

Introduction

Illicit drug abuse remains a serious problem in Thailand, particularly among youth. Opium cultivation takes place in the North by members of several ethnic minorities. The areas of highest cultivation are in the mountainous areas of Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Tak and Chiang Rai provinces. Opium is cultivated by farmers for personal consumption, exported to other countries and sold to produce heroin. In addition, drugs from neighboring countries transit Thailand through numerous corridors that exist along the northern border. The most active route for drugs out of the country is via maritime smuggling routes in the South.

Typically opium is cultivated in elevations exceeding 800 meters. The annual opium cultivation survey is a time sensitive operation constrained by weather and logistical demands. The cultivation survey focuses on 76 highland target areas in 17 northern provinces and one northeastern province. Data must be continually collected and analyzed, and eradication target packages must be quickly prepared to allow eradication troops sufficient time to destroy the crop before it can be harvested. Information from a computerized Geographic Information System is combined with other survey and statistical data to measure opium cultivation trends. ONCB's ongoing opium survey is jointly sponsored by the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) of the US Embassy in Bangkok and the Government of France.

Last year, farmers sought to avoid eradication and increase yields by planting outside of the traditional cultivation window and by utilizing fertilizers and water sprinkling systems. In addition, multiple cropping in the same areas, and smaller more

isolated fields have also been observed. These non-traditional cultivation techniques have complicated ONCB efforts to estimate the opium crop. A long-term solution which combines involuntary eradication with development assistance must continually be used if Thailand is to make significant progress in further reducing the opium crop.