



# STILL POISONED

**Opium cultivation soars  
in Palaung areas under  
Burma's new regime**



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The Palaung Women's Organisation advocates for and advances the status of women in all fields of development and works towards achieving gender equality, justice, peace and a democratic society.

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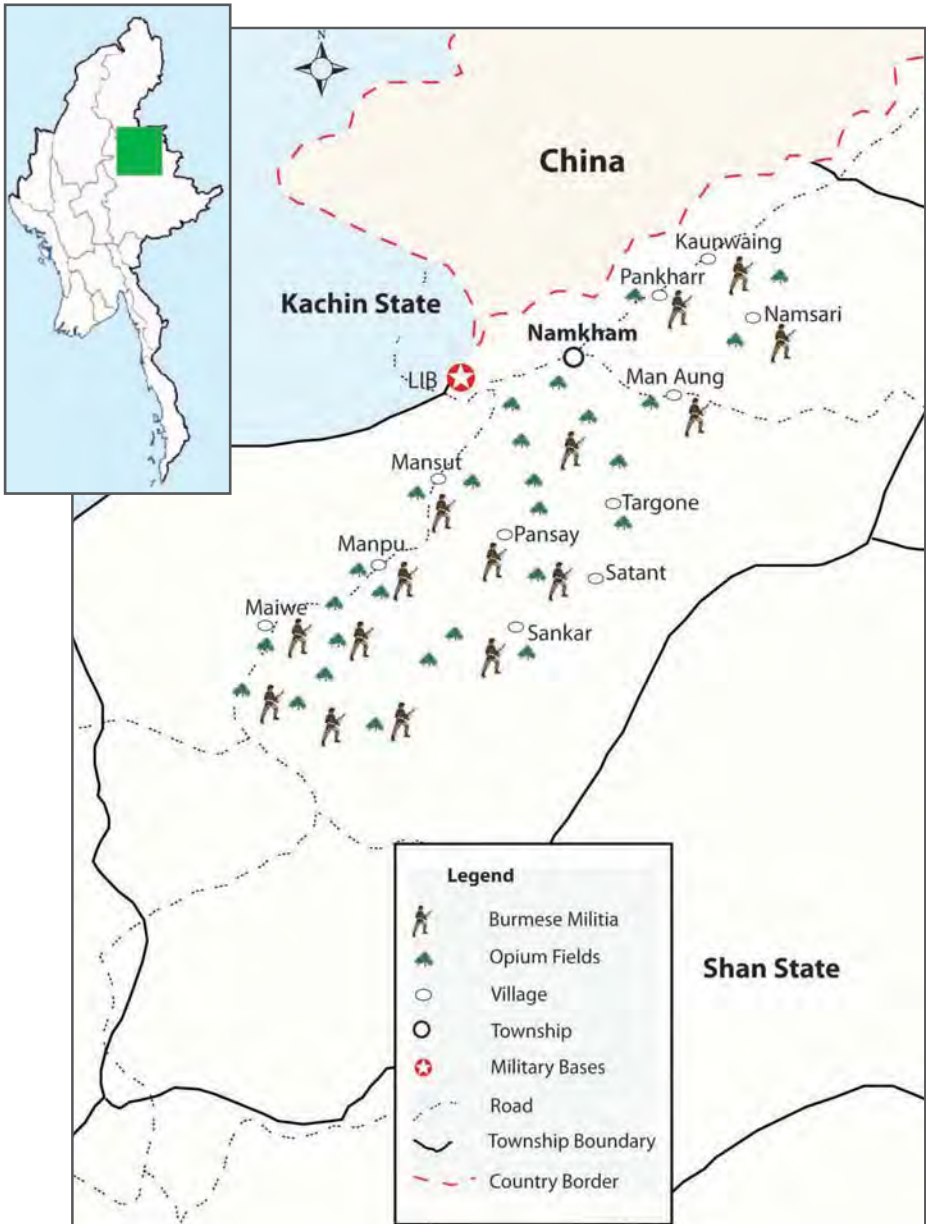
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# Opium cultivation and militia groups in Namkham Township



# Summary

Almost one year after Burma's long-awaited elections were held in November 2010, Palaung communities in northern Shan State are suffering from the effects of an even greater upsurge in opium cultivation than in previous years. Local paramilitary leaders, some now elected into Burma's new parliament, are being allowed to cultivate and profit from drugs in return for helping the regime suppress ethnic resistance forces in Burma's escalating civil war. As a result, drug addiction has escalated in the Palaung area, tearing apart families and communities. Burma's drug problems are set to worsen unless there is genuine political reform that addresses the political aspirations of Burma's ethnic minority groups.

