



Statement from the 7th Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum Pekhon, Southern Shan State 10 May 2019

During 8-10 May 2019, representatives from Kayan, Kayah, Pa-O, Shan, Lahu and Kachin opium farming communities came together to discuss our challenges in life and find ways to solve our problems. We feel it is crucial that our voices of poppy-growing communities are heard in decision-making processes that affect our lives. Therefore, in 2013 we set up the Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum (MOFF), and this is our 7th annual meeting.

We want to make clear to the world why we grow opium. We are subsistence farmers living in isolated mountainous areas, and cultivate poppy as a cash crop in order to buy food to feed our families and buy access to education and health care for our children. So the main reason is poverty. Some people in the city may think we earn a lot of money, but we are still poor. "Rich people don't grow opium," said one farmer, "only poor people grow it!" We do not want to be seen as criminals. We are not planting opium to go against the government or against the world. We are just planting it for our survival.

Many of us would like to grow other crops, but this is difficult for several reasons. First of all, there is no market, and prices are very unstable. We have weak negotiation power. The businessmen are well connected and better organised than us, and they decide the price. We do not have any strong farmers' institutions and we have no collective bargaining power. Our villages are remote, have poor infrastructure and high transportation costs further make it difficult for us to reach the market to sell our crops. No buyer comes to our village to buy our crops; this only happens in the case of opium.

Basic government services are either non-existent or inadequate in our areas. Many of us live without electricity, roads are in poor condition (if they exist at all) and health and education services are very limited. In our areas there is no regular water supply and this is a big problem for us.

Several of us have tried to grow other crops, but this often resulted in losses and debts. Some even lost their property, because they had to borrow money. But the income was insufficient and they could not repay their debts, and finally had to sell their land. The fluctuating prices of other crops further contribute to this problem.

Some of us started growing opium due to a lack of access to land. In Pekhoh Township, local farmers lost their land first due to the construction of the Moebye Dam (1964-1970) which flooded 3,000 acres of farmland and 12 villages; then because of the 'Four-Cuts' campaign by the Tatmadaw in the 1980s; and finally, in 1991 when more Tatmadaw units came in and confiscated over 6,000 acres of our land. Soon after that, the government built the Aung Ban–Loikaw railway line and also confiscated land for this. One of us lost 12 acres of land for this railway. As a result, displaced farmers moved to other higher elevated villages, who had to share their land with them, because many of them were relatives. These areas can grow only opium, and therefore poppy cultivation increased. In the end, many farmers saw no other alternative but to grow opium. In many other areas people faced the same problems. Some of us lost our lands due to confiscation by the Forest Department.

All of us live in areas affected by decades of armed conflict. Without peace, it is very difficult to develop our areas. The armed conflict is one of the main driving forces behind opium cultivation. Even some areas where there has not been fighting for some years, there are still many armed groups and there is no peace. As long as there is no equality, there will be no peace in the country. And as long as there is no peace, there will be no development, and we will have to grow opium.

In Loilem Township, armed conflict and resulting displacement led to the introduction of opium cultivation. "When I was young we never saw opium plants. For generations we grew traditional tea and cheroot leaves," said one of us. In 1998 the whole village was forced to relocate due to a 'Four Cuts' campaign by the Tatmadaw, and villagers were only able to come back four years later. "Our whole village was destroyed including our tea and cheroot leaf plants and we have to build everything from scratch. The only cash crop available to feed our families in this situation was opium," explained one of us.

Decreasing opium prices

Opium prices have been decreasing since 2012. The prices were lowest in the 2016-17 poppy season. This season prices increased a little bit. However, compared to the 2011 period, these prices are still very low, almost half of what they were in 2012.

To sell our opium there are two levels. We farmers sell our opium to a local middleman. This middleman then sells it to traders. We have no contact with these traders and do not know them. We only see the local middleman. The standard opium size is 1 Viss (1.6 kilogram).

Farm gate opium prices per Viss (1.6 kg) in the 2018-2019 season:

Township	price in MMK
Pekhoh	400,000
Pinlaung	350,000
Pinlon	350,000
Hsihseng	450,000
Hopong	450,000
Mong Hsat	600,000
Sadon	800,000

We think there are several reasons for the decreasing opium prices. Fewer traders are coming to our villages because of stricter control by the government and some armed groups. The intention of these armed groups is to monopolise the market, and they only allow those traders linked to them to have access to opium.

Another reason is that the traders are more interested in the more profitable amphetamine type stimulants (ATS) trade. There is a growing local demand for ATS and traders can increase production and sales. ATS now has a bigger market than opium, is easier to produce and transport, and also easy to use. ATS also has a bigger profit margin.

The traders are also changing to investing in land and real estate rather than in opium, because this is now more profitable than the opium business. "The rich do not invest their money in opium anymore. They start investing in land and real estate. There are just 1 or 2 people coming to our village to buy opium," according to one of us.

In Kachin State, money lenders insist that we have to sell the opium back to them at lower prices. We need their loans to buy food and other basic needs. We have no alternatives and no negotiation power and thus have to accept this.

As less buyers are coming to our villages, there is less competition between them. Sometimes only one buyer comes and, when people desperately need money, they sell for whatever price the trader is offering.

Even despite the decreasing opium price, it is still the most economically viable crop for us.

Eradication

Instead of bringing development to our villages, the main response of the government to opium cultivation is eradication. The eradication teams of the government come many times during the planting season, every year. We need to feed them and provide drinks, and ask for their mercy. Then we negotiate with them not to destroy our fields. If this is not possible, we ask them only to destroy part of it. Then we agree on a price we have to pay to them in exchange for this.

