



news release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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German Drugs Commissioner visits EU drugs agency

‘CLEAR CONVERGENCE OF EU DRUGS POLICIES’

Agency Chairman stresses key role of co-ordination in campaign against drugs

Marion Caspers-Merk, Germany’s Federal Drugs Commissioner, in her first visit to the Lisbon-based EU drugs agency, the EMCDDA, says it’s clear that EU drug policies are converging.

For **Caspers-Merk** it’s been the first opportunity to meet the EMCDDA’s new Chairman, **Mike Trace**, the Deputy UK Drugs Co-ordinator. This January he was elected to head the drugs agency board for three years.

Commenting on their meeting, **Trace** says: ‘Co-ordination is all about Europe collectively getting its act together in the campaign against drugs. This is a campaign that Europe must win and is determined to win and **Germany’s** support, represented by **Marion Caspers-Merk’s** visit, is a major contribution to EU unity on co-ordination policies.’

Drugs agency Director Georges Estievenart also says **Caspers-Merk’s** visit, just over, underscores the importance of the agency’s close cooperation with the EU’s biggest Member State – both at a technical and a political level – in meeting the challenge of drug misuse.

Estievenart stresses the key nature of the agency’s relationship with all national EU drug co-ordinators in the context of the EU Action Plan on Drugs 2000–2004. This plan urges all Member States to appoint a national drug co-ordinator. **Estievenart** calls for ‘even closer relations’ between co-ordinators and the EMCDDA, which has a key role in feeding them data.

He adds that **Caspers-Merk’s** visit is ‘very significant’, not only because of **Germany’s** size and importance but also its relationship (‘where East meets West’) with EU candidate countries. **Estievenart** is on record as expressing concern about the drug challenges faced by these countries and possible implications for the EU. ‘In this context, co-ordination of all our efforts is vital’, he adds today.

New ideas in Germany

Caspers-Merk says: ‘The EMCDDA is taking key initial steps to obtain an overall picture of drug co-ordination mechanisms and structures in the Member States. I’m pleased we’re beginning to see greater co-operation and a more comparable view of drug strategies at EU level.’

She is calling for new ideas in **Germany** to meet the drug challenge – not simply primary and secondary prevention, as in the past, but a move towards early prevention, even in childhood.

She adds that, although **German** use of all addictive substances – from tobacco to heroin – is falling slowly, more and more young people are making dangerous and uncritical use of such substances as part of their ‘culture of fun’.

In **Germany**, **Caspers-Merk** says, 50% of heroin addicts are now in treatment. This compares with only one in three in the **United States**. The previous prevention strategy in **Germany** concentrated uniquely on illicit drugs but the present approach now also includes alcohol and tobacco, whose widespread use is judged relatively uncritically by most people.

German–Portuguese talks

Today **Caspers-Merk** was also meeting **Vitalino Canas, Portugal’s Secretary of State of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers**. They were discussing the major topic of ‘user’ or ‘shooting’ rooms. This has been a big issue in recent weeks in **Portugal** in the context of new harm-reduction measures debated in Parliament.

Germany, the **Netherlands** and **Spain** already operate them. Along with **Portugal**, **Luxembourg** and **Austria** are debating the idea. The **Portuguese** Minister asked **Caspers-Merk** to outline **Germany’s** experience of them.

Following the meeting, **Canas** commented: ‘**Germany** has been one of the reference points which **Portugal** has been following with particular attention, especially with regard to harm-reduction measures, which we consider vital. I note the very favourable comments made by my **German** colleague regarding our national “Plan of Action on Drugs – Towards 2004” (*Plano de Acção – Horizonte 2004*) and the 30 priority objectives this plan proposes. The **German** Commissioner considers these very ambitious and has informed me that she would take them into consideration in developing the **German** plan of action of drugs’.

Co-ordination increasingly vital

Co-ordination at national and international level is seen as increasingly vital in tackling the drug challenge. The **EMCDDA** and the **European Commission**, meeting in Lisbon in 1999, called for regular informal meetings between existing national drug co-ordinators.

The first national drug co-ordinators’ meeting in the framework of the **EU** Action Plan took place in Paris under the **French** EU Presidency last September. A second was held under the **Swedish** Presidency in Stockholm this March, at which **Estievenart** presented a report on drug co-ordination in Member States (see Latest News – <http://www.emcdda.org>). Such meetings enable a free exchange of ideas and best practice on strategies and systems. Also in March, the co-ordinators of **France**, **Greece**, **Portugal**, **Spain** and the **UK**, together with the **EMCDDA**, met in Athens to exchange experience.

Contact: Kathy Robertson, Press Officer, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
EMCDDA, Rua da Cruz de Santa Apolónia 23–25, PT-1149-045 Lisbon, Portugal.
Tel: ++ 351 21 811 3000 • Fax: ++ 351 21 813 1711 • E-mail: Kathryn.Robertson@emcdda.org