing supply and tackling money laundering.

Although there were interesting nuggets of information that came from all this – the importance of alternative development in drug producing zones, Uruguay explaining that it owed it to its citizens to legalise the use and production of cannabis and Sweden cementing its reputation as the hardline drug warrior of Europe – the two day meeting was largely an exercise in window dressing.

Most of the real discussion had already taken place. For several months, in a complex game of brinkmanship, representatives from countries had, in the run up to Vienna, been banging their heads together in order to agree on a statement.



But the chasm of opposing views on international drug policy is widening and countries stand on either side of the rift; those interested in increased harm reduction and legalization, such as Ecuador, Uruguay, Mexico, Portugal, Germany, Czech Republic and Switzerland; and those who want to preserve zero tolerance style approaches to drug policy, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Thailand, Sweden, China and Singapore.

Unsurprisingly, these pow-wows came to nothing. The key battlegrounds – the use of the death penalty for drug offences, the inclusion of the expression 'harm reduction' and the acknowledgment that some jurisdictions were experimenting with new drug policies – remained entirely unresolved and therefore were cleansed from the final statement. In the end, all the UN member states could do was to sign a piece of paper saying they would agree to disagree. The consensus ended up a virtual clone of the agreement made in 2009.

At a press conference to mark the end of the meeting, UNODC executive director Yuri Fedotov somewhat

cheekily described the JMS as a "broad consensus".

He played down talk about Uruguay or the two US states sparking a new trend in cannabis legalization. "So far I don't see any other countries, or group of countries, that may follow the route which has been taken by Uruguay," he said.

Fedotov had earlier said legalisation was not a solution to the world's narcotics problem. He said legislation in Uruguay was not compatible with the "letter and spirit" of international drug control conventions, however the UN has taken no action against Uruguay for its new drug law.

Between the lines, there was an interesting dynamic in Vienna. It became apparent that, because of developments in its own backyard, the US, previously a notable sabre rattler in the anti-harm reduction, pro-hardline approach to drug policy, has been forced to take a step back, it's position undermined by the democratic decisions of its own citizens.

Russia, with one of its most senior diplomats at the helm of the UNODC, may have become the new global policeman in the war on drugs. One Russian speaker slated the efforts of the US and the UK in tackling opium production in Afghanistan as a "fiasco".

Even so, far from being a joint enterprise, and severely hampered by the arrival and spread of NPS and online drug buying, any notion of a unified global effort to tackle the drug problem is under increasing strain and calls into question the validity of the UN drug treaties themselves.

■ **Max Daly** is author of *Narcomania: How Britain Got Hooked on Drugs*