Because of forced eradication we feel traumatised, because we have already borrowed money to invest in poppy cultivation and worry that we will become indebted if our fields are destroyed. Whenever people in uniform come to our villages, we have to worry that we do not have enough money and cannot pay them to avoid eradication.

Due to forced eradication without any prior development support, many people between 18 to 40 years old have left our villages to find work in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. "In our villages there are only children and old people," said one of us. This migration also negatively affects our culture, our festivals, and village donations. The eradication also forced us to stop supporting higher education for our children. Related to this is human trafficking. Farmers have little income and are looking for other ways to feed their families, and they therefore have to trust middle men. Migrant workers abroad also get exploited by their employers, because they have no official documents and are vulnerable.

The eradication programmes have not led to a decrease in opium cultivation in our villages. "The government has been eradicating our poppy fields since I was a child, and they are still doing it. So there has been no success. The government should change their strategy," said one of us.

In Kachin State eradication is also carried out by a local organization known as Patjasan, and this has created conflict between Kachin people. On one side, the police let the Patjasan fight with the poppy farmers who are backed up by the Kachin Border Guard Force (BGF). The government, international organisations and Patjasan all demonise and criminalise us. Patjasan is a faith-based organisation, but their members are not from opium-growing communities. There is no mutual understanding between

opium farmers and farmers growing other crops. We want them to understand our situation and difficulties.

Development principles

In our areas there is very limited national and international support to develop our communities and reduce our reliance on opium cultivation. Some existing development projects also have several problems.

In one area, the police came to eradicate our poppy fields, and we tried to negotiate as usual to avoid or reduce eradication. However, the police officer told us that, because we received support from a UNODC project, the opium fields must be destroyed. The officer said that, if they did not eradicate our poppy field, they are afraid UNODC will see it on the satellite opium survey.

In that area, not all farmers receive support from UNODC, and only 10% of the households are involved in the project. So that created conflict between those who are in the project and those who are not. The households which were not involved in the project blamed the others in this way: "because you joined the UNODC project, our fields were eradicated!".

Those who receive support from the UNODC still cannot get sufficient income from the coffee to survive, so many are still growing opium. The coffee we have to sell at a lower price because the UNODC insists that farmers sell to the company that pays less than the market price.

Alternative crops often take several years to become profitable, so insisting on farmers to stop growing opium immediately is unfair.

Meetings with the government and political parties

In the past we were afraid to share our experiences. We have been living in fear since we were born and did not dare to say anything in fear of getting arrested. But now the situation in our country has changed and we need to speak out. We made a film on the life of opium farmers and we sent a video message on our situation and recommendations to the Committee of Narcotics Drugs (CND) in 2018.

We have met with the representatives from the Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control (CCDAC) of the Myanmar Government in Nay Pyi Taw in 2015. This was the first time we could share our challenges and experiences and discuss ways forward with high-level government representatives. As one of us who participated said: "It was like earth meeting heaven." We could speak openly and had a frank dialogue with them, and this was a good experience for us.

Since that time, representatives of the MOFF have been able to join national drug policy workshops in Nay Pyi Taw organised by the government, where we have been able to share experiences and recommendations. However, engagement with the government at state and township level is still limited and challenging. We realize that this is just the beginning of a process of engagement and would like to continue and intensify this.

We have also met with representatives of political parties. Some of them are sympathetic to our difficulties and we openly discussed possible ways forward. They understand better that the root cause of opium cultivation is poverty and conflict, and that a development-first approach is needed to address this problem.

Our demands and ways forward

At our forum we discussed how we could best solve these problems.

Development first

First of all, we ask the government and other entities to stop eradication of our opium fields and first provide development support and sustainable livelihoods. This principle is already included in the new National Drug Control Policy.

We ask for community-based development programmes for our communities. Such support should be suitable for local conditions, culture appropriate, and environment friendly.

Where alternative crops are brought in, these often take some years to produce. Therefore, in these cases a grace period is needed that allows people to gradually reduce their reliance on opium.

Development principles

We should be involved in the design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all development programmes from the beginning. Do not treat us as a recipient of aid.

Development programmes should not only look at reductions in opium cultivation to measure success, but also at poverty reduction and improvement in living conditions, health and education.

Development assistance in our areas should not promote or in any ways become involved in eradication.

We need technical and financial support to help create and support farmers' groups to be able to produce value-added products and not just sell raw materials to businessmen.

These should not be stand-alone projects but support should be part of a national development programme.

Donors should make long term commitments and should consider funding channels through local organisations rather than through international organisations and UN agencies, which have very high operational costs.

Public services and access to markets

The government should improve basic services, including education, health, water supply, electricity and infrastructure.

The government and other actors should help us to get access to markets with guaranteed prices. This is a key factor to be able to sell other crops.

When the price of our agricultural products drops, the government should intervene to control the import of such products from neighbouring countries.

The government should help to create off-farm job opportunities for us. This will also help us to reduce the needs for seeking jobs abroad.

Recognise our traditions and customs

Government laws and policies should reflect and recognise our traditional customary tenure systems. We have no vacant land in our areas. The recently-amended Virgin, Fallow and Vacant Land Management Law should be abolished.

We want the government to return all confiscated lands to us.

We want recognition of traditional and medicinal opium use in those of our areas where this is practised. We also want recognition of legal production of opium for pharmaceutical use.

Involvement in decision-making

We do not want to be treated as criminals. Instead, we want to be involved in decision-making processes that have great impacts on our lives.

The drug issue should be high on the agenda of the peace process, and not only as a social issue as is now the case. We want peace, not only between the government and armed groups but also between communities and between ethnic peoples.

Contact persons

Angelo	09 777 126 437
U Min Thein	09 762 055 284
Khun Sein Shwe	09 424 236 656
Kyar Yin Shell	09 452 831 703
Nan Htay Htay Win	09 784 800 076