

UN OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME: DRUG TRAFFICKING IN SOUTHERN ASIA



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LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Greetings, delegates! My name is Emmie Kao, and I am a junior at the Bishop's School. Since my freshman year, MUN has been an integral aspect of my high school experience, and I hope that this committee serves to both deepen your understanding of world events and enable you to connect with other delegates. I look forward to watching you collaborate to form cohesive, realistic resolutions to tackle an issue that has had a great impact on such a large number of people. As always, I remind you to be respectful and sensitive to other delegates' thoughts and opinions. Good luck, and I look forward to seeing you all in committee! If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me at emmie.kao.25@bishops.com. For general position paper guidelines, please see the Position Paper tab on www.knightsmun.com.

I. BACKGROUND

Since the mid-18th century, certain regions in Southern Asia, particularly Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar, have become epicenters of illegal drug trafficking and trade. Substances such as opium and heroin became increasingly common exports throughout these areas, and at some points, they became near-monopolizers of the industry. In this committee, we will be tackling the primary two areas of drug production in Asia: the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. Neither region is especially wealthy, but both contain uneven terrain, making it difficult for the government to access. One hectare of opium poppies yielded around \$1,800—seven times the cost of wheat in the same land area.¹ This means that, with ample fertile land to grow opium poppies, lower-class citizens could easily make a profit by illegally trafficking

¹ S. Sen, "Heroin Trafficking in the Golden Crescent," Office of Justice Programs, last modified 1992, accessed October 31, 2023, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/heroin-trafficking-golden-crescent>.

drugs.² In fact, much of the reason why opium cultivation grew so popular in those regions was because of the economic strain on their citizens— one of the many detrimental results of violent political turmoil throughout the area.

A. GOLDEN CRESCENT

As of 1992, the area deemed the “Golden Crescent” was one of the largest opium exporters in the world. The region contains parts of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; as a result of the booming drug industry, Afghanistan was, at one point, the second-largest producer of opium in the world.

In the wake of the Afghanistan Civil War (1992-1996), the mujahideen, or Islamic guerilla rebels, began selling opium to fund their campaign against the Soviet Union.³ After the war ended, however, the opium trade continued to provide significant income for Afghans. In 1995, it was estimated that Afghanistan produced 2,335 tons of opium, which could then be used to make 230 tons of heroin.⁴ Factories in Pakistan and Afghanistan use a chemical called acetic anhydride to convert opium to heroin; in 1996, the UN recorded shipments of the chemical from Germany and China to the Golden Crescent, large enough for 70 tons of heroin.⁵

More recently, since the Taliban takeover in 2021, a sharp increase in opium production in Afghanistan has been recorded. Yet as of April 2022, the Taliban’s government specifically

² Thomas D. Reins, "Opium," ed. Thomas Benjamin, *Gale in Context: World History*, last modified 2007, https://go.gale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Reference&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&retrievalId=32d09b6e-3d66-45ff-8c9f-ae2eb3f90196&hitCount=1&searchType=BasicSearchForm&qtPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CCX2587300321&docType=Culture+overview%2C+Topic+overview&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=9780028660851&prodId=WHIC&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CCX2587300321&searchId=R2&userGroupName=bishops&inPS=true.

³ Reins, "Opium."

⁴ Thomas Land, "Middle East drug traffic set to rise," *The Middle East*, no. 258 (1996), https://go.gale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Magazines&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&retrievalId=79af3b57-a097-48ed-9ca7-d4cd36822b59&hitCount=1&searchType=BasicSearchForm&qtPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CA18694279&docType=Article&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAG-MOD1&prodId=WHIC&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CA18694279&searchId=R1&userGroupName=bishops&inPS=true.

⁵ Land, "Middle East."

released a statement that outlawed opium cultivation. In turn, this drastically increased the drug's worth, causing prices to nearly double. Opium farmers' income tripled with the soaring prices. The opium ban showed just how reliant Afghanistan's economy is on the drug: a 2021 UN study showed that between 9-14% of the nation's GDP came from opium farming.⁶

As months passed after the ban and the Taliban began to truly enforce the opium ban, over \$1 billion per year of economic activity was reported lost in Afghanistan. Much of this loss directly impacts poorer, working-class farmers who cultivated opium out of necessity for their lifestyle; without the profits provided by the opium trade, they found themselves without a stable source of income.

