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Opium cultivation up significantly in Myanmar and Lao PDR, UNODC warns

UN officials say food insecurity, ethnic conflicts and poverty responsible for surge

Bangkok (Thailand), 15 December 2011 – Opium poppy cultivation has doubled in South-East Asia since 2006, according to a report released by UNODC in Bangkok today. Myanmar accounts for the vast majority of this opium, and during the past 5 years the cultivation in this country has increased remorselessly. The regional cultivation figure for 2011 is 16 per cent higher than in the preceding year, the report says.

“The high prices for opium in the Lao DPR and Thailand, as well as steep price increases in Myanmar, are making production attractive to farmers,” said Yury Fedotov, UNODC Executive Director commenting on the Survey from UNODC HQ in Vienna. He noted the lack of alternative livelihoods for poor communities and the linkage between poppy cultivation and the lack of peace and security in the growing areas in Myanmar. With an estimated 35 per cent of households struggling to feed themselves, the scarcity of food also drives cash-strapped farmers to grow poppy crop.

Speaking at the report launch in Bangkok, UNODC Regional Representative, Gary Lewis said: “The significant increase in opium poppy cultivation coupled with increases in trafficking in methamphetamines and other illicit drugs reflect a growing human security threat to the region.”

“The opium numbers are heading in the wrong direction. The international community has taken its eye off the ball on illicit drug production and trafficking in South-East Asia,” said Lewis. “This situation means we must be more pro-active on all fronts to prevent our region from again becoming a major drugs hub.”

The report, **South-East Asia Opium Survey (2011) – Lao PDR, Myanmar**, <INSERT LINK TO FULL REPORT> contains the results of UNODC-supported opium poppy cultivation surveys in Lao PDR and Myanmar. In addition, it presents the results of opium poppy surveys implemented by the Thai Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB).

Myanmar remains South-East Asia’s largest opium poppy growing country and the world’s second largest after Afghanistan, with an estimated 43,600 ha under opium cultivation in 2011, a 14 per cent rise from 2010, according to the Survey. In 2011, opium poppy cultivation increased in Myanmar for the fifth year in a row, effectively doubling since 2006.

Opium cultivation in Lao PDR increased 37 per cent in 2011 to 4,100 ha. Thailand reported a 25 per cent decline to 217 ha. While Lao PDR poppy farming remains low compared with a decade ago, there are worrying indications that cultivation is increasing substantially.

The Survey estimates the total potential value of opium production in the three countries at US\$ 319 million, a 46% rise from 2010 (US\$ 219 million). The estimated value of Myanmar opium production rose 56 per cent to US\$ 275 million from 2010 (US\$ 177 million).

Opium prices significantly increased in Myanmar in 2011 to US\$ 450/kg, a 48 per cent increase from 2010 (US\$ 305/kg). This reflects strong demand for opium from neighbouring countries.

The high (and rising) price of opium in Myanmar makes opium production more attractive. The Survey finds that food security is a major problem for both poppy-growing and non-poppy-growing villages in all regions surveyed.

“This erosion of food security is of particular concern to us since – along with the rising price of opium – can trigger a continuous rise in opium production in Myanmar,” according to Lewis. One hectare of opium farming earns farmers 9 times more than rice cultivation in lowlands and 15 times more upland rice cultivation. This makes it difficult for farmers to abandon opium and switch to other crops.

“The Survey nonetheless gives us valuable information to design effective, targeted alternative livelihood programmes,” says Lewis. Noting the changes currently taking place in Myanmar’s political landscape, Mr. Lewis urged greater international support for alternative development projects, particularly in Myanmar but also in Lao PDR.

“The international community has been supporting alternative development projects for years – with great success on the ground in making a difference to people’s lives – especially in Lao PDR,” Lewis said. “The focus now needs to turn to Myanmar – home to 96 per cent of the region’s production -- where political conditions appear increasingly favourable for support but where the presence of alternative development efforts is minuscule.

“We strongly encourage other donors to join Germany and the European Community to fund human-rights-based alternative development efforts in Myanmar and Lao PDR that reduce poverty and food insecurity by improving social infrastructure and economic conditions and people’s lives,” Lewis said at the survey launch.

Background

To assess the scope of opium poppy cultivation and opium production, UNODC has been conducting opium surveys in cooperation with the respective Governments of Lao PDR (since 1992) and Myanmar (since 2002). Thailand has established its own monitoring system.

Using helicopter, satellite and village surveys, UNODC has created a detailed study of opium in South-East Asia. The results are compiled annually, often under hazardous conditions, and presented every year.



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