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Opium-crop cultivation rises in Afghanistan, prices remain high

20 November 2012 - Kabul/Vienna (UNODC) – Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan covered 154,000 hectares (ha) in 2012, 18 per cent higher than the 131,000 recorded the previous year, according to the 2012 Afghanistan Opium Survey released today by the Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). However, since plant diseases and bad weather had damaged crops, potential opium production fell 36 per cent over the same period from 5,800 to 3,700 tons.

Cultivation increased despite a significant 154 per cent increase in Government eradication efforts (over 9,600 ha eradicated in 2012 compared with just over 3,800 in 2011). The number of poppy-free provinces remains unchanged at 17 but Ghor province in the west lost that status in 2012 while Faryab province in the north regained it.

“High opium prices were a main factor that led to the increase in opium cultivation”, said the Executive Director of UNODC, Yury Fedotov, calling for “a sustained effort by the Afghan government and international stakeholders to address illicit cultivation with a balanced approach of development and law enforcement measures”.

This year saw 95 per cent of cultivation concentrated in the southern and western provinces where insecurity and organized crime are present: 72 per cent in Hilmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Day Kundi and Zabul provinces in the south, and 23 per cent in Farah, Hirat, and Nimroz provinces to the west. This confirms the link between insecurity and opium cultivation observed since 2007, says the Survey.

Cultivation rose 19 per cent in Hilmand, which, with over 75,100 hectares, accounted for around half the cultivation taking place in Afghanistan. However, within the Hilmand Food Zone where 42,000 farmers had received agricultural assistance during the poppy planting season, relatively less poppy crop was grown. “Improved living conditions, including greater security and rule of law, should be encouraged in Hilmand and nationwide if we are to help poor farming communities to support themselves”, said Mr. Fedotov.

Looking at the eastern region, cultivation rose significantly in Kunar (121 per cent), Kapisa (60 per cent) and Laghman (41 per cent). However, the eastern provinces contributed only 4 per cent to the national total of opium production in 2012. In the north, opium cultivation increased by 10 per cent in Baghlan despite the eradication of 252 hectares in 2012. Badakhshan was the only north-eastern province to see cultivation rise (13 per cent) in spite of a sizeable 1,700 ha eradicated. In Kabul, the central region’s only poppy-growing province, cultivation decreased by 45 per cent.

In 2012, farm-gate prices for opium remained at a relatively high level at $196 per kg, which continues to provide a strong incentive for farmers to start or resume poppy cultivation in the coming season. As a consequence of low opium yields, the average gross income for opium per hectare was slashed by 57 per cent to $ 4,600 in 2012 from $10,700 the year before. The total farm-gate value of opium was accordingly halved to $0.7 billion and the share of the farm-gate value fell from 7 per cent of GDP in 2011 to 4 per cent in 2012.

For more information please contact:
Kabul: Jelena Bjelica, External Relations, Mob: (+93 796) 520 857, jelena.bjelica@unodc.org
Vienna: Preeta Bannerjee, Public Information Officer, (+43-699) 1459-5764, preeta.bannerjee@unodc.org