WINNING THE FIGHT AGAINST OPIUM IN LAOS

BY DAVID WISE

Opium has a long history in Laos, but since 2001 the government of Laos has championed an aggressive campaign to make the country opium-free by the end of this year.

The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, along with other international organizations, nongovernmental organizations and the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, is assisting Laos in reaching this goal, primarily through supporting opium detoxification and alternative development programs in northern Laos, where poppies are cultivated.

The challenges are considerable. One of the world's last communist holdouts, Laos is a small, landlocked and desperately poor country where 80 percent of the 5.7 million people live in the countryside. Travel is slow and difficult in the north, especially during the July-to-October rainy season when landslides make some roads impassable. The United Nations' human development index ranks Laos 140th of 174 countries. Per capita income is about $320 per year.

Villagers contribute in-kind labor for a new clean water system.

Laos is the world's third largest opium producer, but ranks far behind the two leaders, Afghanistan and Burma. The U.S. government estimates there are approximately 25,000 acres of opium poppies remaining in the country. In 1998, by contrast, there were about 75,000 acres under cultivation.

About 50 percent of the opium produced is consumed by the growers, their families and neighbors. The remainder is exported, usually to a neighboring district or province. In exchange for poppies, farmers receive cash or rice from traders. The average income farmers derive from cultivating opium poppies is around $500 per year.

The primary goal of INL's modest $2 million program in Laos is to eliminate opium cultivation and addiction. In two of the leading opium-growing provinces the program funds infrastructure, such as roads, water and sanitation systems, schools and clinics. It also supports alternative economic activities such as cattle banks, new cash crops, handicrafts and ecotourism, as well as opium detoxification projects.

Detoxification is just the first step for addicts. District and provincial health

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Above: The author, in blue baseball cap, and field adviser Mike Carroll, in red cap, discuss detoxification with recovering addicts. Below: Ambassador Patricia Haslach demonstrates a gravity-fed clean water system in Luang Prabang.

officials visit and monitor them back in their home villages. A few years ago it was difficult to find volunteers for detoxification, but now it's difficult to keep up with the demand. Some recidivism is expected, but early results suggest that recidivism is far less when treatment is community-based.

In a December visit to Luang Prabang, Ambassador Patricia Haslach evaluated the program. The construction of gravity-fed water systems brought health benefits and eliminated having to haul unclean water up a steep hill. Several women told the ambassador, "We can now wash our clothes, ourselves and our children more regularly."

The story is much the same in Phongsali, one of the poorest and most isolated provinces in Laos, where one of the most successful projects is raising cattle. Field advisor Mike Carroll said, "We try to implement activities that the villagers are used to. They have been raising cattle for a long time, but never in sufficient numbers to replace the income lost from opium poppy eradication." The province has also greatly increased the number of hectares devoted to raising a strain of natural green tea that has proven very popular in Vientiane shops. With normal trade relations, that tea may soon be available at Starbucks.

Opium is steadily disappearing from the project areas. There is great satisfaction in seeing how very modest assistance can make a real difference to a village and contribute to developing a drug-free society. Eliminating opium, once viewed as an entrenched business in Laos, is a realistic goal. ■

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