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New United Nations Survey Documents Dramatic Decline in Opium Poppy Cultivation in Laos

VIENNA, 22 June (UN Information Service) -- With the release today of the 2005 Laos Opium Survey, Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the United Nations *Office on Drugs and Crime* (UNODC) announced that "Laos has taken one more step towards freedom from opium." The Survey shows a 73 per cent decline in opium poppy cultivation and a 67 per cent drop in opium production since 2004. This marks the first time in many years that the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) no longer qualifies as a major supplier of illegal opiates to the international drug market.

Over the past seven years, the area of land under opium poppy cultivation in Lao PDR has decreased dramatically, from 26,800 hectares in 1998 to approximately 1,800 hectares at the beginning of 2005. According to Mr. Costa, "It now seems likely that the country will reach the goal its Government set for itself four years ago: freedom from opium by the end of 2005."

While farming families who have abandoned illicit cultivation of opium poppy have worked hard to cope with their loss of income, more needs to be done to help them escape the poverty associated with opium production. UNODC also conducted a study on the coping strategies of Laotian farmers who gave up opium cultivation. While farmers who benefited from alternative livelihood programmes realized quicker recovery, even farmers who were not offered assistance coped by undertaking activities such as off-farm employment, establishing small-scale irrigation systems, developing livestock or collecting non-timber forest products.

The Laotian Government has formulated a strategy for the development of alternative sources of income for Laotian farming families. Mr. Costa has called on the international community to support the effort of the Laotian Government to ensure the sustainability of eliminating opium poppy cultivation in Laos. "As resilient and intelligent as the farmers of Laos have proved themselves to be, many remain mired in poverty. Donor countries need to shoulder greater responsibility for helping these deserving people," he said.

A copy of the 2005 Laos Opium Survey is available at <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/index.html> or by contacting Richard Krueger, UNODC, at richard.krueger@unvienna.org, tel: +43 1 26060 5214

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