

Harvest in Helmand

Author: IWPR trainees

It's time to gather opium in the poppy fields, and everyone seems to be getting involved – even government officials.

It could only happen in Helmand. On April 8, about 60 landowners staged a protest in front of the governor's compound in Lashkar Gah, the capital of this southern Afghan province.

They were demanding that the local authorities step in to resolve a dispute that was threatening to disrupt the all-important gathering of the opium crop. The hired labourers, who work as sharecroppers, had united to force landowners to give them half of the yield, when the owners insisted that one-fifth was a more reasonable share.

The farm owners wanted the provincial government to mediate.

It might look like democracy in action, except that the Afghan government is supposed to be engaged in a high-profile campaign to eradicate the plant.

“We spent all of our money growing the poppy,” complained one landowner. “If the government doesn't help us with the harvesters, we'll lose everything.”

But the workers in the fields are in a strong position. This year's harvest, boosted by copious amounts of rain, may well be the biggest ever, so many hands are needed.

Hired labour also comes at a premium since the work is in dangerous, Taleban-infested areas. Helmand is battling a growing insurgency, and many areas outside the capital are under Taleban control.

“Last year we had to beg from the landowners,” said Abdul Jamil, who gathers poppy every year. “We wanted one-sixteenth of the harvest and we apologised even for that.”

“But this season, they need us more than we need them. They are offering a quarter, maybe a third. We are lucky we're united. If they want us to go into districts where the Taleban are, they'll have to pay us a lot of money.”

By April 9, the harvesters were back at work. According to unconfirmed reports, the Helmand government imposed a limit of one-quarter of the opium yield as a fair deal for the labourers.

Afghanistan provides over 90 per cent of the world's supply of opium poppy. Helmand alone accounts for over 40 per cent of total Afghan production, making it the world's largest opium producer.

President Hamed Karzai has declared a “jihad on drugs”, and the international community has provided generous funds and expertise to help deal with the problem. But despite all the time, effort and money

that has gone into eradication, production seems to be going up relentlessly, at least in Helmand.

Gulbuddin, a local police commander, talked of negotiations over price rather than interdiction and punitive action. "We're telling the farmers, 'These are your fields, not ours. The harvesters don't want to go with you. We cannot make them agree to one half, one-third, or less'," he said.

With the ripening of the poppy, thousands of seasonal workers pour into the province from all over Afghanistan, and even from neighbouring countries. For many, it is their main source of income.

"I am here with six of my friends," said Abdul Baseer, 40, from Wardak province. "We have a poor life, there are no jobs, and I am already old. So we came here to earn some money. We do not have poppy in our province and there are no other jobs, so we come down here every year."

Local people, including schoolchildren and even civil servants also get in on the act.

"I work for the government and I make 3,000 afghani [about 60 US dollars] a month," said Abdul Malek, 35. "My economic position gets worse day by day. I'm married with four children. I live in a government-owned house, but I don't have a patron and they are trying to kick me out.

"I have no other way of making money, so I go off and do 15 days' harvesting. I might make 10,000 to 12,000 afghani [200-240 dollars]. That could solve my problems."

It is backbreaking work. Harvesters typically work two shifts a day. Late in the day they go through the fields, making one cut on each of the bulging poppy pods, so that a milky sap seeps out. This turns into a sticky brown paste overnight, and this has to be scraped off and collected early in the morning before the sun gets too hot. Then another cut is made and the process is repeated for 15 days.

Most migrant workers go from place to place, following the ripening crop. They may work two or three harvests, earning up to 600 dollars in the process.

"I live in Lashkar Gah, and my three brothers and I are going to harvest poppy," said Esmatullah, 24. "We work for four hours in the morning, and another two or three hours in the afternoon. We are now in Nadali [a village close to Lashkar Gah], and when that's finished we will go on somewhere else. The landowners give us a quarter of the harvest, which we have to sell to get money."

Despite the one-quarter share deal reportedly brokered by local officials, labourers may earn less this year once their opium payment is turned into cash. Overproduction is depressing prices, making it a buyer's market.

Rahmatullah, a small-time trafficker, explained, "This was a good year. There was a lot of rain and it will be a big harvest. But the price is going down."

A month ago, he said, a kilogram of poppy paste would fetch 140 dollars, but now it was going for 90 or even 80 dollars.

“Once the harvest is over, we can buy it even more cheaply from the workers,” he said. “They aren’t able to sell everything they earn on the market. Now we control the market, and we can get a good price.”

The farm owners, too, are grumbling about rising costs and falling prices.

“I have 14 jeribs [28,000 square metres or 2.8 hectares] of land under poppy,” said Abdul Haq, from Nadali. “There was no eradication campaign where I was, so my fields are fine. I now have 14 harvesters at work. I’ve had to sell 20 kilos of poppy to pay for the workers’ expenses.”

Experts say that in a good year, one jerib – an Afghan measurement about 45 metres by 45 metres - will produce around 30 kilos of poppy paste.

Even small children await the harvest with glee. After the workers are done, they have free rein to collect and keep anything left in the fields.

Ahmad, an enterprising 11-year-old, is planning to go out to do his own harvest again this year.

“I collected poppy last year and bought myself a bicycle,” he said proudly. “I don’t need anybody to give me money. I can buy the things I want for myself.”

Shopkeepers, too, are also delighted with the influx of workers because it boosts business.

“I usually slaughter just one cow a day,” said a butcher in the Bolan district. “But during poppy season, I slaughter up to five. People need good food, because otherwise the poppy will have a bad effect on them.”

Sawa, who owns a restaurant in Lashkar Gah, was also upbeat. “There are a lot of harvesters in town,” he laughed. “I am making a lot of money.”

But not everyone is so pleased. Given Helmand’s precarious security situation, the arrival of several thousand incomers can be seen as a threat.

“There are too many harvesters in one place,” complained one shopkeeper. “We can’t even drive through town because of all these people in turbans. They’re all wearing black or white turbans, and we can’t differentiate them from the Taleban.”

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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