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Myanmar fails to stem increase in opium cultivation

Paul Carsten

OPIMUM poppy cultivation in Myanmar has risen for the sixth consecutive year despite a state eradication campaign, a United Nations report, released yesterday, said, which threw doubt on government assertions the problem would be over by 2011.

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

But the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said land used for cultivation in Myanmar, the world's second top producer of opium after Afghanistan, still increased 17 per cent to its highest level in eight years.

Myanmar is forecast to produce 690 tonnes of opium in 2011/12 according to the report, up from 610 tonnes - about 10 per cent of the world's

opium - the previous year, the UNODC said. Afghanistan produces around 90 per cent.

Land in the Burmese part of the Golden Triangle - a lawless region of Myanmar, 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 ten households surveyed in 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 Myanmar, said Gary Lewis, UNODC regional representative.

"There is no question that there is a strong connection between the conflicts in the country and the most immediate sources of revenue to purchase weapons, and in many

instances this is both opium and heroin and methamphetamine pills," Lewis 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 who had fought 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 report estimated that land dedicated to growing poppies jumped 66 per cent from the 2011 season.

But output in Laos, at 41 tonnes, pales in comparison to that of Myanmar. The UNODC also believes that most of the Laos opium is intended for domestic consumption.

The vast majority of regional demand comes from China, helped by porous borders in the country's southwest.

China accounts for more than 70 per cent of all heroin consumption in East Asia and the Pacific. The number of registered users has risen at least 22 per cent since 2002, standing at 1.1 million by 2010, according to UNODC.

With China's demand for opium increasing and driving up production 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." REUTERS



A policeman holds poppy plants after a field was destroyed above the village of Tar-Pu, in the mountains of Myanmar earlier this year. REUTERS