

**Statement of the 4th Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum
Loikaw, Kayah State, 9 May 2016**

We, opium farmers and representatives of Kayah, Kayan, Shan, Pa-O, Lahu, Ta-ang (Palaung) and Kachin opium farming communities from Kayah State, Southern, Eastern and Northern Shan State, and Kachin State, came together in Loikaw, in Kayah State in Myanmar, to discuss the challenges we face in our lives, and to share experiences and find ways to solve our problems.

We would like to make the following recommendations to the new government of Myanmar:

We grow opium because we are poor and do not have other livelihood opportunities to feed our families and send our children to school, as well as for medicinal and traditional uses. We are not involved in the drug trade, we are not criminals, and we are not commercial farmers. Some of us also grow it for traditional and medicinal uses. It is important to differentiate between small-holder farmers like us, and those people who grow opium commercially and/or who invest in it.

The government should not carry out any force eradication of our opium fields unless and until they have provided access to sustainable crop substitution programmes and alternative livelihoods to our communities. Eradication should especially not take place during the harvest season. By that time we have already invested a lot and also cannot grow another crop anymore that season.

Instead of only eradicating our poppy fields, and demanding bribes and illegal taxation, government officials should provide basic services to us and long-term support to develop our communities. This should include food security, education and health services, electricity, infrastructure and communication. The government should allow poppy farmers to grow opium for a certain period, until they are able to sustain their livelihoods by other means. Alternative crops should be suitable for local conditions and have a market.

The government should revise the current drugs laws and make a policy that all stakeholders are satisfied with. The government should listen to the voice of the local farmers and consult with them first. Policy making should be a bottom-up approach.

Lack of land tenure security is one of the reasons why some of our communities have resorted to opium cultivation, as a survival mechanism. The government should recognize our ethnic and customary land tenure rights. The current land laws should be changed.

We also want the government to recognise medicinal and traditional use of opium, which is prevalent in some of our communities that have been involved in poppy cultivation for generations. Certain amounts of opium should be allowed for personal use. We want the government to find models to allow

licensed opium cultivation for medicinal and pharmaceutical use, for local and international markets, in close discussions with us. Other countries in the world, such as India, have such models. We want to explore how these can be applied in Myanmar.

Some of our communities are also facing serious drug use problems. We want the government to provide meaningful health and other necessary services for problematic drug users.

We would like to make the following recommendations to promote peace in our country:

Peace is very important for us. Many of us live in areas affected by conflict. In these areas it is very difficult to grow other crops. Our regions are very undeveloped and lack basic government services. We want to be treated as equal citizens. 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.

There are many links between drugs and conflict. We have to pay opium tax to many armed groups, government officials and the Myanmar army. Drug issues should not spoil the peace process. Some armed groups are involved in the drugs trade. This is the 'golden era' for the militia groups. They have the mandate from the Myanmar army to trade and produce drugs. Many drug dealers have arms, and are linked to armed groups. Some ethnic armed opposition groups have anti-drug policies and also eradicate our poppy fields. Sometimes these ethnic armed opposition groups clash with militia and other groups involved in the drug business.

The focus of law enforcement should be on the large traffickers and other big players involved in the drug trade. Now the government allows these big dealers to trade drug freely, but they target people who grow opium for their survival. This is not right. Small-scale opium farmers and drug users are not criminals and should not be treated like this. Instead they need support to solve their immediate problems.

To solve all these problems, there should be a separate session on drugs issues in the peace process and political dialogue. In these sessions, opium farmers should be adequately represented. We also want representatives from our Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum to be included in such discussions.