



UN chief notes losing fight against Afghan drugs

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VIENNA -- The U.N. secretary general on Thursday urged the international community to step up efforts to eradicate drugs in Afghanistan, noting that opium production there has grown by 61 percent in the past year and adding that "time is not on our side."

In his opening statement to a meeting of top global representatives, Ban Ki-moon also warned that the problem extends beyond those who abuse drugs and is threatening Afghanistan itself.

"Drug trafficking and transnational organized crime undermine the health of fragile states, (and) weaken the rule of law," he told delegates. "Above all, the Afghan government must prioritize the issue of narcotics."

- A. Afghanistan's minister for counter-narcotics, however, suggested that drugs can only be eradicated if security in his country is improved.

Named for the agreement that created it nine years ago, the Paris Pact meeting is meant to review steps taken to reduce production and trafficking of opiates from Afghanistan. It will look at ways to block financial flows from the illicit drug trade, choke the flow of chemicals used to make heroin and strengthen local initiatives to help combat drug abuse by Afghans.

But the meeting has no enforcing powers, and international attempts to reduce the Afghan drug problem have had little success.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put in figures the rise in opiate output Ban mentioned: 5,800 tons last year, compared to 3,600 tons in 2010.

"The most urgent task today is to destroy drug crops and drug infrastructure," he told senior officials from more than 50 countries attending a conference on the Afghan drug problem.

Without "serious measures to destroy drug crops ... we are going to fight symptoms rather than the disease itself," Lavrov added, suggesting that international troops in the country make destruction of poppy crops a priority.

A January report by the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime said revenue from opium production in Afghanistan soared by 133 percent last year to about \$1.4 billion, or about one-tenth of the country's GDP, after the crop recovered from a 2010 blight and returned to previous levels.

A copy of the one-day Vienna meeting's final declaration obtained in advance by The Associated Press reflects realities, saying that Afghanistan's drug problem "continues to be a serious concern."

"Illicit traffic in opiates, including heroin, is a growing problem," says the document, adding that revenues it generates fuel "corruption, organized crime and in some cases ... terrorist activities and insurgency."

Ban cited a 2011 U.N. survey, saying that poppy cultivation has increased by 7 percent and opium production by 61 percent in the past year.

"Export earnings from Afghan opiates may be worth as much as \$2.4 billion" annually, he said.

"We cannot expect stability when 15 percent of Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product comes from the drug trade."

Zarar Ahmad Muqbel Osmani, the Afghan minister, said his country understands international concerns but noted that "95 percent of poppy cultivation takes place in nine insecure provinces."

He urged the international community to work hard in interdicting the components needed to turn opium into heroin that enter Afghanistan from neighboring countries."

While the meeting formally focused on drugs, some of the powerful foreign ministers attending announced before the conference began that they will be discussing Syria on the sidelines. Lavrov met Ban, as well as with French counterpart Alain Juppe to be briefed on a French plan to set up humanitarian corridors in Syria that are free of violence.

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