Production of opium for medical purposes in Afghanistan

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Marco **CAPPATO** (ALDE, IT) and made a recommendation to the Council on production of opium for medical purposes in Afghanistan. The resolution was adopted by 368 votes in favour to 49 against with 25 abstentions.

The report recalls that, according to the United Nations, Afghanistan produced 6 100 tonnes of opium in 2006, in other words, 50% more than in 2004. It also states that almost 40% of Afghanistan's GDP is opium-related, and that 3 million people are engaged in the poppy sector producing an income of 1 965 US dollars a year per family. The report goes on to say that, in 2007, the farm-gate value of the opium harvest totalled 1 billion US dollars, or 13% of the licit GDP of Afghanistan. The total potential value of the country's 2007 opium harvest accruing to farmers, laboratory owners and Afghan traffickers is expected to have reached 3.1 billion US dollars, which represents almost half the country's licit GDP of 7.5 billion US dollars, or 32% of the overall economy, including the opium sector.

Afghanistan has practically become the exclusive supplier of the world's deadliest drug, with 93% of the global opiates market. Parliament noted, however, that the number of opium-free provinces has more than doubled, from 6 in 2006 to 13 in 2007 due to successful schemes supporting alternative livelihoods and also expanded security in the north, as well as an effective awareness-raising programme including a system of rewards for good performers, and that 50% of the whole Afghan opium crop comes from the single province of Helmand.

Parliament stated that the growing opium economy and the danger of "state capture" by narco-interests pose a critical threat to development, state-building and security in Afghanistan. There are substantiated claims that insurgents, warlords, the Taliban and terrorist groups are obtaining the major part of their funding through trade in illicit narcotics.

The report went on to draw attention to the Senlis Council, an international security and development think tank, which presented a detailed Technical Dossier that describes how a village-based "Poppy for Medicine" project could work in Afghanistan, including an Integrated Social Control system, the production of Afghan medicines at village level, compulsory economic diversification and general rural development. According to a report by the International Narcotics Control Board there is a global oversupply of opiates for medical purposes. However, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has asked the international community to promote the prescription of painkillers, especially in poor countries, as severe under-treatment is reported in more than 150 countries where hardly anyone who is in need of treatment is being treated, and, in another 30 countries, where under-treatment is even more prevalent or where no data are available.

The European Union remains the biggest donor as regards efforts aimed at reducing the opium supply through projects that promote alternative livelihoods as a substitute for illicit crops. Parliament was convinced that the international presence needs to be complemented by an increased civil cooperation, in order to foster socio-political progress and economic development and also to win "the hearts and minds" of the local population. It felt that the extremely high costs and serious flaws in terms of effectiveness of a counter-narcotics strategy that does not take into account the regional, social and economic diversity of rural Afghanistan when developing and deploying measures on alternative livelihoods, and one that is based only on eradication. The fight against drug production in Afghanistan should reflect a differentiated

approach by locality. Counter-narcotics efforts against farmers must be carefully limited to areas where licit livelihoods are possible (places where access to land and water resources is better, there is proximity to markets and land-person ratios are higher). Alternative livelihood programmes need to focus especially on poorer regions with limited resources, which are the most dependent on opium in the first place,

Accordingly, Parliament recommended that the Council:

(a) opposes, in the framework of integrated development programmes, recourse to fumigation as a means of eradicating the poppy in Afghanistan;

(b) elaborates and submits to the Afghan Government, within the framework of European sponsored illicit supply reduction programmes, a comprehensive plan and strategy aimed at controlling drug production in Afghanistan, by improving governance and tackling corruption at the highest levels of the Afghan administration (with a special focus on the Ministry of the Interior); targeting action against the key traffickers on the ground; improving comprehensive rural development, particularly in the poorest areas and in those not yet producing opium on a large scale; carefully and selectively engaging in manual eradication; and looking at the possibility of pilot projects for small-scale conversion of parts of the current illicit poppy cultivation into fields for the production of legal opium-based analgesics. Production should be subject to strict on-the-spot surveillance which should in its turn be complemented with monitoring by an international organisation, such as the UNDCP, which supervises that production and prevents any diversion of the product to other, illegal, markets such as the heroin market;

(c) offers its assistance in the implementation of a scientific "Poppy for Medicine" pilot project that will further investigate how licensing can contribute to the alleviation of poverty, diversification of the rural economy, general development and increased security, and how it can become a successful part of multilateral efforts for Afghanistan ensuring that a mechanism is in place to exclude regions where recent achievements in establishing the rule of law and the subsequent elimination or reduction of cultivation may easily be jeopardised.