

## **Irrawaddy: A downward spiral**

Proposed opium bans could spark a humanitarian crisis in Burma's drug-rich north

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United Wa State Army chairman Bao Yuxiang said on June 24, after proclaiming Special Region 2 a 'drugs source free zone': "How are the farmers going to survive after the poppy ban? This is the big question that every level of local authorities encounters." He added: "The lives of the people will become more difficult, and we do expect the international community will give us more assistance to let the people be able to overcome the difficulties and achieve the historical commitment."

The Wa and Kokang regions in northern Shan State have traditionally been the major opium-producing areas in Burma, but this could change. The UWSA has declared the areas under their control opium free as of June 26, 2005. In the Kokang region an opium ban has been in effect since 2003, while the Mong La region in eastern Shan State has had a similar ban since 1997.

The implementation of these opium bans in one of the world's largest opium-producing areas may sound promising to international anti-narcotics officials, but for the opium farmers living there it could spell disaster. The Wa and Kokang regions are an isolated and impoverished mountainous area near the Chinese border, and residents rely on opium cultivation as a cash crop. Most farmers can only grow enough rice to feed their families for six to eight months each year. The rest of the food, as well as medicines, clothing and access to education, are bought with the opium they grow.

The impact of the opium bans would probably be grave. According to a 2003 survey by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, an estimated 350,000 households in Shan State—or about 2 million people—stand to lose their primary source of income as a direct result of bans on opium, which constitutes 70 percent of their cash income. Alarming reports are already coming out of the Kokang region.

International agencies warn that the region will enter "a downward spiral of poverty, malnutrition and disease." The most immediate concern is food security. "This area is not very suitable to growing crops other than opium," says the UWSA township leader in Long Tan. "So after the ban the people will be very poor here. The main problem that I can foresee here is the stomach problem."

In the Wa region the effect of the June 2005 opium ban may not really be felt until early 2006, after the next harvest season, as farmers still have opium from the previous season. However, some farmers have not been able to pay back the advances of the opium traders because of the poor 2004 drought-affected opium harvest. These loans are paid back by selling opium at a previously agreed price, usually lower than the market price. The rest of their opium is sold in the market in small portions whenever farmers need to buy something.

Bans on growing opium have been implemented primarily to appease the international community—particularly China, Thailand, and the US—who continue to exert significant drug-control pressure. UWSA leaders hope that in return for their anti-drug policy they will receive political recognition, humanitarian aid and support to develop their remote and impoverished region.

Wa officials claim that the ban will be strictly enforced. "Whether the villagers are happy or not,

they have to obey the order,” said Wei Ai Jung, UWSA chairman of Nam Kham Oo Township in the Northern Wa region. “It is the same as the buffalo pulled by the string in its nose. It has to follow.”

There are serious questions about the sustainability of the opium ban. International agencies warn that “the significant gains that Myanmar [Burma] has made in reducing poppy growing [a more than 50 percent reduction in area over the past five years] might be compromised if alternative development assistance and access to food is not ensured for these populations.” Furthermore, it is unclear what the UWSA will do if the humanitarian aid and political capital it hopes to gain from the ban does not materialize. The ban is reportedly opposed by the population and has already caused resentment against the Wa leadership.

The UWSA has called for international support to prevent a humanitarian crisis following the 2005 opium ban. It has also ordered the relocation of tens of thousands of Wa villagers from their mountainous homelands in the northern Wa region to lower-lying areas. Many of them have been moved to the fertile valleys of southern Shan State, which is controlled by the UWSA’s Southern Command. UWSA leaders say the objective is to move poppy farmers and impoverished villagers to areas where they can grow other crops. This is a controversial project, as in many cases the original Shan, Lahu and Akha inhabitants were forced out, and most of them have fled to Thailand.

