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Anger grows in Morocco's Rif mountains, home of hash and rebellion

By Cahal Milmo in Ketama, Morocco

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In the Café Berber yesterday business was brisk as customers sipped glasses of mint tea while two men in Adidas trainers and padded Nike sports jackets touted walnut-sized samples of the local cash crop - "kif", or Moroccan hashish.

The café, where no visitor can sit for more than a few minutes before receiving a whispered offer of a fudgy brown piece of "chocolate", lies on the bustling main street of Ketama. A tatty and lawless enclave perched high in the inhospitable Rif Mountains of north-west Morocco, it is the centre of a cannabis industry estimated to be worth more than £7bn a year.

Surrounded by forest and inaccessible valleys, this is Morocco's Wild West. Assani, one of half a dozen "businessmen" hanging around the Café Berber and other outlets offering "good smoke, good dreams" for 100 dirhams (£6) for a blob of sweet-smelling hash, shook his head when asked about life in the Rif.

He said: "Here in the Rif we are free and we are poor. Why should we care what the government orders when it does nothing for us? We are the untouchables. All there is here is the kif. It keeps us alive, not the government. Where is the King when we need him? He has abandoned us."

Even in a region as fractious as the Rif, which has a long and bloody history of insurrection against what its indigenous Berber inhabitants call the "Dahilla" or the people of the east, in particular the government in Rabat, direct criticism of the monarch, Mohammed VI, is rare and, to ordinary Moroccans, deeply shocking. As one official put it: "You can call politicians what you like but nobody speaks ill of His Majesty."

But Assani's words were being echoed throughout the villages and towns at the centre of kif production leading down from the Rif peaks to the port of Al Hoceima, where an earthquake on Monday night killed at least 600 people and has left 30,000 homeless. Some estimates have said the final death toll could be as high as 3,000.

As the rescue operation struggles to reach those in need, discontent has erupted into civil unrest with protest marches and road blockades.

Mohammed, a father-of-four from the village of Imzouren, one of the worst-affected communities, joined a march on Al Hoceima on Thursday which resulted in scuffles with police. He was shaking with fury as he explained that he and his family had waited for 72 hours without food or shelter. "God bless the King who loves us. But he is doing nothing for us in our hour of need. We are Moroccans, we are his people but they treat us differently. In the Rif, we are second-class citizens."

Provincial officials in Al Hoceima and the health ministry in the capital, Rabat, admitted to delays and difficulties in reaching outlying villages flattened by the tremor, which measured 6.8 on the Richter scale, and getting supplies to the tented camps which have sprouted up around the port.

The country's constitutional monarch visited the disaster zone within hours of the quake and sent a personal message to his "loyal and devoted subjects" vowing to "personally oversee the mobilisation of the organs of the state and all its human and material resources to come to the aid of the victims". But such assurances have done little to quell a wider discontent.

According to experts, the fury has its roots in a more profound schism between the people of the Rif and their nominal rulers, which has its clearest expression in the stranglehold of kif on the local economy.

Professor Pascual Moreno, head of the International Centre for Rural and Agricultural Studies in Valencia and an expert on the Rif, said: "Cannabis has filled a void created by the inaction of the colonial rulers and the failure of the Moroccan government to improve the infrastructure and standard of living of the Berbers. Now kif is king."

The United Nations Office on Drugs Crime reported in December that cannabis production was expanding so rapidly in the Rif that it was causing soil erosion and deforestation. The area under cultivation has increased from 5,000 hectares in 1950 to a current level of up to 200,000 hectares. Some two-thirds of the Rif population, amounting to 800,000 people, most of them Berber, depend on the crop for their income. They produce 47,400 tonnes of hashish a year, which is smuggled into Europe via a network of ports, chief among them Al Hoceima.

But while the overall trade is worth an estimated £7.2bn, crime does not pay for the overlords of Ketama and the peasant farmers in its hinterland. The vast majority of the profits are taken by drug kingpins, many of them British, Dutch, Spanish

and German criminals on Spain's Costa del Sol.

The average income from cannabis for a Rif farmer is just £1,280 a year, and the region's share of the plunder is £141m - just 2 per cent.

Observers of the trade say it is the legacy of decades of repression and ambivalence by the Rif's rulers - the colonial powers of France and Spain, and then the government in Rabat, which two years after independence brutally suppressed a rebellion by the Berbers in 1958.

Professor Moreno, who led an unsuccessful £750,000 European Union project to persuade farmers to grow avocados instead of kif, said: "Resentment of that suppression is still felt strongly. The Berbers feel attacked and abandoned. There has been some investment in roads and schools but compared with the rest of the country, the Rif is under-developed and deprived.

"More and more people resort to growing kif or leaving to work abroad because there is nothing else to do. In the end you get a place like Ketama, which is like a final frontier: all that is missing is cowboys carrying pistols. There is so much cannabis that the region cannot even feed itself - 80 per cent of its food has to be imported. Without huge investment by Rabat, nothing will change."

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