

UNODC Reports “Worrisome” Rise in Myanmar Opium Production Rest of South East Asia almost opium-free

VIENNA, 10 October (UNODC). The Golden Triangle – comprising Laos, Myanmar and Thailand – is no longer a major supplier of opium. A concerted eradication drive over the past decades has slashed opium cultivation in this once notorious region to the point that South East Asia now produces only 5% of the world’s deadliest drug – the rest comes from Afghanistan. Thailand has been opium-free for almost twenty years. Laos has cut opium production by 94% in less than a decade. Myanmar’s share of the world opium market collapsed from 63% to 6% between 1998 and 2006.

But a report on opium cultivation in South East Asia in 2007, released today by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), shows that this significant downward trend risks being undercut by an alarming upsurge in opium cultivation in Myanmar. In 2007, opium cultivation rose by 29% from 21,500 to 27,700 hectares. Production was up 46% as a result of higher yields. These increases are dwarfed by the opium boom in Afghanistan, but they entrench Myanmar’s position as, by far, the world’s second largest opium producer (460 tonnes).

“Over the past few years Myanmar was priced out of the opium market by much higher yields and cultivation in Afghanistan, leading to a drop in production”, said Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of UNODC. “Nevertheless, the sharp increase in the amount of opium grown in Myanmar in 2007 is worrisome and undermines progress towards a drug-free South East Asia”, said the UN drugs chief.

He pointed to three significant developments in the Myanmar drug economy.

First, while historically opium was grown along Myanmar’s eastern borders with China, Laos and Thailand, it is now concentrated in the South and East Shan states which account for 90% of all opium grown in the country. “There seem to be factors in this part of Myanmar that are conducive to the drugs trade including corruption, high-level collusion, and weak border security. As a result, plenty of powerful people are profiting”, said Mr. Costa.

Second, a reduction in opium cultivation has been offset by more lucrative methamphetamine production.

Third, and as a result, the distribution of drug incomes has shifted away from poor farmers (producing opium) to criminal groups (producing synthetic drugs). “The drug economy in Myanmar has evolved so as to maximize profits”, warned Mr. Costa.

Mr. Costa called for greater international engagement to counter-act these trends.

“More pressure must be applied on those who are profiting from the drugs trade”, said Mr. Costa. He warned that “neglecting the greed and corruption that enable Myanmar’s drug trade will fuel crime, instability, addiction and HIV”. “I therefore urge the Government of Myanmar and the international community to control the flow of precursor chemicals (needed to make heroin and methamphetamines), crack down on drug trafficking, and reduce demand for drugs”, said the UNODC head. He also called on countries of the Golden Triangle to tackle synthetic drugs with the same determination that they have curbed opium cultivation.

The head of UNODC urged the international community and UN agencies to target more assistance towards rural development in regions coping with the loss of income from opium crops. In the past few years, some of the greatest progress in opium eradication has come from the Wa region, one of the poor rural communities in the world.

“While criminals and their cronies are reaping profits from drug processing and trafficking, farmers are bearing the brunt of opium eradication”. Mr. Costa urged the international community to ensure that opium eradication does not increase the vulnerability of farmers to poverty, and trigger a humanitarian crisis.

He also called for improved drug treatment in opium growing regions to help rural communities deal with disproportionately high rates of addiction.

A full copy of the UNODC report on Opium Poppy Cultivation in South East Asia can be accessed at www.unodc.org

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“The UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific promotes and facilitates actions against drug abuse and trafficking, transnational organized crime, human trafficking, money laundering, corruption, and terrorism, through cooperative partnerships in the region.”