Silkworms give Philippine farming town a makeover

A farmer holds silkworm cocoons to be processed into raw silk as an alternative livelihood to marijuana cultivation in Kapangan, Benguet province north of Manila April 18, 2008. Hundreds of white mulberry trees have started to cover mountain slopes deep in the northern Philippines’ Cordillera region, changing not just the landscape but also making over the image of a poor farming town.
Credit: REUTERS/John Javellana

By Manny Mogato
KAPANGAN, Philippines | Mon Apr 21, 2008 11:54pm EDT

(Reuters) - Hundreds of white mulberry trees have started to cover mountain slopes deep in the northern Philippines’ Cordillera region, changing not just the landscape but also making over the image of a poor farming town.

Up until the early 2000s, the upland villages of Kapangan, a vegetable growing town of 18,000 people in Benguet province, was widely known as one of the country’s largest cultivation areas of an illegal plant -- marijuana.

"We’ve started something to erase that tag," Roberto Canuto, a public attorney in the province who was elected mayor in 2007, told Reuters. "We’re determined to be known as something else, perhaps, the silk capital of the country."

Canuto said some farmers have started growing mulberry trees, the main food of silk-producing worms from China and Japan, after sericulture was introduced in nine of Kapangan’s 15 villages in late 2004.

"We’re expanding the mulberry plantation to accommodate more farmers willing to go into silkworm operations," he said, adding many farmers got excited after initial trials produced about 25 kilos of rawsilk, sold at $50 per kilogram early this year.

Wilbur Teofilo, leader of a 33-member farmers’ cooperative in Kapangan, said they have started upgrading 11 "rearing houses" and building nine more to raise rawsilk production to 250 kilos every two months this year.

"We can easily produce about 500 kilos of rawsilk every two months when our operations go on full blast," Teofilo said, showing a box containing thousands of fresh cocoons, leftovers from last month’s production.

"This could be the perfect alternative to marijuana because it would also take six to eight months to harvest mulberry leaves that would be fed to hungry worms. This could give us extra cash without taking any risks."

Fe Donato, an official from the Fibre Industry Development Authority, said the silkworm project could produce as much as 2,000 kilos of rawsilk every year once operations expand in two years, bringing in an extra 4 million pesos ($95,690) for the farmers.
Like most other farmers in his village, members of Teofilo's cooperative were not ready to admit they had cultivated marijuana in the past before getting into sericulture.

But, it was no secret that some farmers in the town were able to construct modest mansions only from raising vegetables, such as cucumbers, chayote and potatoes.

Daniel Baligar, a member of the town's legislative council, said some farmers had taken the risks because cultivating the illegal plant costs less and was not so tedious.

"But, they were planting marijuana in the most inaccessible parts of the mountains, making it difficult for authorities to detect and eradicate the plants," he said.

HEMP EXPORTER

In its 2008 International Narcotics Control Strategy report, the U.S. State Department said marijuana had regained popularity in the Philippines because of tight supply and price increases of the crystal form of methamphetamines, or "shabu".

A gram of the illicit substance on Manila's streets now costs 6,000 pesos ($143.2) compared with about $0.50 per gram of dried marijuana leaves and buds, the report issued in March said.

Washington said the Philippines was also exporting marijuana to some countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Malaysia.

The report, citing data from the Philippines' Dangerous Drug Board (DDB), had identified at least 60 cultivation sites in the country's northern mountain regions and on the troubled southern islands of Mindanao, Jolo, Basilan and Tawi-tawi.

In an earlier interview with Reuters, DDB chairman Anselmo Avenido said about 20 new cultivation sites had been discovered since the start of the year even if security forces had uprooted 2.5 million of the plants in 2007, valued at $11.66 million.

Avenido said the presence of Maoist-led guerrillas and Muslim militants in most of the cultivation sites had complicated the government's efforts to eradicate marijuana sites.

Intelligence reports said about 17 percent of proceeds from production bases were used to fund activities of communist New People's Army (NPA) rebels, including buying weapons and training and feeding more than 5,000 cadres.

TUBER, FLOWERS AND WORMS

Avenido said reducing drug supply was only one part of the government's efforts to overcome the problem. His office was also pushing for programmes to cut demand, raise awareness, cooperate with counterparts abroad and offer alternative livelihood.

Dionisio Santiago, head of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, said they were looking into how Thailand had wiped out its poppy fields by offering farmers viable alternative as well as increasing risks for those who continue to plant marijuana.

"We've been doing lots of experiments but our initial tests met some problems," Santiago said, adding that the planting of a medicinal tuber, known as "yacon", did not take off due to the lack of commercial demand.

Although there were still some farmers planting the tubers, others had gone into cutflowers, Santiago said, the DDB and his office had supported efforts by local officials in Benguet to experiment on sericulture.

He said anti-narcotics agencies had pledged to sink in more investments in the sericulture project if silk-making succeeds in cutting marijuana supply.

Teofilo said farmers in his village were willing to give the silkworm project a try because the potential for providing them extra cash was huge based on the initial experiments since 2004.

"What's important for us was to find new ways to improve our finances through honest means," he said, pointing to an area in the mountain where they had started a mulberry plantation.

"Of course, we like most people to know that we're no longer the marijuana capital in the country. It really gives us a bad name and we wanted that erased forever."

($1=41.80 Philippine Peso)

(Reporting by Manny Mogato; editing by Raju Gopalakrishnan)