



Afghan Farmers Are Switching Crops

BADAKSHAN PROVINCE, Afghanistan—Farmer Arabab Zarin, 59, stands in his striped green robe at the edge of his snow-covered plot of ground, pointing to its far edge. “All this was poppy,” he said. “Red and blue poppies. I grew it for three years and then stopped.”

He is one of thousands of Afghan farmers who turned to poppy in desperation during years of war and Taliban misrule. Income from opium paid for many of the family’s basic necessities—such as their home—and a few luxuries.

But Afghanistan’s opium quickly became the source of more than 80 percent of the world’s heroin. President Hamid Karzai urged farmers not to grow the illegal drug. Zarin and other farmers listened to that appeal and to promises made by their governor and foreign aid groups to help them improve their legal farming.

To help Afghan farmers shift away from opium poppies, USAID spent \$150 million in 2004 and 2005 on “alternate livelihoods” to provide other ways to earn a decent living.

As Zarin and a half-dozen of his neighbors sit in the house that opium money built,

the elderly farmer peers through his thick eye-glasses and tells a visitor that the wheat seed and urea fertilizer he got, through a U.S. aid project, were just a start.

And even if he had enough seed for all his land, and the 400-year-old canal vital to wheat farming in his village were fixed—winter flooding damaged the intake—wheat will never bring as much cash as opium.

Badakshan province was the third largest opium producer in recent years after Helmand and Nangahar. But it also showed the biggest drop in production in 2004 and 2005—along with Nangahar—after Karzai and strong provincial leaders urged people to obey the law. But there was growing concern in early 2006 that many farmers might either shift back to poppy or else grow it in remote fields far from the roads.

The Afghan government was beginning to use tractors to plow under any fresh poppy it found in the hope that farmers would be persuaded to end its cultivation. “We really want to stop growing poppy,” said Zarin.

However, his neighbors, sitting on carpets inside an unheated room in his new house, said that unless local officials stopped growing poppies, poor farmers would find it hard to stop. The Afghan villagers say they don’t want to go back to living in damp, dark, cold houses with earthen floors, without electricity or access to healthcare.

“If you came here 10 years ago,” said Zarin, “there was not even a donkey to take a patient to the hospital in Faisabad. Now we



Afghan farmer Arabab Zarin stands in front of a field that once produced opium poppies. Zarin is one of thousands of farmers who grew poppies to escape poverty.

have a car to take someone to the hospital, even at 11 at night. If there were some companies that would set up factories, people would rather work and then no one will plant poppy.”

Among the ways U.S. aid helps farmers shift from poppies are:

- Some 250 kilometers of roads have been built, part of a wide plan to link remote farms to the bustling markets of Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, and other cities.
- 500,000 farmers in all 34 provinces received improved wheat and vegetable seeds along with fertilizer.
- 200,000 Afghans were hired to repair 6,000 kilometers of irrigation channels damaged by neglect, war, or flooding.
- Livestock growers receive veterinary advice and treatment.

USAID and other aid agencies are also

working with local officials here to establish a regional development plan and attract business investment. Items for consideration include:

- Improve mining of lapis lazuli, the speckled blue semiprecious stone for which Badakshan is renowned.
- Augment collection of herbs and nuts growing wild in the mountains.
- Dry vegetables and fruits for Afghan and regional markets.
- Open up formal border crossings with Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China for trade and tourism.
- Improve the quality and quantity of local wool production used in carpets and clothing.

“We all agree that it is a bad choice between growing poppy and being poor,” said one of Zarin’s neighbors. ★

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