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Poppy crop to rise in Afghan north as prices soar: UN

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Poppy cultivation is set to increase sharply in northern parts of Afghanistan this year amid soaring opium prices, including in many areas which were previously poppy-free, the United Nations has said.

Countrywide, there is expected to be a small fall in poppy cultivation this year due to slightly lower cultivation rates in the fertile southern Helmand and Kandahar provinces, focus of ongoing foreign-led military operations.

But in its annual winter opium survey released Monday, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said the price of dry opium had tripled and predicted a strong rise in the amount grown in the northern provinces of Badakhshan, Baghlan and Faryab.

Steep increases were also predicted in Herat and Ghor in the west and in the central province of Kapisa. All bar Badakhshan were free of poppies in 2010.

Afghanistan produces around 90 percent of the world's opium.

Poppy cultivation is still a lucrative source of income for the Taliban despite some eradication efforts and crop replacement schemes in place to clamp down on cultivation.

The poppy harvest in many areas coincides with the start of spring in Afghanistan around March and April, when fighting between Taliban and NATO-led coalition and Afghan forces also heats up.

Some 87 percent of total opium production comes from southern provinces.

"The winter assessment in the north and northeast of Afghanistan predicts a strong increase in opium cultivation for 2011," the survey said. "However... overall cultivation in the whole country is expected to decrease slightly."

When asked why farmers were growing opium, 73 percent of local elders cited the high price of the drug.

The price of dry opium increased 306 percent to \$281 per kilogram this year, according to the survey, after a blight hit last year's harvest.

A further 15 percent said it was because of a lack of support from the government.

Some 56 percent of villages which cultivated opium this year had not received agricultural assistance from the government in the previous year, the survey added.

It also found a close correlation between insecurity and poppy cultivation in the south, though not in the north -- some 90 percent of southern villages linked poor security to poppy cultivation.