Research carried out by Palaung Women's Organisation in Namkham Township shows that:

- Opium cultivation across 15 villages in Namkham Township has increased by a staggering 78.58% within two years.
- 12 villages in the same area, which had not previously grown opium, have started to grow opium since 2009.
- A significant number of these villages are under the control of government paramilitary "anti-insurgency" forces, which are directly profiting from the opium trade.
- The most prominent militia leader and druglord in the area, "Pansay" Kyaw Myint, from the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, was elected as an MP for Namkham in November 2010; he promised voters that they could grow opium freely for 5 years if they voted for him.
- Government troops, police and militia continue to openly tax opium farmers, and to collect bribes from drug addicts in exchange for their release from custody.
- Drug addiction in Palaung communities has spiralled out of control. In one Palaung village, PWO found that 91% of males aged 15 and over were addicted to drugs. Drug addiction is causing huge problems for families, with women and children bearing the burden of increased poverty, crime and violence.

# Introduction

In 2006, PWO released its *Poisoned Flowers* report detailing the impacts of spiralling drug addiction on Palaung women in Burma's northern Shan State. After the publication of *Poisoned Flowers*, the situation in the Palaung community deteriorated further. PWO began researching the surge in opium cultivation in regime-controlled areas of Burma, releasing our *Poisoned Hills* report in 2010. Despite the report attracting widespread attention from the international media, the situation in the Palaung area is today worse than ever, as Burma's military-controlled government maintains a tight authoritarian grip on all aspects of politics, society and the economy.

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The regime's efforts to combat Burma's drugs problem are characteristic of the new military-controlled government's token efforts to be seen as reformist; despite destroying a small proportion of opium farms and arresting drug dealers and addicts, the military regime simply collects bribes in exchange for their release. Elected representatives such as 'Pansay' Kyaw Myint, who came to power in the November 2010 election, promote the cultivation of opium in northern Shan State whilst families and communities are torn apart by drug addiction. As opium cultivation and addiction continue to spiral out of control, it is clear that Burma's so-called 'civilian' government have no intention to break away from the policies of their predecessors, leaving the Burmese people to suffer at the hands of their own government.

PWO will continue to raise awareness of the devastating impact of opium cultivation and addiction on the Palaung community. We have compiled this brief update, detailing our latest research findings about opium cultivation and addiction in Namkham during the 2010-2011 opium growing season, and analysing the links between the increase in opium cultivation and the political situation in northern Shan State following the November 2010 elections.



# Background

In May 2008, in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, Burma's military regime held a referendum concerning the adoption of a new constitution for Burma. In November 2010, the first elections for 20 years were held in Burma. Despite the military regime's attempts to present both the referendum and general election as democratic, polling was characterised by electoral fraud and human rights abuses across the country.

The 2010 election has not brought the democracy and reconciliation which Burma's ethnic nationalities hope for. The 2008 constitution is also unacceptable, as it does not grant the fundamental political freedom of the ethnic people of Burma and, by ensuring that the military lies outside the law, is simply a tool used by the regime to prolong its dictatorial rule.

Before the November 2010 election, political parties were required to get permission to carry out campaign activities from the electoral commission or the police. For example, when members of the Ta'ang (Palaung) National Party (the TNP) wanted to implement their election campaign in the Palaung area, they had to send a written request to the electoral commission beforehand; only if they were granted official permission were they able to campaign. Even when permission was granted, political parties did not adopt a manifesto during their campaigns, explaining what their party intended to do for the people of Burma. Most parties simply regarded winning as an end in itself. Similar restrictions applied with regards to candidates' movement. Candidates were required to get permission from the police or immigration department if they wanted to travel, and police visited their homes every three days to check that the restrictions on their movement had not been broken.

The military regime employed a strategy of intimidation and repression to prevent Burma's ethnic nationalities from expressing their political preferences. Even though no elections had been held in Burma in the preceding twenty years, the military regime carried out no awareness-raising about the election process in the period before the November 2010 election. As a result, the Palaung people did not fully understand



*campaign poster of the USDP party*

the election process and many cast multiple votes at the ballot box, a fact which the electoral commission chose to ignore.

In fact, the USDP had bribed electoral commission personnel in advance of the election. In return, the electoral commission coerced as many people as possible into voting, and changed non-USDP votes to votes for the USDP. For example, the majority of Palaung people claimed they had voted for the TNP, however the TNP were not elected in the Palaung area as the USDP and electoral commission changed TNP ballot papers to votes for USDP, as was the case in Namkham Township. The USDP's election strategy also included bribing and giving gifts to voters to ensure their victory.

