

Mexico scales down drug bill

Lawmakers said they plan to introduce a watered-down version of a controversial drug bill assailed by the U.S.

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MEXICO CITY - Mexican lawmakers said on Monday that they plan to introduce a watered-down version of a 2006 drug bill criticized by the United States because it would have effectively decriminalized possession of marijuana and other drugs.

The new measure, to be presented in a joint Senate committee Wednesday, drops the previous proposal for a blanket decriminalization for all drug "consumers," and reduces the amount of drugs that can be considered possession for personal use to a "single dose."

"An error was made, unfortunately, in the lower house, adding the [exemption for] consumers," said Sen. Alejandro González Alcocer, president of the Senate Judiciary committee.

"That really betrayed the spirit of the reforms, by increasing [personal use] quantities, and that's why we're paying attention to the criticisms and making changes," he added.

STRUCK DOWN

The original bill passed Congress last year but was vetoed by then-President Vicente Fox in May, after Washington urged Mexican lawmakers "to review the legislation urgently, to avoid the perception that drug use would be tolerated in Mexico."

The new bill exempts from criminal prosecution only Indians who use traditional hallucinogens as part of their rituals, addicts who can prove they are undergoing treatment and first-time offenders.

The exemption for addicts and first offenders caught with drugs for "personal use" exists in current law, but the definitions of an addict or personal-use amounts are unclear. The thrust of the new bill is to clarify distinctions between drug users and traffickers and allow police to act against small-time dealers.

The 2006 bill would have gone much further, exempting just about anyone from criminal prosecution for possession of 5 grams of marijuana (an amount equivalent to four or five cigarettes).

This measure reduces that limit to 1 gram, or a single joint. First offenders would be subject to a fine, but could be prosecuted if caught a second time.

The legal definition of maximum "personal use" amounts for other drugs mentioned in the original bill -- such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines -- would also be reduced to a "single dose" basis under the new proposal, senators said.

TAKING A BIG HIT

Under the measure, small dealers would have a harder time avoiding prosecution by claiming to be drug addicts, an often-exploited legal loophole in Mexico.

If the bill becomes law, people caught with drugs would have to prove they are undergoing treatment at a hospital or rehab center, or under a doctors' care.

At least one of the largest "personal use" allowances in the old law will remain in the new bill: the decriminalization of Indian groups' use of up to 2.2 pounds of peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus plant eaten during traditional rituals.