



Mr Erlend Falch (left) addresses the Symposium.

## Mekong nations confer on Golden Triangle economy

### Times Reporters

Illicit opium and heroin are still the primary components of the drug economy in the Golden Triangle and East and Southeast Asia.

In the north of Laos and Myanmar, opium continues to be produced at high levels with over 60,000 hectares under cultivation producing 20 percent of the global opium supply.

This information was revealed on Tuesday by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) during the Symposium on Addressing the Drug Economy through Wider Development Agendas, which took place in Luang Prabang province.

During the meeting, senior government officials, international and civil society partners from across the Mekong region, and representatives of the Myanmar Peace Centre, the Thai Royal Project and the Mae Fah Luang Foundation considered new development oriented strategies to address the opium economy.

The conference followed the recent political commitment of the six Mekong countries - Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam - to explore ways to better connect drug control measures with other regional

development plans.

Socio-economic surveys of farmers in poppy-growing villages continue to confirm that money generated from opium farming is essential for villagers trapped by poverty and related food insecurity, according to UNODC.

Difficult living conditions, household debt, poor infrastructure and lack of market access are also contributing factors. Opium poppies are not only cultivated by farmers because they provide a means of subsistence in the face of poverty, but also because the crop can be grown relatively quickly and easily.

At the same time, opium from Laos and Myanmar is an essential part of the larger regional transnational crime economy, with heroin produced in, and trafficked from, the Golden Triangle earning billions of dollars annually for organised crime groups that challenge peace and stability.

“At a basic level it is vital that programmes address core issues such as poverty and food insecurity, land tenure and instability – issues that are not only confined to drug control strategies,” Chargé d’Affaires at the Embassy of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg in Laos, Mr Claude Jentgen, said.

“We remain committed to supporting UNODC to help farmers establish sustainable alternative economies. We also hope that other partners will step forward with support so that the work can be scaled up and more farmers are reached.”

The recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) go beyond traditional socio-economic development approaches to encompass the environment, participatory and representative decision-making, as well as security, and rule of law dimensions.

The symposium was convened to discuss options for scaling up comprehensive responses to the regional opium and drug economy in line with the SDGs and development plans.

“There is no doubt that opium cultivation flourishes in areas where isolation and poverty are entrenched, and where farmers are unable to obtain sufficient income from legal activities due to lack of market access, conflict and absence of basic infrastructure,” a Programme Manager and Officer in Charge of UNODC in Laos Mr Erlend Falch said.

“The idea is to connect our efforts to offer alternatives to drug production in Laos and Myanmar to larger development plans.”