Little has changed in Burma following the November 2010 elections and the installation of Burma's so-called 'civilian' government, which is dominated by the USDP. As yet, there has been no significant departure from the policies of Than Shwe's military junta, although this is hardly surprising given that the majority of 'elected' representatives are former military officials from his administration.

Since the election, the new government has tried to cultivate a more internationally acceptable image; in the meantime, human rights violations continue to occur, and renewed fighting has broken out in ethnic areas supposedly under ceasefire. Whilst USDP supporters are rewarded for their loyalty, the majority of civilians are not supportive of the new regime, but are afraid to speak out against the power of the military.



# Opium Cultivation and Politics in Namkham

Kyaw Myint (also known as U Win Maung and Li Yongqiang) is a well-known drug lord, having controlled opium cultivation and drug trading in the Pansay area of Namkham Township, Northern Shan State for more than a decade. Kyaw Myint maintains control of the area through his ‘anti-rebel’ militia *Ta-Ka-Sa-Pha*, one of numerous paramilitary forces set up by the regime to consolidate their control in conflict areas. In exchange for suppressing resistance activity, these militia are allowed to act as local “warlords,” profiting from local businesses, legal or illegal. In 2006 Kyaw Myint’s militia had almost 400 armed troops, and is reported to have recruited many more by the time of Burma’s first elections for 20 years in November 2010.

After PWO’s 2010 report *Poisoned Hills* uncovered that opium cultivation had surged under government control in Burma, the regime’s anti-drugs teams and the military destroyed some opium fields in Northern Shan State but left the majority of opium fields in Namkham untouched. This suggests that the regime’s actions were motivated by its desire to appease the international community and promote a more positive image of itself in the period leading up to the election, rather than a genuine political will to solve the problem. At the same time, the regime would not have wanted to jeopardise its mutually beneficial relationship with Kyaw Myint by destroying opium fields in those areas of Namkham under his control.

Kyaw Myint stood as a candidate for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in the November 2010 election for the ‘Namkham No.2’ constituency. Before the election was held, Kyaw Myint had bribed people in the township to vote for him by giving them money. He claimed that if people voted for the USDP party, they would be allowed to grow opium for five years, and promised that he would protect those people who voted for him by ensuring that their opium fields would not be destroyed.



**'Pansay' Kyaw Myint**

- ✓ **Well known drug lord**
- ✓ **Head of paramilitary force**
- ✓ **Member of Burma's parliament**

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*“U Kyaw Myint himself asked the people to vote 3 or 4 times, and said that if he won he would permit people to grow opium for 5 years. Then, there were only 200 people who were registered to vote and 700 people voted for his party so they did not know what to do.”* – male villager, Namkham Township

During his election campaign, Kyaw Myint is reported to have used his vast wealth to bribe his opponents. According to local people, Kyaw Myint bought a flat and gave money to one of his opponents in return for his withdrawal from campaigning.

*“[Kyaw Myint] was able to persuade his opponent not to compete in the election. To do so, he gave him a lot of money and bought a flat in Rangoon for him. U Htun Aung didn't do any political canvassing because he was bribed. But U Kyaw Myint campaigned in many different areas.”* – male villager, Namkham Township

Kyaw Myint also used his reputation as a militia leader to intimidate the Palaung people into voting for him.

*“He is also the head of the people's militia and his soldiers campaign for him. When they went campaigning, U Kyaw Myint sent them weapons. When the people saw them with guns, they were afraid of them.”* – male villager, Namkham Township

According to PWO's research, most Palaung people voted for the Ta'ang National Party (TNP) during the November 2010 elections. However, when the official election results were announced, the regime claimed that the majority of the Palaung people had voted for the USDP and 'Pan Say' Kyaw Myint was elected as the USDP Member of Parliament for Namkham.

In the period leading up to the November 2010 election, Burma's military regime concentrated their energy and resources on their election campaign, paying little attention to opium cultivation. Meanwhile, opium cultivation was increasing across most of the Pansay area in Namkham Township, Kyaw Myint's core constituency. The regime took no action to tackle this increase in opium cultivation.

Having been elected to parliament, Kyaw Myint now has even more power than before to control opium cultivation in the Namkham area. Opium cultivation during the 2010 – 2011 opium season has increased as a direct result of Kyaw Myint's election and his promise that people would be allowed to grow opium freely in Namkham if he was elected.



