

EDITORIAL

AIDS, drugs, and terrorism: do I have your attention?

A year ago, a high-level official in the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation told me that letting methadone loose in Russia would constitute a worse scourge for the country than heroin itself. The ministry's position on methadone means high HIV risk and for thousands, perhaps millions, of opiate users who might otherwise be able to normalize their lives with medically supervised methadone and become less easy targets for stigma and police abuse. Health officials in Russia are abetting the long-held methadone myths of the Russian narcotic drug establishment, fed dutifully and consistently to an unquestioning press.

I couldn't help thinking as I sat in that ministry office in Moscow how much that line about methadone sounded like "Saddam has weapons of mass destruction aimed at the West," also much in currency at the time. John LeCarré, the great novelist of the Cold War, describes well a technique of the current "war on terror" that everyone who fights for peace in the "war on drugs" knows by heart: politicians tell lies to the media, they see the lies in print, and they pronounce them to be public opinion. It's much easier to get away with this, of course, when the public is predisposed to believing a story, as people so often are if the story is anything about how much beyond redemption drug users are.

It takes a very big and well-disseminated lie like this to justify massive global human rights violations. The human rights situation of drug users around the world, a few exceptional countries aside, is catastrophic. The ill-

ness of chronic drug addiction is governed by laws that trample on public health principles and in too many cases can only be enforced by violating the human rights of drug users. Drug users are the easiest targets for extortion, unlawful arrest, and long incarceration for minor offences. They are highly vulnerable to a form of torture that is special to them – the use of their addiction as an instrument of coercion. They have been reduced to "collateral damage" in the "war on drugs."

The terrible tragedy in Beslan, Russia in September 2004, in which over 350 persons were killed, was in many ways Russia's September 11, a major act of terrorism on its soil. Like the September 11 attacks, the events at Beslan have been followed by a rolling back of civil liberties, in this case including new rules that enable the Kremlin to appoint provincial officials who were previously elected, and restrictions on civil society organizations. If history is any guide, sustaining those rollbacks will require some state-of-the-art lies. So should anyone have been surprised when a few weeks after the Beslan tragedy the government put out the word that "some" of the perpetrators of the crime were "drug addicts"? Whatever the merits of the accusation – others noted that drug-using equipment was never found at the site – it is a predictable tactic that, among other things, fuels public sentiment against drug users and takes the state off the hook in its responsibility to provide public health services for them, also distracting public attention from a more meaningful discussion of the roots of the Beslan tragedy.

With the US-led “war on terror,” we have also seen a US-led effort that might be called a “war on immorality.” As Paul Krugman, a *New York Times* columnist, put it: “the fight against Al Qaeda became a universal ‘war on terror,’ then a confrontation with the ‘axis of evil,’ then a war against all evil everywhere. Nobody knows where it all ends.” Alas, we know that it didn’t end before a full-scale attack against those in the HIV/AIDS movement who seek to work respectfully with sex workers, drug users, and gay and bisexual men. And so we are left, for example, with legislation in the US that authorizes assistance to HIV/AIDS programs in developing countries only for organizations that take a public stand against prostitution, which is millimetres away from making people condemn sex workers. Human rights is again a casualty in this sad turn in public policy.

A number of countries, including Canada, rarely speak of HIV/AIDS policy without espousing a human rights-based approach to fighting HIV/AIDS, an excellent thing. Canada, for example, has put considerable money in its international programs behind women’s empowerment as part of fighting HIV/AIDS and deserves credit for that. But right now, the countries that espouse rights-based approaches to HIV/AIDS – and the United Nations, which is the original “rights-based approach to HIV/AIDS” flag-waver – need to make a bold move to show that human rights is not only about women and children and other sympathetic people not tarred by the

great government-generated lies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. There has to be someone who stands up on the global stage for the human rights of drug users, as well as sex workers, prisoners, and all people vulnerable to both HIV/AIDS and human rights abuse.

At this writing, country delegations and UN agencies are preparing for a meeting of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, at which it is expected that the US will try to engineer a kind of “gag rule” to cleanse UN policies and documents of any support for harm reduction. By the time you read this, it will be known if any country or UN agency stood up to the attack. Whatever the outcome, one must wonder which UN agency will be brave enough to bring to its governing board a statement on the need to protect the rights of drug users as a central element in the fight against HIV/AIDS? Which country with a commitment to human rights will take a resolution on drug users’ rights to the UN Commission on Human Rights or a complaint about torture of drug users to the UN Committee on Torture?

That’s asking a lot of people who believe in human rights, but where else can we turn?

– Joanne Csete

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