

Poppy Destruction Dismissed as Stunt

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Some observers say eradication programme is too little too late, but farmers insist they have no alternative to growing the deadly crop.

Police are destroying fields of opium poppies in northern Afghanistan in an attempt to demonstrate the Kabul government's determination to crack down on opium cultivation

In the only operation in the north this year, the police chopped down 5 jeribs, or 10,000 square metres, of poppies near the Afghan-Uzbek border, and are now destroying 6,600 jeribs in Balkh province.

But with thousands of hectares of land under poppy cultivation in the northern provinces, the move has been dismissed by one leading commentator as too little too late and a propaganda stunt.

In February, the government of President Hamed Karzai - under intense pressure from the West - hosted an international conference on the cultivation and trafficking of opium at which it pledged to curb opium-poppy cultivation, Afghanistan's most lucrative cash crop.

Over 90,000 hectares are being used to grow opium-poppies.

United Nations experts expect this year's bumper crop - now being harvested - to yield 3,600 tons of opium, enough to produce 75 per cent of the world's heroin. According to the UN, the combined income of poppy farmers and opium smugglers last year was 2.3 billion US dollars - equal to half of Afghanistan's official gross domestic product.

Regional warlords and their local commanders profit from drug trafficking, using the abundant cash to bankroll their private armies. In doing so, they weaken the power of the Karzai government in the provinces.

Since March, the police have also eradicated opium-poppy crops in the southwest, south and east and destroyed over 30 heroin laboratories.

But a leading journalist and commentator in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, Ahmad Shah Asar, dismissed the eradication programme as being "about making propaganda".

"They started this programme very late, at a time when most of the harvest had been collected," he said.

"The programme they have started is not a permanent solution to the problem. They should provide farmers with compensation. If they don't do this, the farmers will not be able to grow things on the land next year."

International aid workers agree, saying that while the aim is laudable, the timing is too late to be effective. They also worry the discontent the program creates among farmers will endanger security, especially during the run-up to presidential elections in September.

Gen. Abdul Razaq, head of security for Balkh province, defended the timing of this year's operation. He said that in the areas affected, farmers had already collected 60 per cent of the poppy harvest, but that 40 per cent remained.

The programme is expected to go on until early June

Opium-poppies are an attractive crop for the country's hard-pressed farmers. They have faced over 20 years of war, three years of drought, and large areas of their land remains mined. They say they need to make good money from the land they can still farm.

While working on his poppy farm in Kaldar district, near the Afghan-Uzbek border, Mohamad Rahim, 33, told IWPR that he couldn't afford to support his family if he was forced to grow traditional crops, such as wheat, vegetables and cotton, on his land.

Another farmer, Rustam, 53, warned that if the government took action to destroy his poppy farm, "We will be obliged to start robbery and other illegal things."

Mohamad Denn, 35, explained why it's so hard for farmers to turn away from the crop. While farmers can make only 60 dollars per jerib from traditional crops, opium poppies yielded a thousand dollars per jerib.

In Balkh city, tools used for scoring and bleeding the poppy seed-heads and gathering the opium that they produce are sold everywhere.

In the West, heroin addiction may be a way of death. But here, growing the poppies that produce it are a way of life.

Abdul Khaliq, 30, spoke to IWPR as he scored the poppy-heads in a field.

"We are not happy that youths are addicted and lose their lives through using opium, but we are obliged to grow it to support our family and to survive," he said. "If the government plans to destroy poppy lands, then it should destroy poppies all over the country, not just here."

Labourers working on poppy fields earn twice as much than if they worked on other crops, he said.

Juma Deen, 30, who was also working in the field, said, "If they want to destroy our poppy lands, they should give us compensation for it; otherwise we will be badly affected and then we can grow nothing next year.

"I support a serious law to ban opium poppies, stopping everyone from growing it. We will be happy to grow wheat or cotton instead of poppies if others are also prevented," he said.

Habibullah, the governor of Balkh province, has been seen on local television hacking down poppies with a big stick. He says that eliminating the crop will take time because "we can't eradicate all the poppies in one year".

He also agreed that before steps are taken to destroy poppy crops, farmers should be shown alternative ways to make a living from their land.

A spokesman for the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, UNODC, in Kabul said, "UNODC is fully supportive of transparent and legal efforts by the Afghan government to address the problem of opium poppy cultivation."

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