

Morocco promises to keep cracking down on cannabis

By Agence France Presse (AFP)

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RABAT: Morocco, which has slashed cannabis cultivation by nearly half in the past four years, says it hopes to eradicate the main remaining area of cultivation in the northern Rif Mountains by opening up the region and introducing substitute crops. The eradication program encourages farmers to switch to other crops, especially on fertile land where the growing of cannabis is a recent development, said senior Interior Ministry official Khaled Zerouali.

"In the [Rif Mountains] we are centering our efforts on non-agricultural infrastructure and activities such as rural tourism," he said. "Opening these areas up plays an important role in reducing cannabis."

Production of cannabis resin, or hashish, which amounted to 3,070 tons in 2003, has already dropped by 61 percent in the area, according to Zerouali.

That mirrors progress across the country. A 2003 inquiry sponsored by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) using both observations on the ground and satellite pictures put at 134,000 hectares the area used to grow cannabis. "This area has been cut to 72,500 hectares at present, a drop of 46 percent," Zerouali said.

At a conference of heads of Arab anti-drug services in Tunis last week, a Moroccan delegation presented the nation's experience in the fight against drugs and the growing of cannabis as "pioneering and exemplary," the official MAP news agency said.

Whereas in the period between 1999 and 2003, 31 percent of UNODC member states cited Morocco as source of hashish seized in their countries, a recent report put the figure for 2005 at only 20 percent.

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According to the UNODC Africa accounts for 26 percent of world cannabis production, behind only the Americas [46 percent]. The plant is grown in many African countries, in particular South Africa, Nigeria and Morocco, the UNODC says. The quantities of the drug seized worldwide dropped in 2005, largely because of "less production of this resin in Morocco."

Cannabis has been grown since the 15th century in the central Rif, a mountainous and remote area. The 2003 inquiry highlighted the "major economic dependence" on the plant of 96,000 families who relied heavily on it for an income. The farmers make relatively little money - about \$214 million a year - while the turnover worldwide generated by the output reached \$12 billion in 2003, the UNODC inquiry found.

Morocco has since strengthened surveillance of areas under cultivation and increased the number of drug seizures and prosecutions of traffickers, who are sometimes in league with senior security officers.

"We have a road map and Morocco is treating this issue decisively and seriously," Zerouali said. "Morocco's collaboration with the UNODC ... has enabled us to mark out the terrain and act in total transparency." - *AFP*

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