Opium production in the Golden Triangle continues at high levels, threatening regional integration – UNODC

Bangkok (Thailand) 8 December 2014 – Opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar and Lao PDR rose to 63,800 hectares (ha) in 2014 compared to 61,200 ha in 2013, increasing for the eighth consecutive year and nearly triple the amount harvested in 2006, according to a new UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report released today.

The UNODC report, Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2014 – Lao PDR, Myanmar, says that Myanmar remains Southeast Asia’s top opium producer – and the world’s second largest after Afghanistan. Together, Myanmar and Lao PDR produced an estimated 762 tonnes (mt) of opium, most of which – using smuggled precursor chemicals like acetyl anhydride – was refined into an estimated 76 mt of heroin and then trafficked to markets in neighbouring countries and outside the region.

“This two-way trade of chemicals going in and heroin coming out of the Golden Triangle is a significant challenge to stability and the rule of law,” said Mr. Jeremy Douglas, UNODC Regional Representative, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. “The region’s large demand for heroin provides profitable incentives for transnational crime groups. Not only by bringing in the chemicals needed to make heroin, but in particular by trafficking and distributing the drug to markets in China, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world.”

Shan State in the north of Myanmar, which hosts a number of conflict areas and insurgent groups, remains the center of Myanmar’s opium and heroin activities, accounting for 89 per cent of opium poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle. In Lao PDR, the UNODC survey confirms opium poppy cultivation in the three northern provinces of Phongsali, Xiangkhoang and Houaphan.

UNODC pointed out that economic surveys of farmers in poppy-growing villages show that money generated from poppy cultivation is essential for villagers threatened with food insecurity and poverty.

“The link between poverty, lack of alternative economic options and opportunities, and poppy cultivation is clear,” said Mr. Cheikh Toure, UNODC Lao PDR Country Manager. “Opium farmers are not bad people. They are poor, food insecure people, usually living far from centres and markets where they could sell other products. They need viable alternatives to growing poppy.”

UNODC also warned that the opium business and trade threatens well intentioned regional integration and development plans.

“We need to act. The Golden Triangle is the geographic centre of the Greater Mekong Sub-region, and plans are well underway to expand transport connections and relax trade barriers and border controls, including around opium producing areas. The organized networks that benefit from Southeast Asia’s illicit drug trade are very well positioned to take advantage of regional integration,” Mr. Douglas said.