*Opium field in Namkham Township*

# Findings

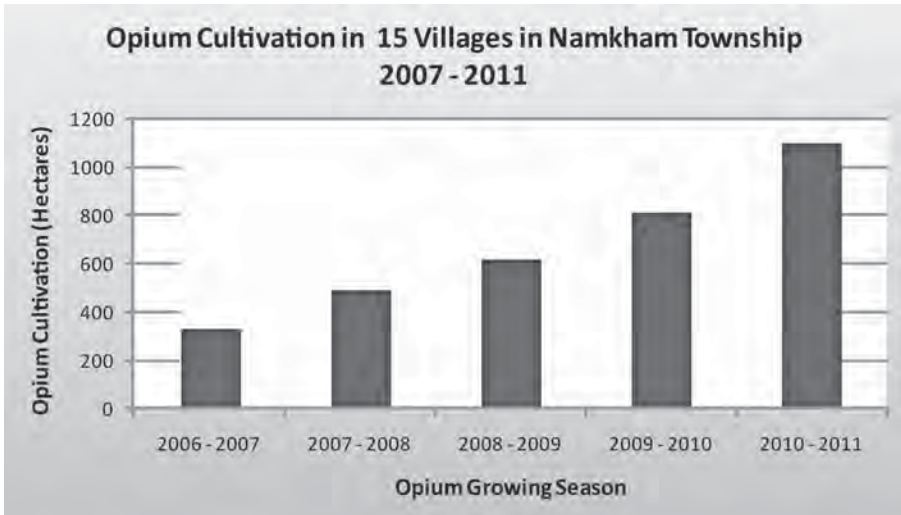
PWO began collecting data on opium cultivation in northern Shan State in 2006. According to PWO's research across 15 villages in Namkham Township, opium cultivation has increased steadily over the past 5 years, despite the Burmese regime's claims that they are tackling the problem by eradicating opium fields. For example, the total cultivation across 15 villages in Namkham in the 2008 – 2009 opium season was 617 hectares; in the 2010-2011 season this figure had almost doubled to 1109 hectares across the same 15 villages, a staggering increase in cultivation of 78.58%.

## Opium cultivation soars in Namkham Township after 2010 elections

12 One reason for the dramatic increase in opium cultivation in Namkham is the economic crisis in the Palaung area. The Burmese regime exercises total control over the local economy, including the tea industry, which is the traditional livelihood of the Palaung people. As the price of tea plummets, the price of essential goods such as rice has increased; many Palaung can therefore no longer rely on the tea industry to make ends meet. As a result, the Palaung community have been pushed towards opium growing as their only means of survival.

The weak rule of law in Burma has allowed the opium industry to flourish, destroying the traditional livelihoods of the Palaung people. Government officials benefit from opium cultivation through illegal taxation and therefore allow farmers to openly grow opium.

Most of the opium cultivation in Namkham occurs in those areas directly controlled by 'Pansay' Kyaw Myint. For example, opium cultivation has soared in Pansay village, where Kyaw Myint is based, from 1,000 acres during the 2009-2010 opium growing season to 1,400 during the 2010-2011 season. Opium cultivation continues to increase even in those villages in Namkham which are outside Kyaw Myint's constituency and are under the control of other regime-backed militias.



Members of the Ta'ang National Party were also elected to parliament in the November 2010 election. Although their power to influence the Thein Sein regime is likely to be limited, they have not yet taken any action to tackle the problem of opium cultivation and addiction in the Palaung area.

### **Poppy farms in 12 new villages in Namkham Township**

When PWO began data collection activities in 2006, the additional 12 villages surveyed in 2010 and 2011 were not included in PWO's research because they had not yet started growing opium. However, in 2009, villages under the control of Kyaw Myint's militia which had not previously grown opium began to cultivate opium crops, as a result of Kyaw Myint's promise that under his authority villagers would be allowed to grow opium freely for five years.

For example, in 2006, 'MP' village did not grow opium, but in 2010 PWO recorded 8 acres of opium fields in that village. While the acreage of the opium crops grown in MP pales in comparison with villages such as Pansay where opium has been grown for years, the expansion of opium cultivation to 12 villages which previously relied on their traditional livelihoods to survive is a worrying development, which underlines the grave impact of the economic crisis afflicting the Palaung community, and the corrupt politics of 'Pansay' Kyaw Myint.

## Corrupt Taxation and Opium Cultivation in Namkham

The opium growing season usually begins in August. In December, opium farmers have to weed out any other vegetation growing in the opium field so that the opium can grow well. In February and April the opium is ready to shred, and this is the time when the opium drug is harvested.

