

Oct 2 2012

How International Aid for Drug Enforcement Fuels Human Rights Abuses

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By [Damon Barrett](#), Deputy Director of Harm Reduction International.



It is increasingly clear that there is a fundamental lack of oversight of how international aid – provided by the US, Europe and the United Nations to poorer countries – is used to pursue anti-drug efforts. In this article Damon Barrett highlights some of the systematic human rights abuses this aid is facilitating.

Last June a twenty-three year-old woman, Tran Ha Duy, was [sentenced to death](#) in Viet Nam for carrying 4kg of methamphetamine from Qatar. She and her twenty-one year-old sister (who received twenty years imprisonment) had been acting as drug couriers in order to earn money, they said, for 'their daily needs'. Duy had originally been sentenced to life in prison, but the Prosecutor's Office wanted her executed and successfully appealed the sentence.

For years, European donors, the US and the United Nations have been assisting Viet Nam with drug enforcement money and technical assistance to increase its capacity to catch traffickers, but also couriers like Tran Ha Duy. Who these people are and how they came to be involved in trafficking are of no concern. What happens to them once caught is not taken into account. Those sentenced to death are simultaneously captured on drug enforcement 'success' statistics, *and* human rights abuse statistics of state sanctioned killing.

But Viet Nam is not unique. A [recent story](#) in The Observer detailed the millions in UK funding for drug enforcement to Iran, much of it through the United Nations. Indeed many Governments around the world have provided similar funding to Iran, much of it funneled through the UN. This is despite Iran's execution rates skyrocketing to over a thousand in two years – frequently without basic due process. Rarely are the full names of those killed even recorded, only their initials showing they passed through Iran's Judicial System.

On its [website](#) the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) touted its role in helping to capture sixty-one traffickers in Iran. Given the rate of executions in that country at present, it seems unlikely that all of these people are still alive. [Harm Reduction International](#) requested information on the whereabouts and sentences of those arrested. To date, UNODC has not commented.

Border liaison offices have been built – with international funding and UN assistance – along Chinese borders to improve interdiction capacity. Recently the Government of Myanmar (Burma) announced at a UN sponsored meeting that it had extradited one hundred and twenty eight people to China via these projects. All may face execution.

The death penalty is the tip of the iceberg. International efforts to tackle the 'evil' of addiction carries risks on an even larger scale. There are hundreds of thousands of people in drug detention centres across China, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Cambodia and elsewhere. Human Rights Watch [has documented](#) arbitrary detention, physical and psychological abuse, rape, isolation and slave labour in such centres. They have been assisted with international aid for years, and provided with capacity building and 'training' by the UN. Even after their grotesque abusive nature was revealed this funding has persisted.

In July of this year, the US Government pledged a new round of funding and collaboration in Lao PDR, committing \$400,000 to 'upgrade the treatment of drug addicts at the Somsanga Treatment Centre and other centres.' This was despite the centre being the subject of a [Human Rights Watch investigation](#) in 2011, which showed appalling conditions where detainees were subjected to systematic violence, and where large numbers were driven to suicide. [Arantxa Cedillo's photographs](#) from within the centres tell their own story.

A [new report](#) from Harm Reduction International tracks drug enforcement funding from donor states, often via the UN, to countries where executions, arbitrary detention, physical abuse and slave labour are commonplace. The report is far from exhaustive but highlights a much broader problem: Governments are so concerned with appearing to be tackling the drugs trade that basic human rights considerations are readily cast aside in pursuit of minor drug hauls; arrest rates; and 'treatment'

statistics. To achieve this end, donors provide millions of dollars to some of the world's most abusive regimes with virtually no human rights safeguards.

There has to be accountability for how drug enforcement aid is spent and where. No longer should money from European and other donor states go to practices they would normally decry as morally reprehensible and illegal, simply because it's earmarked to fight the illegal drugs trade. No longer should that money get the rubber stamp of human rights accountability by passing through the UN. States frequently talk about their 'shared responsibility' to fight the drugs trade. It is now time they took shared responsibility for the human rights consequences of that fight.

Damon Barrett is the Deputy Director of Harm Reduction International and the co-founder of the International Centre on Human Rights and Drug Policy.

Follow Damon on Twitter: [@DamonHRI](#)

LSE IDEAS will be hosting a [Public Event](#) and Releasing a Special Report on October 23rd entitled 'Governing the Global Drug Wars.'

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