

Australian war on Afghanistan opium trade

SYDNEY (Agencies): The Rudd Government is preparing to send several teams of armed Australian Federal Police to help co-ordinate opium crop destruction in war-torn Afghanistan. About 20 per cent of the heroin on Australian streets comes from Afghanistan. The first batches appeared in Melbourne in 2004 as Taliban and al-Qaida-controlled crops entered a post-invasion boom phase. About 12 federal police agents and a team of Australian civilian agricultural experts will be sent to Afghanistan, where they will travel in armoured vehicles and be guarded by private security contractors. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is expected to announce details of their deployment in the next few weeks. Although the "Golden Triangle" of Burma, Laos and Thailand remains the major source of heroin into Australia, the growth in smuggling from Afghanistan to Australia has alarmed authorities. Afghanistan produced a record \$3.2 billion harvest last year -- making up about 93 per cent of the global heroin market. Mr Rudd has argued the Afghan heroin trade has allowed al-Qaida and the Taliban to rebuild. The Federal Government says the agents will work with Afghan counter-narcotics police and British officials to eliminate the opium trade. There are four AFP agents -- two in Kabul and two in Jalalabad -- collecting intelligence on trafficking routes through the Khyber Pass into northern Asia. The Australian agricultural experts will advise local farmers on alternative crops to replace opium harvests. Efforts to crackdown on the illicit crops have been met with violence from al-Qaida, with about 30 counter-narcotics police killed by improvised explosives, snipers and in skirmishes. A US program, overseen by the Central Intelligence Agency, is looking at using helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft with chemical sprays to wipe out opium crops in unco-operative Afghan provinces. Western press reports have claimed the US considered using Agent Orange as part of its anti-drugs offensive. Critics warn that crop destruction drives farmers into the ranks of terrorists and hinders intelligence-gathering efforts. Australia hopes its agricultural experts, specialising in dry-climate crops, will help replace the opium fields with crops that are as profitable for Afghan farmers. The farmers receive only a fraction of the value of their opium, while a mix of Taliban, al-Qaida, tribal landowners, drug lab operators and traffickers reap more than \$680 million a year. Britain, which has taken a lead in counter-narcotics in Afghanistan, has spent more than \$135 million a year on opium eradication and planting alternative crops. In the months after the coalition invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Australia contributed \$500,000 to the United Nations International Drug Control Program for "quick impact projects", specifically to combat opium cultivation in Afghanistan. Although Australian funds and not personnel were involved at that stage, it is believed the money was used to destroy opium crops. The Australian Defence Force has no directive to destroy opium crops, even through troops regularly find crops in southern Afghanistan where they are primarily grown.