Burma’s Opium Output Rises Despite Eradication Effort

NEW YORK - Opium poppy cultivation in Burma has risen for the sixth consecutive year despite a state eradication campaign, a U.N. report said yesterday, throwing doubt on government assertions that the problem would be over by 2014.

Unprecedented eradication efforts managed to destroy almost 24,000 hectares of poppy fields in the 2012 season, running from fall 2011 to early summer this year, more than triple the previous year's total.

But the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime said land used for cultivation in Burma, the world's second-top producer of opium after Afghanistan, still increased 17 percent to its highest level in eight years.

Burma is forecast to produce 600 tons of opium in 2011 to 12, according to the report, up from 610 tons - about 10 percent of the world's opium - the previous year, the UNODC said. Afghanistan produces about 90 percent.

Land in the Burmese part of the Golden Triangle - a lawless region of Burma, Thailand and Laos - home to vast drug trafficking operations - is scarce and many poor farmers opt to use it for poppies, which earn them 19 times more per hectare than rice, according to the UNODC report.

Four out of every 10 households surveyed by poppy-growing villages grew the crop themselves, but other households participated in the cultivation and harvesting, making it vital to the economies of whole communities.

Production of opium is closely linked to ethnic insurgencies inside Burma, said Cary Lewis, UNODC regional representative.

"There is no question that there is a strong connection between the conflicts in the country and the immediate sources of revenue to purchase weapons, and many in Burma and heroin and methamphetamine pills," he said.

"The areas of highest cultivation intensity are also the areas of ongoing or suspended conflict. The emergence of peace and security is therefore an essential ingredient in tackling the poppy problem.

"The government of President Thein Sein, in power since March 2011, has reached ceasefire agreements with many of the ethnic minority rebel groups that had fought the central government for decades, but full resolution of the conflicts is some way off.

Sit Aye, legal adviser to Thein Sein, said in February that the government wanted to wipe out the opium problem by 2014.

Neighbouring Laos has also seen an increase in cultivation. The UNODC reported that land dedicated to growing poppies jumped 66 percent from the 2011 season. But output in Laos, at 40 tons, pale in comparison to that of Burma.

The vast majority of regional demand comes from China, helped by porous borders in the country's southwest. China accounts for more than 70 percent of all heroin consumption in East Asia and the Pacific. The number of registered users has risen at least 22 percent since 2002, standing at 11 million by 2010, according to UNODC.

With China's demand for opium increasing and drug production up in Southeast Asia, it is becoming ever more important for governments to find realistic ways to curb cultivation and bring farmers out of poverty, Lewis said.

"Eradication alone is not the answer," he said. "The real answer is to provide sustainable alternative livelihoods."

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Burma Rejects Call for ASEAN Ministerial Meeting

SINGAPORE - Burma has rejected calls for a special ASEAN foreign ministerial meeting to address resumed violence between its majority Buddhist and minority Muslim communities, Malaysia's state-run Bernama news agency reported Tuesday evening.

"The ASEAN foreign ministers should decline the proposal," the ministry spokesperson was quoted as saying. "ASEAN foreign ministers should focus their efforts on improving the ASEAN dialogue mechanism and discussing the pressing regional issues.

"Burma has been providing the necessary responses, and there has been a general decline in violence since the recent outbreaks," said a spokesperson for the foreign ministry.

"It is important for ASEAN to continue to support Burma in its efforts to maintain stability and peace in the country."

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