Since 1998, UNODC has implemented an alternative development project in Mong Pawk District in Wa Special Region 2 to improve food security and create alternative livelihoods for poppy farmers. According to UNODC, by early 2004 its coverage was limited to Mong Pawk District, targeting some 45,000 people—or less than 10 percent of the total population in the Kokang and Wa regions combined. In light of the humanitarian needs created by the opium ban, the UNODC/Wa project has now been expanded to cover the entire Wa region and has been extended through 2007. In order to address a potential crisis, the World Food Programme in August 2003 had already started to provide food assistance to ex-poppy farmers in Kokang and the northern Wa region.

Beyond its own activities, UNODC has worked since 2003 to expand assistance to the region by facilitating the access of other organizations to the Wa through the Kokang and Wa Initiative. The KOWI is an umbrella partnership that brings together international NGOs and UN agencies to help poppy farmers and their families meet basic human needs without the income derived from opium. In 2003 two international NGOs, Aide Medicale Internationale and Malteser Hilfsdienst, became the first KOWI partners to begin operations among the Wa, taking over the primary healthcare component of the UNODC/Wa project. By 2005, 18 partners were operating under the KOWI umbrella, each of them providing assistance in their field of expertise, while coordinating interventions to ensure coverage of priority areas and establish a more efficient method of delivering services.

The reversed sequencing of policy interventions, whereby the opium economy is eliminated before alternatives are in place, has created additional difficulties in the region. Conversely, the project, rather than gradually reducing opium dependence through alternative development efforts, in effect provides humanitarian assistance to communities affected by the opium ban. It is also clear that the assistance at present is insufficient to offset the impact of the opium bans and to cover basic needs of ex-opium farmers. One observer estimated in mid 2004 that food and economic security had been provided to no more than 10 percent of the population in the northern Wa region. Many of them already had serious difficulties in meeting their basic needs before the ban.

The latest harvest before the ban saw a substantial increase in opium cultivation in the northern Wa region, especially in places that were opium free during the last few years. Opium was grown, for instance, on the best available land and on terraces in full view of the town of Mong Mao. Some observers speculate that because this is the last chance to produce poppy crops before the ban,

individuals among the Wa leadership may be involved in the recent increase in cultivation.

As the price of raw opium increases, next season's production is likely to go up in other areas, creating a "balloon effect," for example, in Kachin State, although in absolute terms the impact on the total opium production of Burma may be relatively small. Other places that could see an increase in cultivation include the area west of the Salween River—in Tangyan—as well as all conflict areas in Shan State. Furthermore, any heroin factories based in the Wa region could move to other areas capable of opium production. Some farmers in the Wa region may still try to cultivate small plots of opium for their own use after the ban—mostly for elderly addicts—as often occurs in Laos and Thailand.

The opium bans in Burma are the product of international pressure, caused by the deadline-oriented thinking and repressive anti-narcotics strategies of the international community. The US has blamed the drug problem in Burma on narco-armies and has indicted drug kingpins. However, after decades of civil war, the reality of the drug trade in Burma is that few of the conflict parties can claim to have clean hands. Decisions over whom to blame for the drug trade and whom to indict seem arbitrary and politicized. Experience from Burma over the last 35 years has also shown that trying to arrest suspected kingpins does not help. Those who stand to suffer the most from these measures are at the bottom of the trade—the opium farmers in Shan State.

Communities in opium-growing areas have not been able to meet their basic needs before the opium bans. Such restrictions could dramatically increase the already ongoing process of erosion of upland rural livelihood bases and produce a humanitarian crisis. Under such circumstances, the sustainability of the ban over the years to come is uncertain.

The only viable and humane approach to reduce opium production may require easing the opium ban deadlines, while creating alternative livelihoods for opium farmers. This would necessitate greater international assistance for a sustainable community-based approach in order to enable opium farmers to participate in decision-making processes about their future.

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\* From BurmaNet News:

<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2005/10/19/irrawaddy-a-downward-spiral-tom-kramer/>