

Poppies Retain Powerful Hold

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Despite renewed pledges by the government to eradicate the drug trade, those who produce the raw material for heroin insist they have no alternative.

In a televised press conference following his recent electoral victory, President Hamed Karzai vowed to redouble efforts to halt drug trafficking.

"There will definitely, definitely not be any drug thing in Afghanistan, we are going to be dedicated, strong in working against that," he said.

Yet, even as he was speaking, the autumn harvest was under way. In southwestern, eastern and northeastern parts of the country, farmers are expecting a bumper crop - and the biggest yields will be from opium poppies.

Farmers across the country insist that they'll continue to plant and harvest poppies until the government provides them with alternative crops and financial support.

"We are not able to support our families unless we grow opium," said Tela Mohammad, from Mer Mandab district, Helmand province. "The government wants to prevent its cultivation, but doesn't help [farmers]."

He said he would keep growing opium, "even if it costs me my head."

Farmers throughout Afghanistan said that the main reasons they depend on opium crops are long-running drought and widespread poverty. They complain the government hasn't been able to find a better solution.

Ashiqullah, from the village of Jazib in Helmand province, told IWPR, "We have an irrigation problem in our area. There isn't enough water in the rivers to irrigate the fields properly, and we don't get a better harvest. So we have to grow opium, because there is not enough water for wheat and corn."

But government officials focus on public-awareness campaigns, rather than taking any concrete step to prevent rising production.

"We inform people in the villages that we will destroy their fields if they cultivate opium," said Dad Mohammad, head of police of Helmand. "We won't let anyone grow it."

Ahmadullah Alizai, head of the counter-narcotics department for southwestern Afghanistan, said, "According to decree no. 53 of President Karzai, no one has the right to grow opium, and we have informed all farmers."

Despite such pledges, opium cultivation continues. And farmers warn that if the government cracks down, they will fight back.

Sher Agha, from the village of Shah Karez in Kandahar province, said, "If the government uses power, people will resist."

Mer Dad of Shenwar district in Nangarhar province, said he would take extreme measures to protect his opium crop.

"I must support 17 family members – I can't let them to die from hunger," he said. "I will even plant mines to preserve my fields."

Government officials have promised seed, equipment and medicines for farmers as an incentive to stop growing opium. But in eastern provinces of Afghanistan such as Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar and Nuristan, farmers have continued growing opium despite such promises.

Farhad, from Rodaat district in Nangarhar province, said he owed a lot of money to various people and was relying on opium to get him out of debt. "God willing, if I can harvest 35 kilos of opium, then all my problems will be solved," he said.

In Nangarhar, a key growing region, the government has even attempted aerial spraying to eradicate the poppy crop. Thus far, such attempts have not been very effective.

In the north, farmers are also sceptical of the government's ability to curtail opium production.

"Growing anything else isn't that profitable," said Sufi Payenda of the village of Yangi Hariq, in Balkh province. "We can't sustain our lives by growing other plants, so we won't stop growing opium."

Sayed Mohammed was irrigating his fields in near the village of Arzankar village in the Chahar Bulak district of Balkh province. He said: "I grow opium on two jerib [4,000 square metres] of land near the stream. And when this land is ready, I will grow it here as well."

Farmers in the north said they would continue to grow opium even if it puts their lives at risk.

"We will die from hunger if we don't grow opium," said Malim Mohammad Zaher, from village of Kutaki in Balkh province. "Even if the government tries to kill us, we won't stop."

Just as in other regions, efforts by officials in the north to stop opium production have failed.

Mohammed Tayeb, head of education department at the agricultural institute in Balkh, said there are 439 villages in the province which each grow opium on an area of at least 54 jerib [108,000 square metres] of land. According to him, the majority of farmers in the region are growing some opium.

One reason the government has been so ineffective in combating the narcotics trade is because of the widespread participation of militia groups and local officials.

Mohammed Zahir Haqbar, head of the counter-narcotics department in the interior ministry, accused some officials of being involved in trafficking drugs abroad.

"No one would dare [participate in trafficking] unless some governmental officials were involved in this business," he said.

However, there is hope that with international assistance, the government can make a dent in opium production.

General Mohammed Daud, deputy interior minister for counter-narcotics, said that over the next three years, the United States and Great Britain will help Afghan farmers through dam construction and the provision of seed and fertiliser. And he promised more robust enforcement of narcotics laws.

"The government is more capable than in previous years, and we have strong support from the international community," he said. "We should decrease production of narcotics by 50 per cent every year."

Daud said it is time for the government to declare holy war - jihad - on narcotics.

"It is jihad, and there is no greater service that can be rendered to Afghans and the people of the world," he said. "It is our religious, Islamic duty."

Wahidullah Amani is an IWPR staff writer in Kabul. This report drew on material from the Pajhwok news agency, an IWPR project.

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