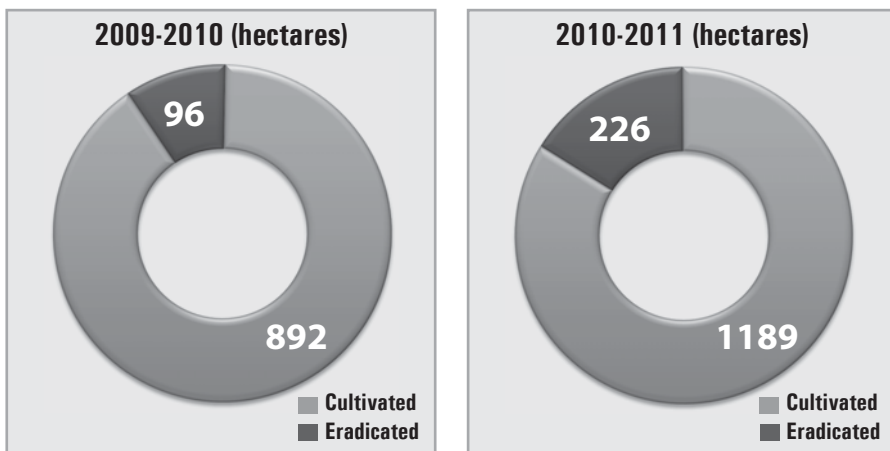
Military and government personnel begin to collect taxes from December. From this time, when the opium has been growing for around two to four months, farmers have to take real care of the opium crop otherwise it may not grow well. Farmers are vulnerable as they are afraid that the regime's anti-drugs teams will come and destroy their fields, their main source of income. Government personnel capitalise on the vulnerability of opium farmers at this time and come to collect taxes from them in return for leaving their opium crops unharmed. They sometimes destroy opium crops in highly visible areas close to the road but leave opium fields in the more remote areas intact.

Harvest time is also crucial for opium farmers as they have invested their time and money in their crop since the beginning of the growing season. Opium farmers are also forced to pay taxes to the the Army and other authorities during harvest time in order to ensure the security of their crops. If they do not have money, they give opium instead.

*“We have to pay many taxes when we grow opium. The anti- drug teams, police, militia, and military soldiers come and collect bribes separately. We must pay them all 15,000 Kyat per household. The anti-drug team is working with the village head man” – male villager, Namkham Township*



## Opium cultivation and eradication in Namkham Township

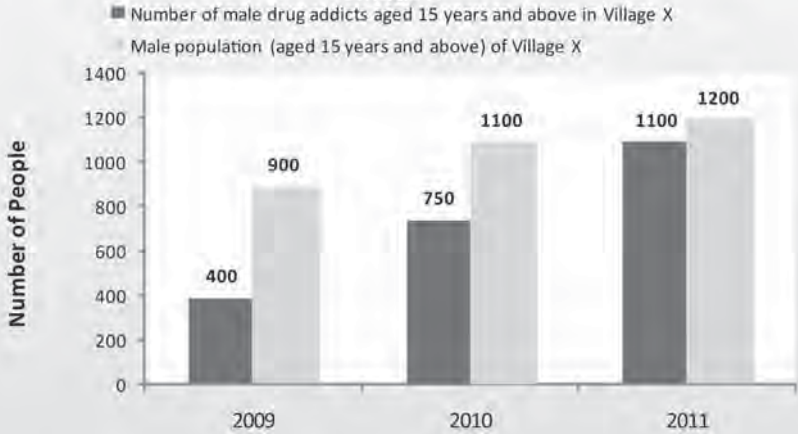


\* Data collected from 27 villages (see appendices)

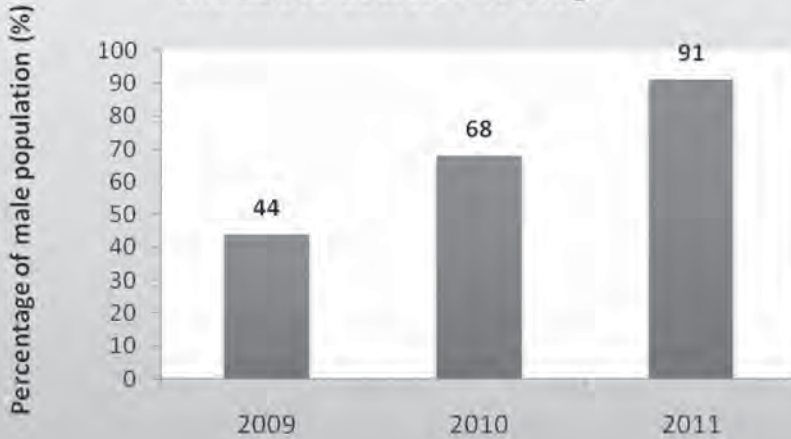
In the period between the 2008 referendum on Burma's constitution and the November 2010 election, the SPDC military government focused its attention on the upcoming elections, in the meantime neglecting its opium eradication activities. When anti-drugs teams carried out eradication campaigns in the Palaung area, they only destroyed opium fields near the main road where the crops were visible to the people, leaving the vast majority of opium fields untouched. Opium farmers were able to pay bribes to the anti-drugs teams in return for their fields being left intact.

