Myanmar fails to stem increase in opium cultivation

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OPium poppy cultivation in Myanmar has increased from the last 18 consecutive years, despite a national eradication campaign, a United Nations report, released yesterday, said, which warned that the problem would be even by 2024.

Unprecedented eradication efforts managed to destroy almost 23,000 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, has increased by 17 per cent to its highest levels in eight years.

Myanmar is forecast to produce 690 tonnes of opium in 2012/13, according to the UNODC report, up from 610 tonnes in the previous year, the UNODC said. Afghanistan produces around 90 per cent.

Land in the Birmese part of the Golden Triangle – a lawless region of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos home to vast drug trafficking operations – is scarce and many poppy 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 or 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 correlation 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 opium problem."

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

Mr. Aye, legal advisor to Thein Sein, said in February that the government wanted to stamp out the opium problem by 2013.

Neighbouring Laos has also seen an increase in cultivation. The UNODC report estimated that Laos and Thailand dedicated 25 per cent of their cultivation to poppies, up 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, but the change, helped by porous borders in Myanmar's northwestern border with China 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 11 million in 2019, 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 reduce cultivation and bring farmers out of poverty, Lewis said.

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