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NEWS

Uruguay legalises sale and production of marijuana

Sophie Arie

London

Uruguay has become the first country to legalise growing, selling, and smoking marijuana, in the face of criticism by the United Nations drugs body, which said that the move was irresponsible and contradicted international drug treaties.

Under the new law, approved by Uruguay's 30 member Senate on Tuesday 10 December by 16 to 13 votes, adult users registered on a government database will be able to buy a maximum of 40 g a month from pharmacies. They will also be allowed to grow up to six marijuana plants in their home each year (or as much as 480 g) and form smoking clubs of up to 45 members that can grow up to 99 plants. The law will come into effect in April 2014.

The legislation, sponsored by the government, aims to reduce drug trafficking in a continent with growing debate over the failure of the "war against drugs" and the need for new strategies.

Although a few countries, such as the Netherlands, have legalised the sale of marijuana in certain circumstances, none has so far legalised its production.

Uruguay is one of the safest Latin American countries but is used as a transit route for Paraguayan marijuana and Bolivian cocaine.

"We've given this market . . . to the drug traffickers and that is more destructive socially than the drug itself, because it rots the whole of society," Uruguay's left wing president, José Mujica, told the Argentine news agency Telam.

The legislation was greeted as a breakthrough by the International Drug Policy Consortium, which issued an open letter, signed by 114 non-governmental organisations around the world, saying, "The path taken by Uruguay establishes the basis for a new paradigm in drug policy. We will support Uruguay and every other state and jurisdiction as they seek to develop more sensible drug policies to tackle the problems related to health and security of their citizens, in full respect with international human rights treaties."

But the UN's International Narcotics Control Board, which monitors compliance with principles laid out in the 1961 Convention on Narcotic Drugs (www.unodc.org/pdf/convention_1961_en.pdf), warned that the decision would be dangerous for young people and would "contribute to the earlier onset of addiction."

The board's chief, Raymond Yans, said he was "surprised" that the government in Montevideo had "knowingly decided to break the universally agreed and internationally endorsed treaty."

In a statement Yans said that claims that the law would help reduce crime relied on "rather precarious and unsubstantiated assumptions."

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