

UN drugs office urged to publish leaked paper backing decriminalisation

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Delegates at an international drug-policy conference in Malaysia urged the UN drugs office on Wednesday to officially release a leaked policy paper in which it makes a landmark call for decriminalisation.

British tycoon Richard Branson, a decriminalisation advocate and member of a global drugs commission, caused a stir earlier this week by leaking the document which proposes decriminalising drug use and possession "for personal consumption."

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) had originally intended for its paper to be presented this week in Kuala Lumpur, but scrapped those plans and has since claimed it was "not a final document."

But more than 500 conference delegates from around the world, including leading medical professionals, researchers, and activists, on Wednesday held up copies of the two-page document, calling for its recommendations to be adopted.

"The overwhelming support from our delegates today for the UNODC's drug decriminalisation recommendations should embolden them to show brave leadership on this issue, and publish the document in its current form," said Rick Lines, head of Harm Reduction International, a global NGO advocating drug-policy reform, which organised the conference.

The UNODC paper says decriminalising personal use of illicit drugs

could reduce the incarceration of millions of people worldwide, saying they often suffer subsequent judicial and rights abuses in many countries.

Bringing drug use out of the shadows could help curb the spread of HIV and other health threats, and reduce strain on prisons, it said.

In leaking the report on his blog Monday, Branson called it "a refreshing shift that could go a long way to finally end the needless criminalisation of millions of drug users around the world."

"The war on drugs has done too much damage to too many people already," he said.

Branson is a member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy which backs decriminalisation. It says the war on drugs has failed and the root causes of drug abuse remain unaddressed.

But the UNODC has said "there has been an unfortunate misunderstanding about the nature and intent of this briefing paper."

In a statement, it admitted the paper was intended for presentation in Kuala Lumpur but said it remained under review and was not "a final nor formal document."

"UNODC emphatically denies reports that there has been pressure on UNODC to withdraw the document," it said, adding that "it is not possible to withdraw what is not yet ready."

The UN general assembly plans to hold a special session in April to discuss ways of addressing the drug problem.

Former Swiss President Ruth Dreifuss, a drug-reform advocate and

conference delegate, said the decriminalisation movement is gaining ground.

"We see a real movement towards decriminalisation," she told AFP.

"It's not the end of the story but that will be when using drugs are no longer considered unlawful."

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