

Afghanistan's deadly crop flourishes again

LEVEL TWO - INTERMEDIATE

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

Pre-reading activities

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about opium poppies.

1. Rich countries should give money to poor countries like Afghanistan so that farmers there can be encouraged to stop growing opium and to grow other crops.
2. Poor farmers in Afghanistan have a right to grow opium as they need money to survive.
3. Rich countries should stop giving money to countries like Afghanistan until they stop the growing of opium there.
4. The war on Afghanistan has created the conditions for the growing of opium to start again.

Pre-reading questions.

Choose the best answer for each of these questions. Then read the text to check your answers.

1. Which drug is made from poppy seeds?
a. cocaine b. heroin c. cannabis
2. Which country is the world's largest producer of heroin?
a. Colombia b. Thailand c. Afghanistan
3. What is the current price of a kilo of opium?
a. less than \$1000 b. around \$2500 c. more than \$5000
4. Of which organisation was Mullah Omar the leader?
a. the Taliban b. the opium producers c. the province of Kandahar
5. In the last year before prohibition, how much did Afghan farmers earn from opium production?
a. nothing b. almost \$100 million c. \$5 billion

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When the war began 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 house, he scattered the seeds in the ground. Last week he proudly looked at his growing poppy field. "You'd be stupid not to grow opium," he said, pointing at the little plants pushing out of the earth. "If the Americans give us some money, we'll stop planting poppy. If they don't, we'll continue." Mr Rahman lives in Singesar, a dusty village near the southern desert city of Kandahar. The village is famous because Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban's leader, used to live here.

Two years ago Mullah Omar prohibited opium production in Afghanistan, which was then the world's largest producer of heroin. Taliban soldiers ruthlessly enforced the ban. "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 action was inspired by Islamic principle, was a trick to force up the price, or an attempt to please 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. But with the end of the Taliban's rule,

farmers all over Afghanistan have returned to their old, lucrative ways. The bombing campaign by the United States has had a result not foreseen by Pentagon strategists - everyone is planting opium again.

"I can make \$1,600 from this small poppy field 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. 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 government. He says he is opposed to drugs and has called for all poppy production to stop. But he does not control the whole country, his government does not have much money and people do not fear the new police authorities in the same way that they feared the Taliban. UN officials privately admit that Afghanistan will produce an enormous opium crop this year.

Mr Karzai's representatives are doing their best. This month Kandahar's new governor, Gul Agha, closed down the city's opium bazaar, an old city institution that had survived last year's poppy ban.

"There is nothing left for us now but to sit and drink tea," said Shau Ali, 35, sitting on the carpet of his empty bazaar shack. "We are very sad because we don't have a job any more. We are trying to persuade the government to let us sell our remaining stocks of opium." 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.

Back in Singesar the local security chief said that Gul Agha had instructed him not to worry too much about digging up this year's poppy harvest - a move that would make the new governor very unpopular. "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 a difficult 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 Afghanistan since the time of Alexander the Great. It needs little water and grows easily in the dry climate. Few people believe that Mr Karzai can eradicate it

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Comprehension

Match the beginnings of the sentences in the first column with the endings in the second column

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Afghan farmers will stop planting poppy seeds | a. was closed down by the governor. |
| 2. Two years ago ... | b. the new police authorities. |
| 3. Afghan farmers grew garden vegetables ... | c. has fallen sharply since last year. |
| 4. After the fall of the Taliban ... | d. are far more profitable than grapes. |
| 5. Opium poppies | e. because the poppy has already been planted |
| 6. People are not afraid of ... | f. Afghanistan was the world's biggest heroin producer. |
| 7. The Kandahar opium bazaar ... | g. by businessmen from Iran and Pakistan. |
| 8. The price of opium ... | h. instead of opium poppies. |
| 9. It's too late to take action this year ... | i. if the Americans give them money. |
| 10. Most of Afghanistan's heroin is bought ... | j. Afghan farmers returned to their old habits. |

Vocabulary work

Match these words with their meanings:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 1. plot | a. without mercy |
| 2. to scatter | b. complete removal/destruction |
| 3. to prohibit | c. a small piece of land using for growing plants |
| 4. ruthlessly | d. to predict |
| 5. to foresee | e. to make something illegal |
| 6. lucrative | f. a primitive building |
| 7. eradication | g. producing a lot of money |
| 8. shack | h. to throw in different directions |

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LEVEL TWO - INTERMEDIATE

Word building

Complete the following table

| VERB | NOUN |
|----------|------------|
| produce | production |
| oppose | _____ |
| enforce | _____ |
| grow | _____ |
| confirm | _____ |
| collect | _____ |
| admit | _____ |
| survive | _____ |
| persuade | _____ |
| instruct | _____ |

Discussion

Should poor Afghan farmers be allowed to grow opium poppies to make money?

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Key

B 1. b 2. c 3. b 4. a 5. b

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

D 1. c 2. h 3. e 4. a 5. d 6. g 7. b 8. f

E 2. opposition 3. enforcement 4. growth 5. confirmation 6. collection 7. admission
8. survival 9. persuasion 10. instruction