Unless the Burmese regime takes the issue of opium cultivation and addiction seriously and starts addressing the root causes of the drug problem, the scale of the problem will continue to increase.

### Number of male drug addicts aged 15 years and above in Village X



### Percentage of male population aged 15 years and above addicted to drugs



## Drug addiction rates in village 'X' double within 2 years

The UNODC's Myanmar Opium Survey 2010 reports that the rate of opium use for northern Shan State is 1.2% of the population. However, PWO's own research into drug usage in northern Shan State indicates that the real rate of addiction is much higher. Given the Burmese regime's recent efforts to promote a better image of itself in the international community, it is likely that it is keen to conceal the enormity of the drug problem in the area, and this is reflected in the data it supplies to the UNODC.

PWO conducted a survey of drug addiction rates in one village. The charts below show the rate of drug addiction amongst males aged 15 and over in village 'X'.

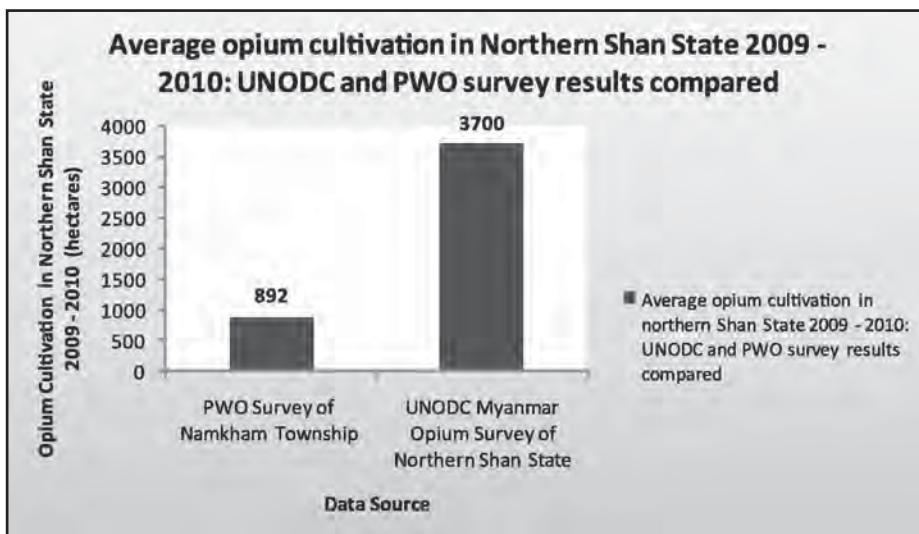
After Palaung Women's Organization released its *Poisoned Hills* report in 2010, the SPDC military regime arrested some drug addicts in northern Shan State and put them in jail. However, this was simply an attempt by the military regime to be seen to be taking action against the drug trade, as in reality, officials accepted bribes from the drug addicts in return for their release from jail. Moreover, the military regime does not conduct any awareness-raising campaigns about the dangers of drug addiction, or offer any drug rehabilitation programs or centres. Ultimately, the rate of drug addiction in the Palaung area will not decrease until the authorities tackle the root cause of the problem.

*“The police and militia cooperate with each other to arrest the drug addicts but they don't arrest the drug dealers. If we have drug dealers in the community, we will have drug addicts. On the 3rd June 2010 the police and militia arrested eight drug addicts from AMK village but the addicts paid bribes to the police and militia and were released. Those addicts who were arrested who had a motorbike needed to pay a 'tax' of 250,000 Kyat in order to be released, and those without a motorbike paid 150,000 Kyat.”* – male villager, Namkham Township

## Opium cultivation in Northern Shan State: UNODC and PWO survey results 2007 – 2009 compared

	2006 – 2007	2007 – 2008	2008 – 2009
UNODC Myanmar Opium Survey of 23 townships in Northern Shan State	390	800	1,600
PWO Survey of 1 township in Northern Shan State	328	496	617

\* Figures in hectares



## PWO findings and official UNODC surveys

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) releases its Myanmar Opium Survey annually. However, the reliability of the survey is limited as the UNODC is unable to access many areas of Northern Shan State, forcing them to rely on data supplied by the Burmese regime. The information presented in the Myanmar Opium Survey cannot therefore be considered independent and poses a serious question of legitimacy.

