

Fedotov Becomes New UN Drugs Tsar

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VIENNA — A Russian diplomat pledged to focus on public health and human rights issues Monday on his first day as the UN's new drugs and crime tsar.

Yury Fedotov, a veteran diplomat who until recently was ambassador to Britain, replaced Italy's Antonio Maria Costa as the head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and will also oversee the UN complex in the Austrian capital.

The Vienna-based agency, established in 1997, helps nations fight illicit drugs and international crimes such as human trafficking and corruption. It also publishes closely watched reports, including some focused on poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, the world's largest supplier of opium.

"Public health and human rights must be central" to his agency's work, Fedotov said in a statement.

"Whether we talk of the victims of human trafficking, communities oppressed by corrupt leaders, unfair criminal justice systems or drug users marginalized by society, we are committed to making a positive difference," he said.

He added that drug users need "humane and effective treatment" and not punishment.

"Drug treatment should also promote the prevention of HIV," he said.

In June, AIDS activists had urged UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon not to appoint Fedotov, saying they were concerned that Russia's poor record on human rights and HIV would severely damage the agency's credibility.

Yet on Monday, one of those groups, the International Harm Reduction Association, said it was willing to give Fedotov a chance because it was encouraged by his first comments.

"We certainly hope this sets the benchmark for the path he'll be taking," said the association's executive director, Rick Lines. "For any public official, they're going to be judged by what they do with the responsibility they're given."

Russia is the endpoint for most of the heroin coming from Afghanistan, and it has repeatedly called on NATO forces there to do more to uproot Afghanistan's opium production. Federal Drug Control Service chief Viktor Ivanov says his country has about 2 million opium and heroin users, a severe public health problem.

At a recent international AIDS conference in Vienna, experts said those suffering from the deadly disease in Russia and other Eastern European countries are often stigmatized, criminalized and denied access to lifesaving treatment.

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