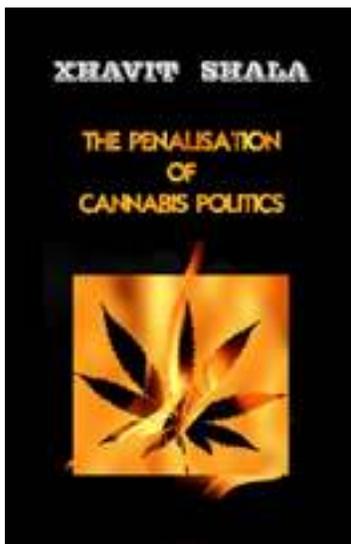


Instead of a Forward



LAZARAT, Albania (Reuters) - Cannabis plants lay stacked up like Christmas trees around a police station near this remote Albanian village, a humbling sight for growers who two years ago took pot-shots at an Italian police helicopter.

“Why didn’t you come much earlier?” an old woman wailed at the police, berating them for not acting before work had gone into growing the crop. “Four of our donkeys died fetching water for these plants. And now you come and the harvest’s all gone.”

Albania has been clamping down on cannabis cultivation since Prime Minister Sali Berisha pledged early this year to “wipe it off the map.” But in the southern village of Lazarat, where plants have been uprooted by police, residents feel they are being singled out and harshly showcased.

Plenty of sun, water, poverty, anarchy and hard-to-reach hills turned post-communist Albania into one of the biggest exporters of cannabis in Europe. Lazarat has been at the heart of this trade, and for many years was a no-go zone for Albanian police. In 2004, villagers shot at an Italian drug-spotting helicopter as it tried to photograph marijuana fields.

Berisha pointedly stayed away during his election campaign last year. “There was far more cannabis than vines,” said a monitor sent to Lazarat for last year’s general election, which was won by Berisha’s Democrats. “In some places I saw no walls separating property, just cannabis fences.”

Despite Berisha’s pledge, the people of Lazarat had thought this year would be business as usual; they believed the absence of police at the start of the summer meant the authorities would again turn a blind eye to their crops. But although Berisha’s Democrats had in the past been accused of protecting Lazarat, partly to annoy Socialist rivals, they now see cracking down on cannabis here as a means to win international respectability.

In June, Interior Minister Sokol Olldashi flew into Lazarat to warn cannabis growing would not be tolerated. On the same day, drivers for parliament and the Constitutional Court were arrested in the area with 220 pounds of the weed. “It is absolutely intolerable for police inspectors to allow narcotic drugs be cultivated in their territory as if they were onions,” Olldashi said.

Lazarat village leader Dashnor Aliko said there might be a few people growing cannabis, but not the whole village. “The state should help employ people because they will try anything to feed their hungry children,” he told Reuters. He said he had seen television

pictures of “whole plantations” elsewhere in Albania that dwarfed Lazarat’s modest fields.

Former police Chief Xhavit Shala says politics and drugs are sometimes mixed in what is known locally as “cannabis politics,” whereby politicians have sometimes feigned ignorance of drug growing because that might have cost them votes. Shala said that in the district of Fier, for example, high quality cannabis was grown by the village chief, the teacher and even a police inspector.

Albania began its latest anti-drug campaign by banning speedboats used to ferry drugs across the Adriatic to Italy. But investigative reporter Artan Hoxha, who uncovered plantations in Vlore helping to trigger a police crackdown there, said stopping speedboats was not the answer.

“This is a fight you win on the ground,” he said.

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Instead of a proper forward to this book I decided to print part of this news release from the prestigious news agency Reuters, a release that was subsequently carried by all the world’s public information news giants, and which accurately and succinctly conveys the anti-cannabis philosophy and long standing commitment against cannabis cultivation of the author of this book. Reuters portrays the phenomenon of cannabis cultivation in Albania as a scourge for the Albanian society and politics. This agency informed the international public opinion that Albania possesses now a clear political will to fight cannabis cultivation. It highlighted poverty and the cannabis politics as factors that encourage cultivation and highlighted the need to prevent cannabis cultivation as a very important stage in the fight against cannabis.

Albania is pursuing the path of Euro Atlantic integration. However, in order for this process to be successful, our country can no longer continue to co-exist with the phenomena of cannabis cultivation. And when a criminal phenomenon is of massive proportions and spread over many villages and areas, as it has been the case with the cultivation of narcotic plants, it presents a serious threat to our national security. In these circumstances, the level of commitment and success in the fight against narcotic plants cultivation is a clear indicator of the political will to fight crime and of the successes of the government’s national security policies.

The Albanian Center for National Security Studies has made effort to provide its contribution to the success of this fight. Following the publication of the book "Between Anti-cannabis and cannabis politics", the center and the director, the author of the book, continued, through articles and opinion pieces, to draw the attention to the need to not only prevent cannabis cultivation from happening but also to propose concrete alternative to farmers and strengthen the legislation in the field.

Some of these pieces and article have been collected in this publication in an effort to make them available to the institutions, interested individuals and the public at large, trusting that it will help to further intensify the fight against cultivation of narcotic plants and narcotics in general by the state and the society at large.

The Author