

Dutch cities wants cannabis cultivation decriminalised

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Dutch cities called Friday for the government to decriminalise cannabis cultivation and wholesale, which remain illegal despite easy access to the drug in hundreds of licenced coffee shops.

Eight of the Netherlands' 10 biggest cities, including Amsterdam and Rotterdam, signed a manifesto in central city Utrecht calling for "creating a national system of certified and regulated cannabis cultivation," they said in a statement.

Although cannabis is technically still illegal in the Netherlands, the country in 1976 decriminalised possession of less than five grammes (around a sixth of an ounce) and it is widely available over the counter in coffee shops.

However, growing and selling any quantity over five grammes is illegal, meaning the cultivation and wholesale of cannabis is in the hands of organised crime.

Critics say government policy is hypocritical because it obliges [coffee shop](#) owners to buy their supplies from criminals.

The government reaps hundreds of thousands of euros (dollars) a year in taxes from coffee shops, Dutch media reported.

The Dutch finance ministry told AFP that it could not say how much money it made from licenced coffee shops.

"We want cannabis cultivation to be regulated so the national market is manageable and more transparent, and to decrease the influence of organised crime," said the manifesto, signed by 35 municipal councils.

"Organised crime supplies the coffee shops," it said.

The manifesto, entitled "Joint Regulation" and supported by renowned Dutch politician and former defence minister Frits Bolkestein, also calls for better quality control of cannabis and safety norms for decriminalised weed plantations.

"Virtually all illegal plantations are fire risks," the cities said, citing a report saying that a quarter of fires in Dutch urban areas are connected to the lighting and electrics of illegal cannabis plantations.

The seat of government, The Hague, and Almere, east of Amsterdam, are the only big cities not to have signed the manifesto.

Justice Minister Ivo Opstelten rejected the proposals: "I really don't think this is the solution," the Liberal minister told Dutch public television.

"Mayors just have to learn to live with it," he said.

He said that the proposed measures would not resolve the problem, claiming that around 80 percent of cannabis grown in the Netherlands is for export.

Opstelten has offered to help municipalities to resolve problems of criminality related to cannabis in a different way, notably with more police.

The minister has previously said that international treaties would prevent

the government getting involved in cannabis cultivation in any way.

The town councils noted that Uruguay last year became the first country to oversee the production and sale of marijuana, while US states Colorado and Washington in January legalised recreational cannabis shops.

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