Prior to the 2009 – 2010 opium growing season, UNODC measured opium cultivation in northern Shan State on a township rather than village basis. In 2009, UNODC reported finding 1,600 hectares of opium fields across 23 opium growing townships in northern Shan State. In the same year, PWO's survey found 617 hectares of opium cultivation in just one townships in the same area, suggesting that UNODC's reliance on data from the Burmese regime had led them to seriously underestimate the scale of opium cultivation in northern Shan State.

As the graph at left shows, the UNODC's Myanmar Opium Survey 2010 estimates that 3,700 hectares of opium were cultivated in the whole of Northern Shan State in the 2009 – 2010 opium growing season (in a total of 23 townships). However, according to data collected by PWO, 892 hectares of opium were cultivated in *Namkham Township alone* over the same time period. Again, this suggests that the UNODC has severely underestimated the scale of the opium problem in Northern Shan State.

The UNODC's continuing reliance on the Burmese regime to facilitate its data collection means that the Myanmar Opium Survey fails to capture the extent of the problem of opium cultivation in northern Shan State.

## **Impact of opium cultivation and addiction on the Palaung community**

Many Palaung people see drug use as a way of escaping from their problems, especially during this time of extreme economic hardship. However, addiction is having devastating effects on has on their community.

Many children are forced to give up their education because their parents can no longer afford to pay for it. This can be either because they are not able to work as a result of their addiction, or because they use the family income to buy drugs, or both. When their parents cannot afford to provide education and healthcare as a result of their drug addiction, children become the victims of drug abuse. Some families become homeless because their father or husband has sold everything they own to pay for drugs. Most women who have sons worry about them becoming drug addicts like their fathers.

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Drug addicts often resort to stealing money and food from their own families and neighbours in order to pay for their addiction. When an addict needs drugs, he will steal rice, oil, pots and other household items to sell or exchange for drugs. When he has emptied his own house, he will steal from other villagers in the community, selling their possessions to buy drugs. He is motivated to steal by his addiction. He may even abandon his family and turn his back on his old life, which in fact happens quite frequently.

Drug addicts often do not work to contribute to their family income and they frequently become violent towards their spouses, especially if they are denied money from their wives to buy drugs. Verbal and physical abuse becomes a part of everyday life for the family of an addict.



*“There are a lot of drug addicts in my village. The drug addicts don’t want to work for their survival and to provide for their needs so they don’t have enough money to buy drugs. They steal things from their family. After nothing is left for them to steal at home they steal other things from our community. Most of the people in the community are afraid of drug addicts. If the village authorities arrest the drug addict and ask them to pay a fine, they don’t have money to pay. The government authorities have taken no responsibility for rehabilitating drug addicts.”* - female villager, Namkham Township

*“He is using drugs. He did not have the money to buy drugs so he went to the bar and began drinking alcohol, promising to pay for it later. His wife went to her friend’s house where her daughter was studying. When her husband came back from the bar he got angry because he thought his wife went out to tell people about him. So he hit his wife and was choking her.*

*After that day, his wife was talking with her friend but her husband thought she was talking about him again so he hit her. She could not work for three days.*

*She went to the village headman to ask for a divorce from her husband but the village headman simply told her husband that he must not behave like that in future. She could not divorce her husband.”* - female villager, Namkham Township

Those Palaung women whose husbands are addicted to opium have to single-handedly provide financial support for the whole family. As a result of high unemployment in the Palaung area, many women are forced to migrate in search of work so that they can make enough income for their family’s survival. This exposes them to the risk of human trafficking, as reported by PWO in the June 2011 report *Stolen Lives: Human Trafficking from Palaung areas of Burma to China*.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study clearly reveals the increase in opium cultivation and drug addiction in Namkham Township, in Burma's northern Shan State, since PWO last reported on the issue in 2010.

Rather than addressing the political and economic factors fuelling Burma's drug problem, Burma's military regime has allowed 'Pansay' Kyaw Myint, an MP elected in November 2010 and a known drug lord, to profit from the illicit cultivation of opium in his constituency. In return, Kyaw Myint has used the paramilitary forces at his command to help the military regime suppress the Palaung people's demands for justice and equal rights. Their complicity in the opium trade suggests that Burma's so-called 'civilian' government has no intention of ending the culture of impunity present at all levels of Burma's regime, or of taking serious measures to combat the drug problem in northern Shan State.

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In Namkham Township, opium addiction levels have spiralled out of control, bringing a fresh batch of problems to a community already in crisis as a result of the regime's oppression of ethnic areas. Opium addiction not only destroys the addicts themselves, but their families and communities. The rise in crime, economic hardship and violence which has accompanied the increase in drug addiction has had a particularly severe impact on women and children. Despite this, Burma's military regime continues to arrest small numbers of drug dealers and addicts, only to release them in exchange for bribes.

