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Repressive drug policies boosting AIDS spread

VIENNA: Policies that criminalise drug use are increasing the spread of AIDS, experts said yesterday, calling for a milder and more effective approach to preventing drug use.

"Misguided drug policies... fuel the AIDS epidemic and result in violence, increased crime rates and destabilisation of entire states," said Julio Montaner, president of the International AIDS Society.

"Yet there is no evidence they have reduced rates of drug use or drug supply," he added in a statement.

Montaner and other AIDS experts, including Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, the co-discoverer of the HIV virus, published yesterday a Vienna Declaration calling for an end to ineffective and costly drug

policies and for more emphasis on strategies that have been scientifically proven to work.

In some parts of the world, such as eastern Europe and central Asia, injecting drugs is the main cause for the spread of HIV, the experts said.

More widespread needle and syringe programmes, as well as access to opioid substitution therapy (OST), by which illegal drugs are substituted for less harmful substances, would lower the number of HIV infections without increasing drug use, they added.

"The current approach to drug policy is ineffective because it neglects proven and evidence-based interventions, while pouring a massive amount of public funds and human resources into expen-

sive and futile enforcement measures," said Evan Wood, founder of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICSDP).

"It's time to accept the war on drugs has failed and create drug policies that can meaningfully protect community health and safety using evidence, not ideology."

"Addiction is a medical condition, not a crime," added Montaner, who will chair the upcoming AIDS conference in Vienna next month.

Some 20,000 experts and AIDS researchers are expected at the biennial conference, which will be held from July 18 to 23.

The Vienna Declaration, the conference's official declaration, is up for signature on the website: www.viennadeclaration.com - AFP