

Harm reduction for poppy farmers in Myanmar?

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"A humanitarian crisis looms, HIV epidemic may be exacerbated with the 2005 total opium ban in the Wa state."

From a report by Jean-Paul Grund, AHRN Consultant, on the international conference on "Drugs and Conflict in Burma (Myanmar): Dilemmas for Policy Responses", organised by the Transnational Institute (TNI) & Burma Centre Netherlands (BCN), Amsterdam, 14-15 December 2003.

The immediate reason for this conference was to look at the opium bans implemented in the Kokang region in 2002 and announced for the whole Wa region in Shan State for the year 2005. Based on the results of a recent assessment mission into the area, TNI believes that the planned implementation of these bans is very likely to result in a humanitarian disaster.

In her opening remarks, Fiona Dove, TNI Director, fleshed out the aims of the conference with a summary of the international community's concerns about Myanmar's various economic, environmental, public health and political problems, all of which have become intricately enmeshed with the drug issue. Thus, the conference aimed to identify the problems related to current drug control efforts in Myanmar and to specify policy options and recommendations for the international community towards a more humane and considerate drug policy.

Programme, speakers and participants

Providing a number of perspectives on the issue of drugs and conflict in Myanmar were representatives of various ethnic minorities, international developmental NGOs, academics and other international experts.

Speakers included Adrian Cowell whose excellent documentary "The Opium Convoys" (1996) kicked off the second day of the conference; Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, a former Shan State Army commander; Jeremy Milsom, a UNODC officer involved in the Wa Alternative Development Project; Don Pathan, editor of the Nation in Bangkok; Guilhem Fabre, a sinologist at the University of Le Havre; and Alain Labrousse, former director of the Observatoire Geopolitique des Drogues.

Nearly 60 invited participants came to the conference which was not open to the public in order to stimulate

a frank and open debate. This included NGOs representing different ethnic groups in Myanmar, developmental NGOs and international experts; representatives of the Dutch government, the German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) and one person from the UNODC Wa Alternative Development Project in Myanmar (the only UN body represented) who mentioned speaking on his own behalf and not the UNODC.

Main Issues

Business, not politics.

According to Cowell, one must understand the particular political history of the country and the underlying principles of Myanmar politics, in particular Shan politics, in order to make sense of the drug trade and its role in the intricate and enduring conflict situation, which has gripped the country since its independence in 1948.

Identifying two overall forces in Shan State (a national unifying and a more volatile regional one), he pointed towards the "uniquely fluid political framework" presented by "cellular trading alliances."

This is exemplary in the switches in alliances between ideologically extremely disparate military/political entities (e.g., from resistance or revolutionary to Ka Kwe Ye militia and back to rebel army again). Several speakers contended that Shan politics has essentially been used "to neutralise one Shan against the other."

While most political armies may not be the actual organisers of the drug trade, over the years all parties have benefited from it and continue to do so, mostly through a 10% levy on the opium convoys or other parts of the trade (and on nearly everything, i.e., rice mills, saw mills, transport of consumer goods, etc.).

Doing business is what drives the drug trade; armies and politics are incidental,” noted some of the speakers who were virtually unanimous in stating that the drug trade is largely in the hands of ethnic Chinese (and not the Wa people, dubbed as “the world’s most heavily armed narco-traffickers” by the US State Department). This is why, unlike heroin, ATS, i.e., “Ya Ba” (methamphetamine tablets), are mainly produced by independent entrepreneurs outside of the political arena.

Humanitarian crisis and the opium ban.

The (international) demonisation of drugs, like Thailand’s recent ferocious war on drugs, affects both farmers and users who are at the extremes of opium/heroin distribution. Most speakers fear that the Wa leaders’ hierarchical top-down implementation of a total ban on opium growing by 2005 will have little consideration on the consequences for the mostly poor, opium farmers. For most farming families in the Shan State, growing poppies is paying for what most people in developed countries take for granted. “*Opium is our food, our cloths, our medicine, the education of our children,*” one farmer summarised.

Over the last years, small farmers in Shan state have seen a gradual deterioration of this sustenance base, and with the 2005 opium ban for the entire Wa region, a humanitarian disaster looms on the horizon, including severe food shortages, educational drop out and forced migration.

At the conference, Jean-Luc Lemahieu, UNODC country representative in Myanmar, was quoted worrying over the speed the implementation date is approaching: “...it’s too fast, too soon. I don’t see enough income coming in for the opium poppy farmers and I’m concerned that we’ll have a humanitarian crisis on our hands as a result.”

HIV and reduced opium supply.