B. GOLDEN TRIANGLE

In 1991, the United States Department of Justice published a report on the opium and narcotic production in a region deemed the "Golden Triangle," which includes parts of Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand. The region's mass production of opium led to an oversupply of heroin, becoming a large factor in the worldwide "epidemic."⁷

Opium cultivation in the region is believed to have begun around the 16th and 17th centuries, with heroin only becoming a major component of the economy after World War II. The Vietnam War, in particular, spurred the illicit trade to become a successful economy, with demand for heroin increasing with the number of American soldiers present.⁸ The United States government turned a blind eye to such activities, as pursuing drug trafficking seemed trivial in comparison to the ongoing Cold War ideological battle.⁹

⁶ *Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan*, 19, 2022, accessed October 31, 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Opium_cultivation_Afghanistan_2022.pdf

⁷ S. Sen, "Heroin Trafficking in the Golden Triangle," Office of Justice Programs, last modified 1991, accessed October 31, 2023, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/heroin-trafficking-golden-triangle>.

⁸ Sen, "Heroin Trafficking," Office of Justice Programs.

⁹ Reins, "Opium."

In the 1990s, Myanmar reigned as the largest heroin producer in the world, with a recorded 215 tons in comparison to Afghanistan's 69 tons. The drug was exported from towns like Fang, which are only accessible by smaller, rural roads. Isolation of production enables drug barons to work free of government influence, which means that remote regions are mostly controlled by heroin warlords. These individuals are able to make a large profit by exporting their drugs to Thailand. In fact, after the junta, or military-controlled government, took control in 1988, many heroin exporters made peace with the ruling party.¹⁰

In 2011, Myanmar's original military junta dissolved to form a more democratic government, including a military-dominated civilian parliament.¹¹ This government appeared to be making headway in its attempts to eradicate Myanmar's drug problem, with cultivation rates slowly but steadily decreasing.¹² However, February 2021 saw yet another military coup, which yielded a 33% increase in land reserved for opium cultivation within a year. The military ceased drug eradication raids, choosing instead to focus its resources on maintaining its fragile hold over the nation, which has also inadvertently caused many struggling farmers to take up opium cultivation out of necessity.

II. UN ACTIONS

The UN has been carefully monitoring the drug trafficking situations in both the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. However, certain aspects of the problems, including domestic

¹⁰ "The Golden Triangle's new king: drugs," *The Economist*, February 14, 1995, <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A16415293/WHIC?u=bishops&sid=bookmark-WHIC&xid=8aec74c5>.

¹¹ Lindsay Maizland, "Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified January 31, 2022, accessed November 3, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya>.

¹² "Opium is surging in Myanmar, a top heroin producer, since its military took over," NPR, last modified January 26, 2023, accessed November 3, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/26/1151622133/opium-farming-surges-in-myanmar-since-the-military-coup-the-u-n-says>.

conflicts in many of the nations involved, only hinder its attempts at helping. In a June 2023 report, it was stated that UNODC is working to “monitor the drug situation, identify drug trends, and provide advice on cooperation, detection, precursor chemical control and public health strategies.”¹³ Because many of the nations that are experiencing the largest drug trafficking issues are also undergoing significant political change, the UN’s ability to address the problem has been stifled.

However, it should be noted that the UN has publicized several of its strategies for addressing the opioid crisis as a whole, including the “Five Pillars of the UNODC Opioid Strategy” and the “Four Spheres of Action” regarding the emerging threat of synthetic drugs.

III. QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As you think about how you want to tackle the issue of drug trafficking in Southern Asia, here are some questions that may be useful to think about:

1. How will your solution impact your nation’s economy?
2. How might your solution affect different socioeconomic groups in your nation, including the working-class and upper-class populations?
3. What role would the UN play in such initiatives?
4. Will outlawing opium or heroin production help to resolve or only worsen the problem?
5. How will you fund your solution? Will it require funding?

¹³ United Nations, "UNODC report: East and Southeast Asian synthetic drug supply remains at extreme levels and diversifies," UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, last modified June 3, 2023, accessed November 3, 2023, <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/2023/06/regional-synthetic-drugs-report-launch/story.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CTraffickers%20have%20continued%20to%20ship,started%20moving%20and%20reconnecting%20after.>

6. What role might the emerging threat of synthetic drugs play in this committee? Would your solution for synthetic drugs differ from that of opium and heroin?

IV. HELPFUL RESOURCES

- https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Opium_cultivation_Afg_hanistan_2022.pdf
- <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/central-asia.html>
- <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pipe-dreams-the-taliban-and-drugs-from-the-1990s-in-to-its-new-regime/>
- https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-ro_hingya

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