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HRW.org

December 1, 2014

His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-Moon
United Nations Secretary-General
United Nations Headquarters
New York, NY 10017

Dear Mr. Secretary-General:

I write on behalf of Human Rights Watch to urge you to ensure that the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session on drugs embraces the need for global drug policies based on human rights principles and addresses the serious human rights harms of current global drug policy through significant reforms of that policy.

For decades and in numerous countries, Human Rights Watch has documented abuses that are often inextricably linked to global drug policies that heavily emphasize criminalization of drug use, possession, production and distribution. We believe the 2016 UNGASS offers a unique opportunity to reassess these policies, engage in an open and wide-ranging debate about their harms, and consider alternatives to the current approach to global drug control.

Specifically, we urge you to ensure that the following key human rights concerns are at the heart of the debate:

- National and international responses to drugs have often involved large-scale abuses and discriminatory practices in the name of enforcing criminal laws or ensuring “treatment” of people who use drugs.
- The heavy emphasis on criminalizing the drug trade has dramatically enhanced the profitability of illicit drug markets, fueling the operations of groups that commit abuses, corrupt authorities, and undermine democracy and the rule of law.
- Criminalizing personal drug use is itself problematic in terms of human rights, as it tramples on the person’s right to privacy and basic concepts of autonomy underpinning all rights.
- Drug policies often compound harms to the health of people who use drugs by driving them away or denying them essential health services

and information.

- Restrictive drug policies impede medical and scientific use of controlled substances in numerous countries, condemning millions to needless suffering from pain and other symptoms.

While this is not a comprehensive list of all the human rights concerns raised by existing global drug policies, we believe it encompasses many of the central issues that the 2016 special session should tackle directly. We provide additional detail on each of these issues in an annex to this letter. We urge you to make each of them an explicit item on the agenda.

For additional information about Human Rights Watch's position on drug policy reform, we urge you to review our essay, "The Human Rights Case for Drug Reform," which we attach for your reference. In addition, we attach a list of our many publications dealing with various human rights issues related to drug control policies, which we encourage you or your team to consult as you work on the agenda for the session.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of these suggestions. We look forward to discussing our concerns further in coming months.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Roth
Executive Director
Human Rights Watch

Encl.

CC: Commission on Narcotic Drugs; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; World Health Organization; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations Development Programme; United Nations Children's Fund