Myanmar already has one of the worst HIV epidemics in the region and the opium bans are likely to exacerbate the problem. Opium use reportedly runs through whole families and generations. Diri Gam, HIV project coordinator of the Pan Kachin Development Society suggested that in many townships that grow opium poppies, 80% of households include a drug user, mostly heroin, a little less than half of them injecting the drug.[1] Some 80% of loggers and workers in the mining industry also use heroin and/or opium. Heroin is very cheap (“2.5 yuan per injection”[2]) and widely available. Reportedly, knowledge about HIV and safer

drug injecting is rare, while needle sharing is very common. While at present the (small) majority of local opiate consumers (who are often the same small farmers who grow the poppies) do not inject, drug shortages associated with the opium bans may incite mass transitions towards heroin injecting, as was witnessed after opium bans were implemented in a number of South East Asian states in the 1970s.[3]

With the suggested high levels of risk behaviours among the country’s IDU community, HIV may spread rapidly among such novice IDUs.

“Drugs or Politics?”

“Is a drug solution possible without a political solution?,” echoed some speakers amidst differing positions on how the international community should approach the drug problem and the associated harms vis-à-vis the geo-political situation and the presence of a highly repressive military regime.

The author of this report also argued that the policies of the international community towards Myanmar should be judged by harm reduction criteria; that while economic sanctions are the international community’s legitimate tool to pressure the military regime towards more democracy, these should not hit hardest the poorest of the poor, and nor should it obstruct efforts to avoid the current HIV epidemic from getting completely out of control.

A quiet consensus for a more sophisticated approach to drug eradication was apparent among speakers and participants, no matter what their position is on the importance of sanctions for the process towards democracy. “*Enforcement of tight deadlines will result in major food shortages and may jeopardise the fragile social stability in the areas,*” stressed TNI in its debate paper on Drugs & Conflict in Burma (Myanmar). Hence, this should force the international community to rethink its strategies. They argue that the gradual decline in opium production can only be sustained when adequate alternative sources of income for basic subsistence of farmers are secured, which is presently far from the case. Otherwise, farmers may quickly revert to (covert) opium growing, which will, perhaps for the first time, put them at risk of severe sanctions by military authorities (both in Rangoon and the ceasefire regions in Shan State) who are eager to comply with promises made to the international community.

Thus, “*law enforcement repression is likely to increase, with human more rights abuses and more displacement a potential outcome.*” For that reason,

TNI advocates “a simultaneous easing of drug control deadline pressures and increasing international humanitarian aid efforts” as the only viable and humane option available to the international community. Paradoxically, this seems also to be the position of UNODC Myanmar.

Summary

This conference has stimulated and has brought, as the organizers intended, “nuance to the currently highly polarized debate on international engagement with Myanmar/Burma.” It concluded with calls to continue the dialogue and raising a number of questions and issues that would impact such an alternative approach, including:

- # How to empower and involve the farmers in such a “developmental” solution, in particular in the absence of a strong civil society;
- # How can the various stakeholders have a voice in developing an alternative drug policy for Myanmar;
- # How would a humane drug policy for Myanmar (and other producer countries) look;
- # How could the concept of harm reduction be applied to both the demand and the supply side of the country’s drug problems;
- # Is there a need for a “Roadmap,” and, if so, who will design it, who will decide about it?

The conference was supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) and four smaller non- governmental sponsors. A full report of the conference by TNI is available at the AHRN On-line Library.

Notes

[1] Data from the HIV project of the Pan Kachin Development Society suggests that 25% of the opiate users smoke opium, while heroin is smoked by 30%. Another 30% injects heroin and 10% injects opium, while 5% uses other drugs and modes of administration.

[2] This suggests that heroin may be sold in liquid form, which may exacerbate the risk of HIV transmission. Revisiting ‘the Hidden Epidemic’ suggests the same, especially in shooting galleries where high risk behaviours are widespread.

[3] Westermeyer J. The pro-heroin effects of anti-opium laws in Asia. Arch Gen Psychiatry. 1979; 33: 1135–9.

All roads lead to China

Crop substitution programmes in Burma are handicapped not only by the absence of good roads and other logistical prerequisites to get the often perishable agricultural products to distant markets, but also because China produces many of the same agricultural products ‘en masse’ and dumps them in the border areas of N.E. Myanmar. China is also becoming the main destination market for Burmese and other drugs. In his presentation: “The Black Hole of China White,” Guilhem Fabre, a Sinologist at the University of Le Havre, argued that there may now be about two million heroin users in China, who, he estimated, consume 200 tons of heroin every year. Fabre not only suggested that the presently decreasing production figures in Myanmar are a gross underestimate (explained by the Chinese “Black Hole”), but that heroin from the Golden Crescent is now increasingly exported to China as well.