This case study therefore highlights the nexus between drug production and power relations in Burma's conflict-ridden Shan State. While Burma's military-controlled government continues to use military means to suppress the demands of the ethnic peoples for justice and equal rights, it needs to rely on its army infrastructure, including local paramilitary forces, to suppress the ethnic resistance movements. These forces in turn are sustained by the opium trade.

PWO therefore reiterates that without genuine political reform which addresses the political and economic factors fuelling opium cultivation in northern Shan State, the military regime will continue to make a profit from the opium trade at the expense of the Palaung people.

PWO makes the following recommendations:

***To the military regime***

- To implement a nationwide ceasefire and begin a tripartite dialogue which addresses the political aspirations of Burma's ethnic nationalities; this is the most effective way to address the opium problem in the long-term.
- To stop destroying opium fields without supporting alternative crop development and carrying out public awareness-raising about the dangers of drug use.

***To the Palaung community***

- To speak out about the issue of opium cultivation and addiction, how it affects themselves, their families and their community, and to demand action from their elected representatives to tackle the problem.

***To the international community***

- To challenge the military regime for its failure to seriously address problems of opium production and addiction in areas under its control.

***To the UNODC***

- To improve the accuracy of its data by working directly with people in the communities where opium is cultivated, rather than with the Burmese military regime.

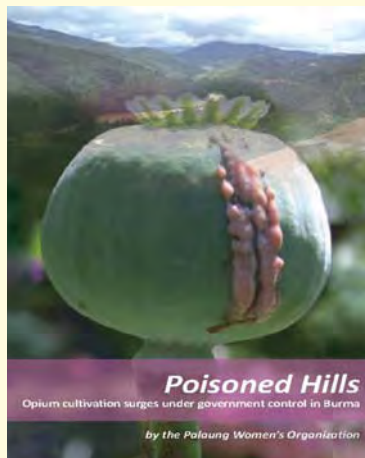
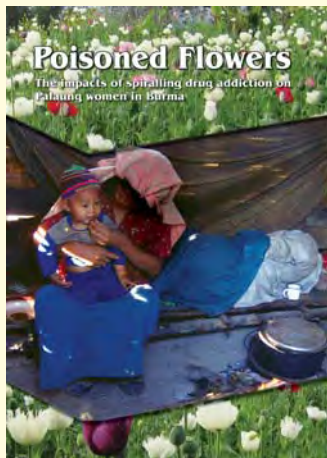
# Appendices

## Opium Cultivation in villages 1-15 in Namkham Township, 2007 – 2011

No.	Village	Opium Grown (acres) 2006 - 2007	Opium Grown (acres) 2007 - 2008	Opium Grown (acres) 2008 - 2009	Opium Grown (acres) 2009 - 2010	Opium Grown (acres) 2010 - 2011
1	PS	500	700	800	1000	1400
2	SK	60	80	100	110	130
3	TG	30	60	80	100	140
4	NS	10	40	60	70	100
5	MW	30	50	70	80	100
6	MS	20	30	60	70	90
7	NS	10	15	30	60	70
8	MP	30	50	60	100	130
9	TH	10	25	40	60	80
10	SK	30	50	60	80	130
11	WL	10	20	30	50	70
12	KK	15	20	30	60	80
13	PY	7	15	15	40	50
14	ST	30	40	50	80	100
15	MP	20	30	50	60	70
	<b>Total</b>	<b>812 acres / 329 hectares</b>	<b>1225 acres / 496 hectares</b>	<b>1535 acres / 621 hectares</b>	<b>2020 acres / 817.46 hectares</b>	<b>2740 acres / 1108.83 hectares</b>

**Opium Cultivation in villages 16-27  
in Namkham Township, 2009 – 2011**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Name of Village</b>	<b>Opium Grown (acres) 2009 - 2010</b>	<b>Opium Grown (acres) 2010 - 2011</b>
16	WS	18	22
17	ZS	40	40
18	MM	18	20
19	MP (1)	7	8
20	MP (2)	9	10
21	PK	3	4
22	MLP	8	10
23	PJ	20	18
24	MLT	13	12
25	MB	8	8
26	MM	20	20
27	ML	20	25
	<b>Total</b>	<b>184 acres / 74.46 hectares</b>	<b>197 acres / 79.72 hectares</b>



The Palaung Women's Organisation has since 2004 been monitoring opium cultivation and the devastating effects of increasing addiction on Palaung communities. This latest update demonstrates that cultivation continues to soar in Palaung areas under Burma's new regime.