

Helmand Grippled by Opium Harvest

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Schoolchildren down pencils and migrant workers arrive to help gather opium paste from the poppy fields. The distinctive red, white, and pink poppy flowers have all but gone from the fields in Helmand province, leaving in their place the bare pods containing valuable opium paste.

With harvest season, or “nish”, in full swing, the schools are empty, the fields are buzzing, and even the police are getting in on the action.

Gul Wali has come to Helmand from his native Nangarhar province in the east. Unlike Helmand, the undisputed centre of the opium industry, Nangarhar has made some progress in combating the illegal trade. That has prompted harvesters like Gul Wali to come in search of work.

“I am here for nish,” he told a reporter in Grishk, a district approximately 40 kilometres from the provincial capital Lashkar Gah. “But when the police stopped me, I told them I’d come to work as a stonemason. I thought Helmandis cultivated poppy secretly, like we used to do in Nangarhar.

“The policeman said, ‘Forget masonry. Come with me and help harvest my poppy – you’ll make a lot more money.’ That’s when I realised that everyone in Helmand, from simple illiterate farmers up to government officials, is involved in the poppy business.”

In 2007, Helmand accounted for an estimated 53 per cent of Afghanistan’s 8,200 metric tonnes of opium, making it the world centre of production. Almost half of the world’s heroin originates in this one dry and dusty southern province.

The Taleban hold sway over large swathes of territory, and reap political as well as economic benefits from allowing farmers to grow the crop without hindrance.

This year, experts expect the harvest yield to remain roughly at last year’s level instead of recording another annual jump. But in large part this stabilisation has come because there is little more arable land left in Helmand to cultivate.

With over 100,000 hectares needing to be harvested, seasonal labour is in short supply. “Nishgar” or harvesters like Gul Wali can command hefty wages, and even schoolchildren are being pressed into service.

“Our lessons have been cancelled,” said Zia ul-Haq, 14, who was working in a poppy field in the Nawa district.

His school in Lashkar Gah was almost empty, he said, explaining, “All my teachers and classmates have gone to nish. I want to buy a bicycle out of the money I make here, because I walk hours to get to school.”

Mohammadullah, a ninth-grade student in Lashkar Gah, is also playing truant.

“There were 60 pupils in my class, but now there are only five left,” he told IWPR. “I need money for my school costs, and you can earn a lot at this time of year.”

Hamidullah, 19, is in ninth grade at the Kart-e-Lagan school, in Lashkar Gah, but he has come back to Nawa for the harvest.

“I have to rent a room in Lashkar Gah to go to school,” he said. “I can’t ask my father or brothers for that money. I need to work to make money.”

His classmate Yar Mohammad has chosen to stay in school through the harvest, but he says it is lonely.

“There were 45 in our class before the harvest season, but now there are fewer than 20,” he said. “The rest have gone to work as harvesters. I think they’ll have a lot of problems when they come back, because they’ll have missed a lot of lessons.”

Another pupil at the Kart-e-Lagan school, who did not want to be named, said the spiralling cost of food had made poppy harvesting a necessity for many.

“Our teachers have also gone to work as harvesters, because they need the money,” he said. “A sack of flour now costs 5,000 Pakistani rupees [about 80 US dollars]. They can’t afford to buy even flour with the salary the government pays them. I wanted to go and work as a harvester, as well, but I didn’t go because I love my lessons.”

Mohammad Wali, head teacher at the Kart-e-Lagan school, insisted his staff and students were still in class. But he confirmed that teachers were hard pressed to earn enough money to live on.

“Our school is the only one whose students and teachers have not gone to the poppy harvest,” he told IWPR. “But our teachers have resolved to give up teaching unless the government issues them with land for housing. We cannot live on a salary of 3,000 afghani [60 dollars] a month. One sack of flour costs more than that.”

The recently-appointed provincial governor, Mohammad Gulab Mangal, rejected allegations that absenteeism was rife in the schools.

“It is not true that all the schools have gone off for the harvest,” he told IWPR. “It’s only those pupils whose families grow poppy. But Helmand does have a very bad education situation.”

The harvest is back-breaking work, in daytime temperatures that soar high into the thirties.

"I work ten hours every day in the hot sun," said Hamidullah. "When I get up in the morning, I have a severe pain in my feet."

The job involves making cuts on the poppy pod, causing it to ooze a whitish paste. When the paste has turned brown, usually the next morning, it is ready to be scraped off. That done, the pod is then scored again over a number of days, in a constant cycle of cut, wait, and scrape.

The nishgar use a distinctive tool to make the cuts, and a special sharp-sided spoon to collect off the paste. These utensils are sold openly in markets in Lashkar Gah.

One local farmer complained that he was stopped by police on his way back to his home in the countryside after buying the tools of the trade.

"I bought some tools for 40 afghani at the bazaar in Lashkar Gah," said Khan Mohammad, from Marja district. "The police confiscated them at a checkpoint, saying they were illegal. It isn't illegal in the city, where they sell these implements to everybody. But all of a sudden they are banned at the checkpoint. What's that all about?"

Poppy eradication teams, led by Afghan and foreign troops, have made an effort to destroy a significant percentage of the fields.

Compared with 2007's dismal showing, they have had some successes this year. Final figures have yet to be released, both for the eradication campaign and the harvest itself, but several thousand hectares are believed to have been destroyed.

The campaign has come at a high cost, both in economic terms and in the anger caused by the destruction of farmers' future income.

"I had 24 jeribs of land [48,000 square metres] planted with poppy, but these thugs came and destroyed it all," said Sher Ali, a resident of Nawa district. "Now I am bankrupt, and I owe 700,000 afghani [14,000 dollars]. If the government wants to eradicate poppy, fine. But they should then think about giving me a job. What am I supposed to live on? The price of food is sky-high, there are no jobs, nothing."

Governor Mangal insists that the poppy has to go.

"Helmand will never have a good name and reputation as long as there is poppy cultivation in this province," he said. "All the misfortune and problems that beset the province have been caused by poppy."

But many of his constituents feel differently.

"I am very happy these days," said Bismillah, 45, a resident of Nawa district. "I have six sons, who are usually just hanging around. But these days they are very busy. Lots of people come to me and ask me to send my sons for nish.

“Each of them can make about 10,000 rupees, and all told they will bring in 60,000 [900 dollars], which is enough for us to live on for awhile. God protect this poppy!”

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Focus: Afghanistan

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