

Russia Slams UN Counter-Heroin Effort

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The  **Moscow Times**

Russia's anti-drug tsar said Monday that a United Nations campaign to curb the illegal production of heroin in Afghanistan was useless and had no chance of succeeding.

The world's largest per capita heroin consumer, Russia is struggling to contain a crippling heroin crisis. With up to 3 million addicts, it is now facing an HIV/AIDS epidemic that is spreading among drug users from dirty needles.

"The [UN] plan for Afghanistan has proven to be stillborn from the start and has no prospects," Viktor Ivanov told a meeting of the Federal Drug Control Service, which he heads, Interfax news agency reported.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime three years ago proposed a wide-ranging strategy to tackle Afghan heroin production and trade. Goals included increasing the number of opium-free regions, securing Central Asian borders and improving security around the Caspian Sea.

Ivanov said this strategy has proved "utterly unviable" and that the focus should be on "fully eliminating Afghan drug production."

According to the United Nations, just over a fifth of the 375 tons of heroin coming from top producer Afghanistan now finds its way through ex-Soviet Central Asia to Russia.

Russia has come under sharp criticism from both international and local health groups that say it should do a better job fighting drug addiction at home, including by legalizing the heroin substitute methadone.

The Russian Health Ministry says there is no proof methadone is effective, while the country's chief sanitary doctor, Gennady Onishchenko, has called methadone "just another narcotic."

The UN-affiliated World Health Organization says there are a million HIV-positive people in Russia, and deems methadone essential in fighting the epidemic.

Activists are banking on UN human rights chief Navi Pillay to pressure the Russian government during her visit to Moscow this week to legalize methadone.

Separately on Monday, Russian media reported that Ivanov has given the green light to introduce mandatory drug testing in some high schools from September this year.

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