

Afghanistan's deadly crop flourishes again

LEVEL THREE - ADVANCED

With the Taliban gone, opium poppies carry the peasants' hopes of prosperity

Pre-reading activities

Discussion points. Read this statements and say which you agree with and which you disagree with.

1. Poor farmers should be allowed to grow opium poppies in order to make money.
2. All opium crops worldwide should be destroyed.
3. Rich countries should pay farmers in poor countries to grow alternative crops.
4. If drugs were legalised, the black market in illegal drugs would disappear.
5. Countries which permit the cultivation of dangerous drugs should be isolated.

Read the following statements that refer to the text about the cultivation of opium poppies in Afghanistan and decide whether they are true or false. Then read the text to check your answers.

1. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, banned the production of opium in Afghanistan.
2. Two years ago, Afghanistan was the world's largest producer of heroin.
3. Poppy production in Afghanistan rose last year.
4. Growing grapes is more profitable than growing opium poppies.
5. Women are not allowed to harvest poppies.
6. Afghanistan is expected to produce a bumper opium crop this year.
7. The Taliban's prohibition of opium production was largely ignored by the population.
8. The price of opium is higher this year than last year.

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When fighting broke out in Afghanistan late last year, Fahzel Rahman went to his cellar and brought out some tiny yellow seeds. In a small plot next to his mud house, he scattered the seeds in the ground. Last week he surveyed his burgeoning poppy field with pride. "You'd be stupid not to grow opium," he said, gesturing at the lettuce-like plants pushing out of the cracked earth. "If the Americans give us some money, we'll stop planting poppy. If they don't, we'll carry on."

Mr Rahman lives in Singesar, a dusty village of terraced vineyards and pomegranate trees half an hour's drive from the southern desert city of Kandahar. The village is famous because Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban's fugitive leader, used to live here - a fact that gives Mr Rahman's opium garden extra piquancy.

Two years ago Mullah Omar issued an edict outlawing opium production across Afghanistan, at that time the world's largest producer of heroin. Taliban soldiers ruthlessly enforced the decree. "I grew tomatoes and other garden vegetables last year," Mr Rahman said. "Before that the Taliban let us plant poppy."

Nobody knows whether Mullah Omar's edict was inspired by Islamic principle, was a cynical trick to drive up the price or a last-ditch attempt to appease the international community. Since the mid-1990s the Taliban had earned millions of dollars from the heroin trade. Either way, United Nations officials last month confirmed that poppy production in Afghanistan fell by 91% last year - from 82,172 hectares to 7,606, with most of that grown in areas controlled by the Northern Alliance. But with the end of the Taliban's rule, farmers across Afghanistan have reverted to their old, lucrative ways. The bombing campaign by the

United States has had a result not anticipated by Pentagon strategists - everyone is planting opium again.

"I can make \$1,600 from this small poppy patch here," Mr Rahman said, pointing to his modest kitchen plot. "If I sell all of the grapes over there, I'll only make a fraction of that," he added, gesturing towards a giant, rolling vineyard framed by low mountains and morning sunshine. According to another opium farmer, Abdul Ali, the harvest season between May and July is a happy time in Singesar. "We all collect the poppy resin together, including the children. Even women do it, because the crop grows very high and nobody can see their faces. We are glad of the money."

The eradication of opium is one of the first big tests for Hamid Karzai, leader of Afghanistan's new interim authority. He has taken an uncompromising line on drugs, and called for all poppy production to stop. But his control over much of the country is tenuous; his fledgling administration lacks resources and his local officials fail to inspire the same kind of dread that the Taliban once did. UN officials privately concede that Afghanistan is heading for a bumper opium crop this year, with much of it destined for Britain and the rest of Europe. One senior UN official based in Kandahar said: "The Taliban ban was implemented almost 100%. Already we know that farmers are planting opium again. Without any proper enforcement, advocacy and assistance from the donor community, the problem won't go away."

Mr Karzai's representatives are - on the surface at least - doing their bit. This month Kandahar's new governor, Gul Agha, closed down the city's opium bazaar, a venerable city institution that had survived last year's poppy ban. "There is nothing left for us now but to sit and drink tea," Shau

Ali, 35, an opium trader lamented, sitting on the carpet of his empty bazaar shack, decorated with glossy pictures of the Gulf. "We are very sad because we don't have a job any more. We are trying to persuade the government to let us sell off our remaining stocks." Mr Ali said a kilogram of opium currently costs between \$2,200 and \$2,700, down from last year's price of \$3,300 when there was no prospect of a fresh crop. But nobody at the opium bazaar seemed genuinely miserable: the business had, it appeared, merely shifted from the front of the shop to a small back room accessible via a waist-high door.

Back in Singesar the local security chief revealed that Gul Agha had instructed him not to worry too much about digging up this year's poppy harvest - a move that would undoubtedly heap much unpopularity on the new governor's head. "There's not much we can do this year because the poppy has already been planted," Agha Wali said. "We'll make a start next year." With the Taliban gone, ending Afghanistan's status as the world's largest heroin producer is clearly going to be an uphill task. In the last year before the ban came into effect the trade was worth \$98m to Afghanistan's farmers, with most of the buyers wealthy businessmen from Iran and Pakistan. Opium has flourished in the country's southern desert region - as well as in northern provinces such as Badakshan - since the time of Alexander the Great. Unlike wheat, it requires little water and is ideally suited to the country's arid valleys and unreliable rivers. Opium grew in Afghanistan during the time of King Zahir Shah - who returns from exile next month - as well as throughout the Russian invasion, and the turbulent mojahedin years. Few believe that Mr Karzai can wipe it out.

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Vocabulary work

Match the following words from the first part of the text with their meanings:

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 1. burgeoning | a. producing a lot of money |
| 2. fugitive | b. very determined |
| 3. an edict | c. without mercy |
| 4. to outlaw | d. complete removal |
| 5. ruthlessly | e. growing very quickly |
| 6. to revert | f. strong fear |
| 7. lucrative | g. an official order |
| 8. eradication | h. to return to |
| 9. uncompromising | i. very old and wise |
| 10. fledgling | j. to prohibit |
| 11. dread | k. recently formed |
| 12. venerable | l. referring to a person on the run from justice |

Fill the gaps in these sentences with appropriate forms of words taken from the second part of the text:

1. Opium-sellers _____ a lack of business.
2. In Singesar there seems little prospect that this year's poppy harvest will have to be _____.
3. If a place is difficult to reach it is said to be _____.
4. Persuading farmers not to grow opium will probably be an _____ task.
5. The Afghan king has been in _____ for many years.
6. Opium poppies _____ in dry conditions.
7. It will be very difficult for Mr Karzai to _____ opium production in Afghanistan.
8. The years when Afghanistan was ruled by the mojahideen were very _____.

Discussion Point

Now that you have read the text, make a list of points for and against the growing of opium poppies in Afghanistan.

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Key

B 1. True 2. True 3. False 4. False 5. False 6. True 7. False 8. False

C 1. e 2. l 3. g 4. j 5. c 6. h 7. a 8. d 9. b 10. k 11. f 12. i

D 1. lament/are lamenting 2. dug up 3. inaccessible 4. uphill 5. exile 6. flourish 7. wipe out
8. turbulent