

guardian.co.uk

Mystery disease blights Afghan opium poppies

UN fears rise in prices could lead to greater cultivation of crop, dealing blow to efforts to crack down on drug

Reuters
guardian.co.uk, Thursday 13 May 2010 20.29 BST

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



A field of opium poppies. Photograph: Reuters

An unknown disease blighting [Afghanistan's](#) opium poppies is threatening efforts to reduce the illicit drug's economic grip on the country by ramping up its price for farmers, the UN said today.

Afghanistan is the world's biggest opium supplier and 90% of the Afghan crop is harvested in south Helmand where thousands of US troops are fighting insurgents who are partly funded by the trade.

The international community has spent years trying to reduce Afghanistan's dependency on opium cultivation, which provides an income for thousands of poor farmers, reluctant to switch to licit crops because they are less profitable.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Kabul was unable to confirm what disease had infected poppies, which are processed into heroin, but said its impact would not be seen until the harvest at the end of the summer.

"In the short-term it seems to be mother nature's way of helping," said Jean-Luc Lemahieu, an UNODC spokesman. "But if farmers see their licit crops affected and, in addition, speculative opium prices stimulate cultivation to new heights then the long-term negatives will have offset the short-term positive."

He added that samples of infected plants were still undergoing tests.

The disease may hurt international efforts to purge Afghanistan of opium cultivation as it might also damage legal fruit and vegetable crops such as pomegranates, vital for the country's agrarian economy, said Lemahieu.

For the past two years the supply of the opium has declined and cultivation is limited to seven of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. This has led to a rise in prices, says the UN. Past eradication efforts have turned communities against the Afghan government and foreign troops. US marines in Marjah, Helmand, have employed a strategy of paying farmers to burn their crops.

The disease now affecting the poppies has so far been reported in Helmand, and neighbouring provinces of Kandahar and Uruzgan, said Lemahieu.

Villagers who rely on opium poppy cultivation for incomes have in the past accused western forces of deliberately planting diseases to wipe out the plant.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010