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Afghan opium growth sees "alarming" rise

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Afghanistan needs to be more serious about fighting drugs after an "alarming" 18 percent increase in opium cultivation this year, the U.N. drugs agency said on Tuesday.

The rise was mainly due to high prices and a failure of state agencies to work together to wipe out a trade that helps fund the Taliban-led insurgency, a United Nations report said.

Some experts say the departure of most NATO-led forces by the end of 2014 could trigger a spike in the growth of poppy in a war-torn country responsible for 90 percent of the world's opium, a trend likely to worry western governments.

Jean-Luc Lemahieu, Afghanistan country representative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), warned opium cultivation could climb higher next year if the government failed to better coordinate its efforts and make counter narcotics a priority.

"If the other arms of the governments do not move forward seriously on counter narcotics, then next year we will see more increases. This is a very dangerous (trend)," he told reporters.

"There's been some turning of a blind eye ... and this is coming back to the government now with a vengeance. The government will now have to deal with these issues in a more dramatic matter."

"We think the numbers are alarming, but we are not panicking," Lemahieu added. "We are convinced we can turn it around. But we need to act today."

But while poppy cultivation increased, production was down 36 percent to an estimated 3,700 metric tons caused by a combination of disease affecting the crop and bad weather.

The farm gate value of opium fell 49 percent in 2012 to \$717 million, a figure equivalent to 4 percent of the country's tiny economy, it said.

Ninety-five percent of opium growing took place in nine provinces in the south and west of the country, many of which provide popular support for the Taliban who encourage farmers to grow poppy rather than far less lucrative agricultural products.

The UNODC last year estimated the opium trade may have earned the Taliban \$700 million, up from \$200 million a year in the previous decade, with traffickers earning billions more.

WEAK PERFORMANCE

Zarar Ahmad Muqbel Osmani, the minister of counter narcotics, said there was political will to tackle the problem but insecurity and poor implementation of anti-opium programs had proved costly.

"There was a weak performance of state authorities in providing alternative livelihoods," he said. "In some cases, people were cultivating poppies in areas close to local authorities and this is something that needs to be taken seriously."

Opium cultivation rose 19 percent in southern Helmand province, which accounts for almost half of Afghanistan's poppy, while growth surged in parts of the east, with a 121 percent climb in Kunar and 60 percent and 41 percent increases in Kapisa and Laghman respectively.

The UNODC report said opium prices had decreased slightly from a year earlier, but were still high, which was a major factor behind the increased growth.

The number of poppy-free provinces, where growth was on less than 100 hectares, remained unchanged at 17, or around half of the country. The report said government eradication efforts had increased by 154 percent.

Some experts warn uncertainty over Afghanistan's future after most foreign forces withdraw by the end of 2014, an Afghan election year, could fuel a surge in opium growth as a means of generating cash to hedge against further instability.

