

INTERNATIONAL

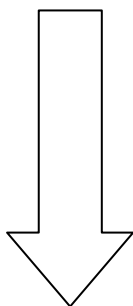
Afghan drug hounds



B.K. Bangash/Associated Press

Abdur Rehman, center, an Afghan farmer who used to make a good profit growing poppy, sits with his sons on a farm just east of Jalalabad. Rehman says he's worried about his profits falling off because now he must grow onions

Nation's opium production virtually wiped out



By Kathy Gannon
The Associated Press

Opium poppy growth in decline

U.N. surveyors looked at four of the major poppy-growing provinces in Afghanistan, once the world's largest producer, and found that cultivation is declining.



SOURCES: U.N. Drug Control Program, ESRI

AP

JALALABAD, Afghanistan — U.N. drug control officers said the Taliban religious militia has virtually wiped out opium production in Afghanistan — once the world's largest producer — since banning poppy cultivation in July.

A 12-member team from the U.N. Drug Control Program spent two weeks searching most of the nation's largest opium-producing areas and found so few poppies that they do not expect any opium to come out of Afghanistan this year.

"We are not just guessing. We have seen the proof in the fields," said Bernard Frahi, regional director for the U.N. program in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

He laid out photographs of vast tracts of land cultivated with wheat alongside pictures of the same fields taken a year earlier — a sea of blood-red poppies.

A State Department official said yesterday all the information the United States had received so far indicated the poppy crop had decreased, but he did not believe it was eliminated.

Last year, Afghanistan produced nearly 4,000 tons of opium — the milky substance drained from the poppy plant — which was then converted into heroin and sold in Europe and North America. It was a world record for opium production, the United Nations said — more than all other countries combined, including the "Golden Triangle," where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar meet.

Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban's supreme leader, banned poppy growing before the November planting season and augmented it with a religious edict making it contrary to the tenets of Islam.

The Taliban, which has imposed a strict brand of Islam in the 95 percent of Afghanistan it controls, has set fire to heroin laboratories and jailed farmers until they agreed to destroy their poppy crops.

But the ban has badly hurt farmers in one of the world's poorest countries, shattered by two decades of war and devastated by drought.

Some farmers who are unable to pay debts because of the poppy ban are trading their young daughters to clear their debts, U.N. and Taliban officials say.

The U.N. surveyors, who completed their search this week, crisscrossed Helmand, Kandahar, Urzgan and Nangarhar provinces and parts of two others — areas responsible for 86 percent of the opium produced in Afghanistan last year, Frahi said in an interview

Wednesday. They covered 80 percent of the land in those provinces that last year had been awash in poppies.

This year they found poppies growing on barely an acre here and there, Frahi said. The rest — about 175,000 acres — was clean.

The State Department counter-narcotics official said the department would make its own estimate of the poppy crop. Information received so far suggests there will be a decrease, but how much is not yet clear, he said.

The Drug Enforcement Administration declined to comment.

No U.S. government official can enter Afghanistan because of security concerns stemming from the presence of suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden.

Poppies are harvested in March and April, which is why the survey was done now. Tucci said it would

have been impossible for the poppies to have been harvested already.

"The Taliban have done their work very seriously," Frahi said.

Ahmed Rehman, who shares less than three acres in Nangarhar with his three brothers, said the opium he produced last year on part of the land brought him \$1,100.

This year, he says, he will be lucky to get \$300 for the onions and cattle feed he planted on the entire parcel.

Shams-ul-Haq Sayed, an officer of the Taliban drug control office in Jalalabad, said farmers need international aid.

Tucci said discussions are under way on how to help the farmers.

A devastating drought that has killed off entire herds, destroyed crops, turned 80,000 people into refugees in their own country and forced another 170,000 to flee into neighboring Pakistan has exacerbated the poppy ban, leaving some destitute farmers to trade off their young daughters to pay off debts.

"I just talked to a farmer who said: 'I gave my small daughter to the one I got a loan from,'" said Amir Mohammed Haqqani, the Taliban's chief anti-narcotics man in Nangarhar province, which was the second-largest opium-producing region last year.

Farmers traditionally use opium as a source of credit, borrowing against the next year's harvest, Frahi said.

In deeply conservative Afghanistan, girls often are married off at puberty. According to tradition, the family of the groom pays the bride's parents for their daughters.

But girls are now being handed over in marriage at a much younger age to grooms who often are in their late 20s and early 30s, Poulsen said.