

Uprooting poppy fields forever

Villagers in the Golden Triangle struggle to reap a dollar from new cash crops

To tackle a growing drug problem, the Chinese Government has joined with neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia since the early 1990s to help farmers plant cash crops such as rubber trees, fruit and rice to replace their traditional crop, the opium poppy. China Daily reporter YU NAN recently visited Special Region No 2 of Shan State and Special Region No 4 of eastern Shan State in Myanmar. Her report follows.

It was February 15. The harsh sun of high noon in Nankajiang village beat down on the shiny leaves of the rubber trees, the bumpy, winding road and me.

It was a long way from North China, where most people were still wearing sweaters and overcoats.

The village sat on a hilltop among a chain of mountains, about 10 kilometres from Bangkang (Banghsang), the capital city of Special Region No 2 (also called Wa State) in Myanmar.

Dozens of local children and women sat or stood in the shade of the thatched roofs, watching us from their stilt houses with curiosity.

A little girl dressed in a handwoven pink smock, who was staring and giggling at me, suddenly turned and quickly disappeared into the green ocean of rubber trees.

I instinctively ran to follow in her steps.

Only then did I discover where the men were. They were working among more than 2,000 hectares of thin but tall rubber trees nearby. Their bodies were hidden by the dense leaves — their favourite camouflage.

A little boy, who looked less than five years old, was found sweating man turning soil with a hoe only 10 metres away.

The deeply tanned man who spoke the local Wa language told my translator his name was Ai Sang and he was one of more than 3,000 workers at the rubber tree farm.

The 40-year-old was born and grew up in the village. Six years ago, he and other villagers reluctantly said goodbye to the opium poppy, which had been planted for generations.

They now make a living growing maize and fruits. They expect the rubber trees to produce yields in two years' time.

The business also includes a small wine factory and pig farm. A new factory is also planned to process raw rubber, said Wang Ming, who heads the operation.

The farm, called Nankajiang Rubber Company, was established in 1997 with the help of Special Region No 2 of Shan State.

Most of the technical staff, including Wang, came from Southwest China's Yunnan Province across the border. They are there to help local farmers

plant various cash crops, Wang said.

The Nankajiang Rubber Company is also one of the largest trials of the "Substitute Plant" plan in the region, said Wang.

The Golden Triangle, spanning the border areas of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, is notorious for its poppies and drug production.

No one believed that things would change, because the region's poppy trade is said to have started more than 1,000 years ago.

But things are changing, slowly and painfully.

Anti-drug campaigns

The Substitute Plant plan, which was initiated by China in the early 1990s and supported by the local authorities, had uprooted much of the illicit crop in Special Region No 4 of eastern Shan State by the end of 1997.

Now the plan is gradually being implemented in other areas of the Golden Triangle in Myanmar that border China, according to Lei Jianbo, deputy director of the Narcotics Control Bureau's Administrative Office with the Yunnan Provincial Public Security Bureau.

The Wa State was the region most committed to the anti-drug campaign, he said.

Located in an isolated part of the Golden Triangle, the special region covers about 30,000 square kilometres and has a population of 600,000.

It was founded on April 17, 1989.

According to Xiao Youliang, deputy president of the special region, 4,000 hectares of poppies were planted in the region at that time. The total annual output of opium was 60,000 kilograms, one of the largest opium supplies around.

In November 1990, the region of opium production, estimated at 60,000 hectares, was expected to be eliminated by 2005.

Besides setting fire to drug processing factories, the local authority also relocated some 60,000 local people from their homes in the northern highlands, where planting opium poppy was their sole income source, to the southern plains, where they could plant various cash crops.

The relocation started in December 1999 and ended in early 2002, Xiao said.

The outcomes of the anti-drug campaign are now evident, he said.

By the end of 2001, only one-third of the old opium poppy fields — or 1,400 hectares — were still in use with an output of 25,000 kilograms of opium. "It is still a large amount but a great step for us compared with 10 years ago," Xiao said.

Forty per cent of the local farmers now cultivate opium poppy, claims Xiao, down from 60 per cent a few years ago.

"We've developed a range of substitute industries," said Chen Longsheng, director of the General Affairs Office of the Wa



Planting hope: Two men from Nankajiang village about 10 kilometres from Bangkang (Banghsang), the capital city of Special Region No 2 in Myanmar, work among the young rubber trees under the scorching sun.

Photos by YU NAN/China Daily

State Council. He listed rubber, tea, lychee, longan, teak and apple plantations, gem and zinc mines and wine production as some of the alternative businesses.

Chen went to Myanmar in 1968 from China's Yunnan Province and has lived in the region ever since.

"That's just a start," said 75-year-old Chen in *putonghua* with his obvious Yunnan accent.

Xiao Youliang gave special thanks to China for its help with the programme.

"We've got a lot of help from China in various fields, such as education, medical treatment and technical support in agriculture," he said.

Market challenge

Less than three years are left before the 2005 deadline for the elimination of opium poppy crops. Officials in the special region agree time is of the essence.

One of the biggest obstacles facing the campaign to eliminate the poppy trade is the demands of the market economy.

Nowhere has that been more obvious than in Special Region No 4 of the Shan State.

In 1998, the local government invested 900 million kyat (US\$3.6 million) to build a sugar refinery capable of processing 800 tons of sugar cane per day.

However, the factory operated for only one season, producing about 2,500 tons of sugar in 2000.

It wasn't until the factory began to produce sugar that local officials realized there was already a huge surplus in China, with many sugar refineries in China losing money too. It couldn't get an export quota from China.

"Now the facilities are in



Patient children: Some children linger in a roadside village on the

danger of being scrapped," said Luo Changbao, deputy president of the special region's Military and Political Committee. "The failure is a great blow to our confidence in substitute industries.

"We are trying to find crops with promising market futures to plant, but it's not so easy since most counties in China's Yunnan Province, near our border, have similar weather and similar crops," Luo said.

"Long-distance transport to other provinces is also impractical since the costs could exceed the value of the crops," he added.

The Wa State farmers are also pessimistic about the market.

"Only lychees were profitable last year and the fate of rubber is still uncertain two years on," Chen Longsheng said.

The maize wines produced by the Nankajiang farm sell for only 0.5 yuan (6 US cents) per bottle, despite their rich, distinctive fragrances and attractive packaging. And local consumption is very limited, said

Wang Ming.

Wang added he still hasn't found contacts in the rubber sales market and he's begun to worry about the future income of the 3000-plus people working in the farm.

"We are now trying to get a quota for the rubber," said Chen Longsheng. "And we still need more orders from China."

The region is also considering developing tourism, an industry that has proven a success in Mengla, the capital city of Special Region No 4.

But in Bangkang, better roads, hotel services and public security are needed to promote tourism in the short-term.

"No matter how hard the path to our final goal is, we will help people here to uproot opium forever," Chen said.

He quoted Bao Youxiang, president of the special region, to reaffirm their commitment: "The cultivation of poppies must end within this generation, even though it has lasted for more than 1,000 years.

"That's the only way we can help ourselves," Chen added.