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UNIS/NAR/860
11 October 2004

United Nations Drugs Office Confirms Steady Reduction in Opium Cultivation in Myanmar

VIENNA, 11 October (UN Information Service) -- Opium cultivation in Myanmar shows a 29 per cent decline in comparison to 2003, according to the Myanmar Opium Survey 2004, released today by the United Nations *Office on Drugs and Crime* (UNODC). The opium cultivation this season is estimated at 44,200 hectares (ha) representing a significant cumulative decline of 73 per cent when compared to the 163,000 ha in 1996. The production of opium for the year 2004 amounted to 370 metric tons, representing a decline of 54 per cent with respect to 2003. The Shan State traditionally has accounted for more than 90 per cent of total opium production in Myanmar.

"Factor in a parallel decline in opium cultivation in Laos -- 45 per cent in comparison to 2003 -- and what we may be seeing, if the decline continues, is a potential end to more than a century of opium production in the Golden Triangle," said Antonio Maria Costa, the Executive Director of UNODC. Speaking to an audience in Brussels, Costa added: "Today Myanmar faces a critical, two-fold challenge. First, the country needs a permanent decline in opium production. At the same time, Myanmar must do everything in its power to head-off the humanitarian disaster threatening opium-growing families who at present live on, or below, the poverty line."

According to the survey, 260,000 households were involved in opium cultivation in 2004. Most of them reside in remote, mountainous, and isolated areas, and opium is often their primary or sole source of income. Most importantly, the average income of non-opium producing households is 30 per cent higher than opium producing households. "Opium is a last resort for farmers confronting hunger and poverty," said Mr. Costa. "If we do not provide for the basic human needs of farmers in Myanmar, they will never escape the vicious circle of poverty and opium cultivation. The opium communities will remain vulnerable to human rights abuses, human trafficking and forced relocation," added Mr. Costa.

According to Gareth Evans, President and CEO of the International Crisis Group (ICG), "It is very encouraging that the United Nations has been able to report such a significant decline in opium production in Myanmar. However if these declines are to be sustained, more will have to be done to provide economic opportunities for those living in border areas in Myanmar -- even in the absence of political reform, which is essential. ICG has recommended that donors develop new strategies, working with the UN and others to reduce poverty and to tackle the problems of conflict, disease and drugs that have caused so much harm in this region."

The survey also indicates the average farm-gate price of opium has increased by 80 per cent over last year's cost -- in 2004 the average cost per kilogram was US\$234 as opposed to US\$130 recorded in 2003. The increase, a reflection of a scarce opium production this season, could act as an incentive for farmers to cultivate greater amounts next year.

"Democratization and national reconciliation in Myanmar, as well as national commitment to drug control, are goals the United Nations has re-affirmed on several occasions. The international donor community carries a responsibility to support this process by providing alternative sources of income to those families in Myanmar whose livelihoods are adversely impacted by the loss of opium-generated revenue," concluded Mr. Costa.

This survey jointly carried out by UNODC and the Myanmar Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control provides also figures on addiction. The survey (http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crop_monitoring.html) is based on field work complemented with satellite imagery.