Statement by the Republic of Palau at the occasion of the 49th WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence

Delivered by Mrs Valerie R. Whipps, First Lady of the Republic of Palau and Chair of the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Palau

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Chair, distinguished members of the Committee, colleagues,

On 10 June 2026, the Republic of Palau notified the Secretary-General under Article 2 of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, requesting a critical review of nicotine. I am here to say why we did so, and to ask this Committee to take that review forward.

In our 2022 Global Youth Tobacco Survey, nearly 46 per cent of students aged 13 to 15 reported using e-cigarettes. More than six in 10 of those who used tobacco said they wanted to stop but couldn’t. These are our children and our neighbours' children, and they are not failing at willpower. What they are describing is dependence, and the substance that produces it is nicotine. It is the same dependence that has kept a billion adults smoking for a century, long after they knew what it was doing to them.

Nicotine is not harmless. WHO's guidance describes it as highly addictive and harmful, especially for children and young people whose brains are still developing. And yet no Party had ever asked this Committee to review it. Guidance is not assessment, and only this Committee can carry it out.

In 2023, Palau ended the import and sale of e-cigarettes. Within months, nicotine pouches appeared. Same molecule, new format. Cigarettes, e-cigarettes, pouches: the device changes, the dependence does not, and the dependence is what the business is built on. We all know that sequence: you regulate one product, and the industry brings the next. We were always one step behind.

So we stopped asking which product to regulate next, and started asking about the molecule itself.

This Committee has never carried out a critical review of nicotine. In 1996, its pre-review looked only at patches and gum. Since then, the market has drastically changed. Today's e-cigarettes can deliver nicotine as fast as a cigarette, and both e-cigarettes and oral nicotine

pouches can deliver higher doses than a cigarette. And the molecule is now made synthetically, without tobacco, and whether tobacco-control instruments reach it is contested.

Palau values the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and was among the first to endorse its adoption. A review of nicotine complements the FCTC. It does not replace it.

Amphetamines, ketamine and MDMA have all been critically reviewed under this Convention. Nicotine, used by more than a billion people, has not.

Our request is straightforward. We ask the Committee to take nicotine forward to a critical review, and to assess it against the criteria this Convention sets for any substance: its capacity to produce dependence, evidence of actual abuse, the threat to public health, and its therapeutic usefulness. We do not prejudge the outcome. We ask that the question be examined on the evidence.

Two points on that examination. First, Palau supports continued access to approved cessation medicines. Nicotine replacement therapy has been on the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines since 2009. The dependence we see is not created by patches and gum, but by consumer products engineered for rapid delivery, and we ask that the assessment of abuse reflect that. Second, we encourage all Member States to contribute their data and experience through the questionnaire process.

Others stand with Palau. 103 organisations across 46 countries have publicly endorsed our request for this review. They see what we see.

In Palau we say that it takes only a twig to bring a pot to boil. We are a small country. We did not take this step for Palau alone - we took it for every child, in every country, who deserves to grow up free of an addiction they never chose.

Thank you.