

## **Everyone's a Winner at Helmand's Drug Bazaars**

**Author:** IWPR trainees

The poppy harvest is in and everyone from the Taleban to local government officials is cooperating to get the opium crop to market.

A distinctive odour hangs over the local bazaar in Chan Jir, a small village in Nadali district, just 15 kilometres from the Helmand's provincial capital Lashkar Gah. Most of the two dozen or so shops in the market specialise in just one commodity – opium.

Sayed Gul, a tall young man of 25, stands outside his shop, his hands covered in sticky brown paste. A merchant with a bulky bag under his cotton patu, or scarf, passes by, and Sayed Gul springs into action. Running so fast that his sandals kick up the dust behind him, he catches up to the stranger and takes his arm.

“Where are you going, man?” he says, leading him into the shop

Once out of the burning sunshine, serious negotiations begin. Sayed Gul calls for his young son to bring the Hajji Sahib, or respected guest, some tea. He is eager to offer him some of his poppy paste – the man is a small-time trafficker buying up opium in Chan Jir to sell on to larger dealers in Pakistan.

Sayed Gul is new to the retail trade. Until now, he has been a poppy farmer. But lured by the hope of large profits, he decided to sell his own crop this year.

“I got 36 kilos of poppy paste from my land this season, so I decided to go into business,” he told IWPR.

It is a difficult market – Helmand's farmers have grown so much poppy that prices are down, so buyers like “Hajji Sahib” must be courted assiduously.

Afghanistan is by far the world's largest producer of opium poppy. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, the country produced over 90 per cent of the world's heroin in 2006, with Helmand alone accounting for close to 45 per cent of that figure.

Like most of the other merchants at the Chan Jir bazaar, Sayed Gul is paying the police to leave him alone while he sells his highly illegal wares. The monthly fee for protection hovers around 6,000 Pakistani rupees, or approximately 100 US dollars.

Helmand province's police chief Nabijan Mullakhel said his forces had found no direct evidence of complicity.

“We have received reports that there are open markets where poppy paste is bought and sold, but when we send our forces out we cannot find any. It seems they are doing it underground,” he said.

Hajji Zahir, who fled recent violence in Helmand's Sangin district to sell opium in Nadali, explained the apparent inability of police to track down the drug retailers.

"If NATO or anyone else is coming to destroy the bazaar, the police will tell us in time so that we can move our paste to a safe location," he said. "The drug dealers and smugglers cooperate with the local authorities," he added. "Without them, we wouldn't be able to do our work properly."

Farmers also pay informal "taxes" to police and local officials from the beginning of the process all the way up to the harvest.

"The government makes a lot of money at harvest time," said Shah Mahmud, 40, a landowner in Nadali. "We paid about 1,500 afghani per jerib to the police not to destroy our poppy during the eradication campaign. Now we're paying the government to allow us to sell the product without interference - we are giving them 220 grams of poppy paste per jerib."

A jerib is 2,000 square metres or a fifth of a hectare. The 220 gram levy is fairly modest given that average yield in Helmand is about 10 to 12 kilograms per jerib.

The arrangements are quite open and operate semi-officially, according to Hajji Aligul, 55, a tribal leader in Nadali.

"I attended a shura [council] where we negotiated with the government," he told IWPR. "We agreed that we would give 220 grams of poppy paste per jerib. The police commander told us, of course, that if we did not reach agreement, they would take the paste by force."

Despite the central government's declared "jihad on drugs" and the international community's generously funded but largely ineffective counter-narcotics campaign, Helmand's poppy crop keeps increasing year after year. There is general agreement that 2007 will be the best year ever for Helmand's opium poppy, and the heroin that is derived from it.

"We do not have the exact numbers and statistics," said Engineer Abdul Mana'an, the head of the province's agriculture department. "But we estimate that this year, approximately 90,000 hectares of land were planted with poppy in Helmand, compared with 69,000 last year. It was a very good harvest."

In Afghanistan as a whole, 172,000 hectares of land were planted with poppy in 2006. Figures for 2007 are not yet available.

According to Mana'an, the eradication campaign in Helmand destroyed 7,000 hectares, although even this modest figure has been disputed.

"The government does not have a good policy for eradicating cultivated land," he said. "Reconstruction and assistance projects have not been effective, so the farmers have returned to poppy."

"Also, the government does not eradicate until the poppy is ready to be harvested. This just fuels

corruption and bribery. If they continue this way, I think next year we will have over 100,000 hectares of poppy just in Helmand.”

The Taleban are another major player in the drugs game. While evidence is sketchy, many observers assume that the insurgency is being funded by international drug profits. It is undisputed that the Taleban are receiving funds locally from farmers, shopkeepers, and traffickers.

“Local people collect money for the Taleban,” said Shah Mahmud 40, a landowner in Nadali. “The Taleban contact tribal leaders and say, ‘don’t forget us, we need money too’. Most people give voluntarily.”

Others pay out of fear, say some residents.

But cooperation has been so close that farmers say the Taleban scaled down their “spring offensive” this year so as not to interfere with bringing in the crop.

“It is not beneficial to have fighting during the harvest,” said Shah Mahmud. “The Taleban and the government both receive money from poppy – they lose out if the crop is destroyed by bombing or fighting.”

In several places, villagers have requested that the Taleban leave the area until after the harvest.

“We told the Taleban, ‘This year the government was very good to us and did not destroy our poppy,’ said one tribal leader who did not want to give his name. “We said, ‘Stop your fighting during harvest time, otherwise we will turn against you, take up arms against you and kick you out of the area.’”

Najmuddin, 25, a landowner in Zarghon village in Nadali, agreed.

“The Taleban treat us very kindly and we will support them forever,” he told IWPR. “They left so that people could get their harvest in. The government has also treated us kindly, and helped us set up markets where we can sell our poppy.”

The Chan Jir bazaar specialises in catering for smaller dealers, say locals, while the bigger fish go to Marjaa, about 25 kilometres from the capital.

“Very high-ranking drug barons come to our bazaar,” boasted Hajji Ghulam Nabi, who has a shop in Marjaa. “They buy the opium and then smuggle it out through Iran.”

The authorities in Marjaa insist that the traffickers have been dealt with.

“There is no one buying or selling poppy in my district,” said Sarwar Jan, the police chief in Marjaa.

But drug dealers here say the arrangements are very much the same as in Chan Jir.

“We pay the government 2,000 afghani [40 dollars] a month for each shop, and they leave us alone, so we operate without fear,” said Nabi.

Fazal Muhammad Shirzad, head of the counter-narcotics department in Lashkar Gah, insisted the authorities were making headway.

“We seized 42 kilos of poppy paste in Nadali district at the beginning of May,” he said. We seized another 62 kilos on May 27h, but unfortunately the traffickers escaped.”

According to Shirzad, the counter-narcotics department seized 172 kilos in just one month. But that is a small fraction of the amount - forecast at over 3,000 kilos of opium - that Helmand will produce this year.

The downside of such a large harvest is that prices are falling, according to farmers. Last year a kilo of poppy paste was fetching as much as 140 dollars. This year the price has fallen below 80 dollars.

“They grew too much this year,” said one drug trafficker from Nawa district in Helmand.

IWPR is implementing a journalism training and reporting project in Helmand. This story is a compilation of reports by the trainees.

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