

July 21, 2011

His Excellency Georgiy Enverovich Mamedov
Embassy of the Russian Federation in Canada
285 Charlotte St.
Ottawa, ON K1N 8L5



Re: Commemorating the Russian victims of the War on Drugs

On this day, we express our solidarity with the activists around the world, including the International Community of People Who Use Drugs, who are marking a Day of Commemoration for the victims of the War on Drugs at Russian embassies. We express our grave concern at the thousands of Russians who continue to die needlessly every year as a result of Russian drugs policies that are brutal and inhumane. As you know well, the HIV epidemic is exploding in Russia, with injection drug use playing a major role. An epidemic of drug overdoses is adding to the death toll.

According to expert assessments, more than 5 million people in Russia use narcotics, and every day, more than 150 people newly infected with HIV – most of them because of a lack of access to clean needles and syringes. In addition, there is little access to scientifically-based strategies for treating drug dependence – including medication-assisted therapy using such clinically proven medications as methadone, contrary to all internationally recognized guidelines and recommendations. UN agencies such as the World Health Organization, UNAIDS and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime have all repeatedly recommended access to such treatment methods as a critical element of any effective response to HIV among injection drug users.

Yet such effective, safe, evidence-based interventions remain illegal in Russia, and those individuals and organizations that promote the implementation of such interventions in hopes of saving lives are officially considered criminals. Harm-reduction programs, including needle exchange, are officially accused of engaging in “propaganda” promoting drug use. And now legislators there are considering introducing even stricter legislation that will lead to the criminal prosecution of any individual convicted of using drugs. The documented consequence of such policy is an enormous amount of unnecessary, preventable disease, imprisonment and death in Russia.

We urge the Russian government to abolish the criminal ban on methadone, to support rather than repress harm reduction programs and workers, and to reform its drug laws so as to place health concerns, not further pointless and harsh criminalization and punishment, at the centre of Russia’s response to drugs and the related harms they are causing to too many of your people.

Sincerely,

Richard Elliott
Executive Director

Cc: Ms. Tatyana Alekseevna Golikova, Minister of Health and Social Development
Mr. Victor Petrovich Ivanov, Director, Federal Drug Control Service