



PRESS RELEASE - 2 June 2014

Opium cultivation bounces back: TNI report shows dramatic failure of ASEAN's 'Drug Free' strategy.

Bouncing Back - Relapse in the Golden Triangle, a new in-depth report by the Transnational Institute (TNI) launched in Yangon, Burma/Myanmar, on Monday June 2, highlights the profound changes in the illicit drugs market in the Golden Triangle – Burma, Thailand and Laos – and neighbouring India and China over the past five years. The report outlines the causes and consequences of a doubling of opium cultivation after a decade of decline. It argues that repressive drug control policies have failed to reduce consumption and production and instead led to more dangerous forms of drug use, growing human rights abuses and impoverishment. It finally highlights the workable alternatives that offer a better prospect for addressing drug-related problems in Southeast Asia.

The ASEAN strategy to become 'drug free' by 2015 is failing dramatically. In the last decade, opium cultivation in the region has doubled, drug use – especially amphetamines – has increased significantly, and there remain strong links between drugs, conflict, crime and corruption. This deadline oriented thinking has resulted in repressive drug policies, mainly targeting marginalised communities including drug users, opium farmers and small traffickers.

The report is based on hundreds of interviews with drug users, opium farmers and small traders gathered on the ground in difficult circumstances by a dozen local researchers. It reveals how under political pressure of the unrealistic deadline of a 'drug free ASEAN' by 2015:

- Opium bans merely shifted cultivation into different regions such as Shan State in Burma and Northeast India and have had little permanent effect because opium is often the only crop viable to compensate for food shortages and high levels of poverty.
- There has been a surge in injected heroin use and repression has led consumers to diversify their consumption, shifting back and forth between heroin, methamphetamine, pharmaceutical opioids and other psychoactive substances.
- Repressive drug policies have led to the imprisonment of tens of thousands of users in the region, overcrowded prisons and hampered access to health care and treatment. In turn the limited access to life-saving harm reduction services has led to the high incidence of HIV and hepatitis C among drug users.
- The presence of a profitable illicit drug market has exacerbated conflict and stimulated corruption, crime, violence and human rights violations.
- The drug market has become increasingly regionalised with opium cultivation in Northeast India linked to Burmese markets, India and China producing precursors for heroin and ATS for Burma and Thailand, and the Golden Triangle producing heroin for the Chinese market.

Tom Kramer, lead author of the report, said: "Until regional governments and the international community properly addresses poverty, conflict and rising demand for heroin in China, opium bans and eradication will continue to fail. Alternative livelihood options need to be firmly in place before communities can be expected to abandon illicit cultivation".

Co-author Ernestien Jensema says "Governments' emphasis on repressive measures and disproportionate sentences have resulted in overcrowded prisons, large-scale compulsory 'treatment' and other human rights abuses including the death penalty for non-violent drug offences. Several countries are starting to explore alternative approaches, but progress is too slow and it is vital that people who are most affected by drug control policies, especially drug users and opium farmers, become more involved in the discussion and in policy making".

'Bouncing Back' argues for drug policy changes that prioritise health, development, peace building and human rights. Proposals for reform include decriminalising drug use, abandoning disproportionate sentences, ending the counterproductive ban on traditional mild psychoactive plants such as kratom, shifting resources from law enforcement to alternative development and harm reduction, prioritising adequate access to essential medicines, and providing evidence-based voluntary treatment services

for those who need them. Much can be gained if governments set different, meaningful indicators for their drug policies. Instead of focusing on the number of drug related arrests to look at the number of people with access to services; instead of aiming for increased eradication shift attention to include human development indicators in the policy design.

Co-author Martin Jelsma said the research shows that, "Instead of holding on to the illusion of a drug free ASEAN, policies and resources should be redirected towards managing the drugs market in the least harmful way, because whether we like it or not, that market is here to stay. Continuing on the same path is not only destined to failure but is also causing untold devastation to human lives across Southeast Asia. At a time the Americas are turning their back to the war on drugs, Asia should also start to rethink its drug policy."

<http://www.tni.org/bouncingback>

<http://druglawreform.info/en/publications/item/5413-bouncing-back>

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