

Afghanistan: Opium Production Soars in Kandahar

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Poppy fields flourish despite claims by security forces that eradication efforts are proving effective.

Although opium production in the Kandahar province of southern Afghanistan has increased by nearly a fifth in the last year, local officials insist that counter-narcotic operations efforts are proving successful.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Kandahar province remains Afghanistan's second largest producer of opium, surpassed only by Helmand. The agency says opium poppies were grown on 337 square kilometres of land in Kandahar this year, an increase of 19 per cent from 2013.

Whereas poppies were eradicated on 10.8 square kilometres last year, only 0.68 sq km has been cleared in 2014.

Despite this Mohammad Ismail Ghausi, head of Kandahar police's anti-narcotics force, told IWPR that his department had made significant progress over the last year. As well as clearing fields and burning opium, his men had arrested more than 300 people and brought them to prosecution. Sixty were suspected of smuggling hundreds of kilograms of drugs, and eight of them were major traffickers operating on a national scale.

"If you look at our accomplishments last year, they were sizeable compared with the rest of the country," Ghausi said. "We have continued our war on drugs this year. We make no compromises with anyone. A good example is the ex-governor of Maiwand district, Hajji Saleh Mohammad Nowruzi, whom we arrested on charges of smuggling drugs."

Some Kandahar farmers say that, with few other opportunities to make a living off the land, they have no option but to cultivate the banned crop.

Abdul Salam, who produces opium in a remote part of Maiwand district, told IWPR in a phone interview that he and his fellow-farmers would continue growing poppy no matter how many times the government destroyed their crops.

"We don't grow the crop for fun," he said. "We've been left on our own. The government has not yet fulfilled its promises to help us find markets for legal crops. If the government is committed to the promises it made us, we are ready to stop growing this banned crop."

Ghausi agreed that farmers usually turned to poppy because they were poor and had few other opportunities to earn a living. If alternative markets or crops were found, he said, he was confident that drug production would fall drastically.

Some locals say farmers are becoming discreet about how they manage poppy-growing.

"Previously, poppy crops could be seen everywhere in the district," said Kalimullah, a resident of Kandahar's Dand district. "There were even poppy fields next to the governor's office, but the number has fallen now greatly. They grow it in secret locations now."

Al-Haj Ghulam Mohammad Masumi, head of the Samoon Civil Society Institution in Kandahar, said the poppy harvest was greater this year because the local security agencies had been distracted by the protracted presidential election. He predicted that the trend would remain upwards unless the government made good on its promises to provide farmers with alternative means of livelihood.

Drug addiction among Kandahar's two million-strong population is a problem. Acting provincial governor Toryalai Wisa recently told a press conference that there were 100,000 addicts in the province.

Mohammad Yusuf, head of a narcotics demand-reduction programme, said there were currently four state-run treatment centres and one private clinic for addicts operating in Kandahar. Some 1,000 people had already been treated this year, while 6,000 others were currently receiving therapy.

"Our department works in various ways to prevent cultivation," he said. "One is running public awareness programmes in the provincial capital and in the districts. We also want to reduce the number of addicts to reduce demand for drugs and prevent their cultivation."

Yusuf said some farmers had been provided with improved seed strains to encourage them to grow legal crops.

This policy has long been favoured in Afghanistan. During a visit to Kandahar last year, former counter-

narcotics minister Zarar Ahmad Muqbel and the United States envoy on law enforcement, Stephen McFarland, announced plans to launch a “Food Zone” programme in the province’s poppy-growing districts. This scheme aims to raise public awareness and provide alternative livelihoods while pushing forward on strict counter-narcotic measures.

A Food Zone programme run in neighbouring Helmand which combined wheat seed distribution and aggressive poppy eradication initially led to a reduction in opium production. Amid accusations of corruption, however, this early success was followed by a resurgence of opium growing.

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