

# Morocco slashes cannabis crop, UN says

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| Rabat, Morocco

07 February 2007 11:33

Morocco's multibillion-dollar cannabis crop, the biggest in the world, has shrunk by almost half over three years due to a government eradication campaign and drought, a United Nations official said.

But the next step -- convincing farmers in the poor northern Rif region to seek other livelihoods -- needs heavy support from the European Union, said Bernard Leroy, international legal adviser at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

Rabat has long been accused of failing to develop the mountainous Rif and of turning a blind eye to the complicity of local officials in a hashish trade that three years ago netted \$12-billion for drug barons and dealers based in Europe. An estimated one quarter filtered back to Morocco.

Forty years ago, the dark-green fern-like plant was once found only in the remotest mountain areas, but it has gradually spread across the entire region and west to the Atlantic coast as demand from Europe has soared.

Cannabis grows well even in poor soil and has come to be known as "green gold" because it offers a way out of grinding poverty for thousands of families.

Smugglers hide hashish in containers and trucks or use powerful speedboats to ship it as far as Barcelona in Spain or Marseille in France.

The UNODC found that the area of the Rif planted with cannabis had fallen to around 70 000 hectares from 130 000 in 2003.

"I think there has now been a real strategic change," Leroy told Reuters by phone from UNODC's office in Vienna after he visited Morocco recently.

"We must see now how this pans out. If peasants don't see the support coming they will go back to farming cannabis."

The government has said it aims to erase cannabis production by 2008. The crackdown was given added momentum in 2004 by suspicions that hashish was used to partly pay for dynamite that blew up trains in Madrid in 2004, killing 191 people.

## Arrests

Leroy said the Moroccan government had installed scanners at ports that can detect cannabis hauls within large trucks and containers and made moves to combat corruption, replacing many police officers in Tangier and elsewhere.

Last summer, police arrested suspected international hashish dealer Mohamed Karraz and 16 others, including at least six former police officials.

In November, four suspected members of a drug-trafficking ring were arrested and the police seized 10 tonnes of hashish.

But the longer-term solution lies in creating alternative crops and bringing new jobs by ending rural isolation and encouraging tourism and industry.

The government is building motorways, a new port and a chain of offshore business parks to encourage foreign companies to outsource services and manufacturing.

Leroy said Morocco had a strong reputation as a producer of olives, and surging demand for olive oil could offer the Rif an alternative to cannabis.

He said there was a risk European willpower could flag, given that cannabis had become so prevalent in Europe and governments might not see it as a priority; but the EU had a responsibility to act.

"We need to finance eradication and put in place a programme of substitution ... and thirdly we need to avoid the "air hole" where you launch a programme but it doesn't bring enough results to help the peasants." - Reuters

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