

AFGHANISTAN

Big Growth in Afghan Poppy Crop

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The US has confirmed a big increase in Afghanistan's opium poppy crop and says the **illicit drugs trade is endangering efforts to rebuild the country.**

A US State Department official said **poppy cultivation in Afghanistan was expected to jump by 40% this year.**

Another official said there were record levels of poppy cultivation in areas not previously used for this purpose.

Afghanistan is one of 22 nations listed by Mr Bush in his annual report to Congress on "major" drug-producers.

"On the narcotics front, tied like a ball-and-chain to security, justice and economic development, we stand in the darkness of a long shadow," assistant secretary of state in the bureau of narcotics and law enforcement, Robert Charles, told a congressional hearing.

Pentagon official Peter Rodman say the drugs trade is corrupting Afghan government institutions and that without vigorous eradication, security would not improve quickly.

"We know that profits from the production of illegal narcotics flow into the coffers of warlord militias, corrupt government officials and extremist forces," Mr Rodman said.

Concern

The UN released figures earlier this year saying **three-quarters of the world's opium poppy was now grown in Afghanistan.**

Hamid Karzai has warned that drug-trafficking and production is helping terrorism, and the Central Bank governor reportedly said earlier this week it accounted for a third of the country's economy.

On Thursday, President Putin of Russia accused coalition forces of doing almost nothing to reduce the threat of drugs from Afghanistan.

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