

Huge opium production fall won't stop heroin glut: UN (Update)

June 23 2016

Global opium production plunged almost 40 percent last year but the world remains awash with heroin, the narcotic that still kills the most people worldwide, the United Nations said Thursday.

"Heroin continues to be the drug that kills the most people and this resurgence must be addressed urgently," said Yury Fedotov, head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in a new report.

It said that production of opium, which is processed into heroin, fell to 4,770 tonnes in 2015, a 38 percent plunge from the previous year.

However, 2014 was one of the strongest years on record and last year saw a poor harvest in Afghanistan, the world's biggest opium producer accounting for 70 percent of global output.

The report also said the sharp fall was "unlikely" to lead to "major shortages" in heroin supplies since traffickers have built up massive stockpiles in recent years.

"There's no reason to think that heroin production in Afghanistan is over," the report's lead researcher Angela Me told AFP.

"There's still a lot of heroin in the market."

US 'epidemic'

Globally, around five percent of adults, or 250 million people, consumed at least one drug in 2014, the UNODC said.

Of the estimated 29 million heavy users, some 17 million are addicted to opiates, which include heroin, opium and morphine.

Asia remains the world's largest market for opiates, accounting for an estimated two thirds of all users, with Myanmar being a main supplier.

Over the last two years, record opium output in Afghanistan has sparked a large increase in cheaper heroin supply to the United States.

As a result, heroin-related deaths reached the highest level in a decade, almost doubling from 5,925 in 2012 to 10,800 in 2014 in the US.

The UNODC said the US "epidemic" still showed no signs of abating.

The report also found there were signs that heroin shipments to Europe were on the rise, with a higher number of seizures recorded by customs in Italy and France.

Shrinking cocaine market

However, the global cocaine market appears to be "shrinking" despite top producer Colombia recently massively upping its output, the UN agency said.

Global coca cultivation fell by more than 30 percent between 1998 and 2014, due in part to national eradication efforts and alternative development programmes for farmers.

In a study released last July, the UNODC said cultivation in Colombia had risen 44 percent in 2014 to 69,000 hectares (175,000

acres)—slightly over half of the global growth area, but still way below the peak levels reached two decades ago.

But the increase has so far not translated into more cocaine entering the global market, and consumption in both the US and Europe continues to drop, the latest report said.

The UNODC said the Colombian surge may have been linked to peace talks between the government and the FARC guerilla force.

Rebels were thought to encourage farmers to grow coca to then benefit from alternative development programmes once a deal is reached.

The rebels, who were to sign a definitive ceasefire with the government later on Thursday, have previously said they would cut all ties to the cocaine trade, currently a major source of income.

New drugs

Meanwhile, cannabis remains the world's most commonly used drug, with an estimated 183 million consumers.

The report said the west's growing liberal attitude toward the drug in recent years had gone hand in hand with a "worrying" increase in heavy users and those seeking treatment.

The UNODC also expressed concern over the continued proliferation of new narcotics developed from natural or synthetic substances to circumvent existing drug laws.

They are considered particularly dangerous because their health effects are hard to assess, the report said.

Popular in Europe and Asia, a total of 644 new substances have been reported since 2008, including at least 75 last year.

However, many vanish as quickly as they appear, indicating that "the market is very dynamic", Le said.

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