

UN Brands Afghanistan a 'Narco-State,' As Washington Looks the Other Way

by Ramtanu Maitra

Yet another bumper opium crop in Afghanistan in 2004 has begun to drown out Washington's various loud claims that it has achieved significant economic successes in that country in the last three years. With the harvest of raw opium measuring close to 4,600 tons, Washington has indeed come under pressure from the United Nations, Britain, and other European nations, urging the United States to make an effort to end the deadly menace.

On Nov. 18, the UN distributed the just-published report which concluded that Afghanistan is on its way to becoming a "narco-state," and that U.S. and NATO forces in the country should get involved in fighting the drug trade as well as terrorists.

"It would be an historical error to abandon Afghanistan to opium, right after we reclaimed it from the Taliban and al-Qaeda," said Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

The report also said that opium is now the "main engine of

economic growth, and the strongest bond among previously quarrelsome peoples." It valued the trade at \$2.8 billion, or more than 60% of Afghanistan's 2003 gross domestic product.

Action Overdue

None of this may seem surprising to those of you who have been reading the *EIR* over the last three years. Opium had always been cultivated in Afghanistan. But never before, except in 1998 and 1999, has the cultivation of opium been so extensive as it was during the years 2002, 2003, and 2004—the years the Americans wrested "control" of Afghanistan from the Taliban following its spectacular military victory over the militia in the Winter of 2001.

The intrinsic linkage among the drugs, drug money, weapons, militia, warlordism, and terrorism has been pointed out a number of times in this magazine. After the Oct. 9 Presidential election, which was handcrafted by Washington with due help from Islamabad, the UN Office on Drugs Crime has come on strong, declaring it would be an "historical error" to abandon the nation to opium. It also pointed out that one in ten Afghans is now estimated to be involved in this dangerous business.

The UN agency found that this year's cultivation of opium—the raw material for heroin—was up by nearly two-thirds. Bad weather and disease kept production from setting a new record, although it still accounted for 87% of world supply, up from 76% in 2003.

U.S. Did Nothing

This opium boom indicates that the United States did not do anything to reduce the drug menace. In fact, most observers note that the United States had actively sought cooperation of those warlords who were knee-deep in the drug trade. There was no "information gap" or a failure of the CIA that led to this state of affairs. It was an accepted policy adopted to



With a bumper crop of opium in Afghanistan this year, Washington is coming under pressure to finally stop its pragmatic deals with the "anti-al-Qaeda" opium warlords, and do something to stop the drug production. Afghanistan produces 87% of the world's supply.

achieve short-term gains and, in essence, to push Afghanistan another step closer to the precipice.

Why, then, was this policy adopted? There could be a number of reasons that Washington adopted the policy to encourage drug production, the most important of which is to get the support of those who have muscle and power to fight the Taliban. It is widely acknowledged that the Afghan regime, constituted of disparate elements who have seldom agreed on any one issue, did not have its writ beyond the capital city of Kabul. The rest of Afghanistan is under the loosely controlled regime of warlords. While most of these warlords are dependent on opium to bankroll their militias, only a handful, such as Ismail Khan, Governor of Herat, are not. Ismail Khan's financial strength came from collecting taxes from the traders who were bringing in goods from Iran through Herat.

But, Herat was not a Taliban stronghold. Southern, south-eastern, eastern, northeastern, and northern Afghanistan's strongmen are all opium warlords. Washington, Islamabad, and Kabul worked with all of them to "get rid" of the Taliban militia and other "Islamic fundamentalists." Was the anti-Taliban alliance a drug producers' crusade? It is difficult to assess.

Washington's dalliance with drug warlords has raised quite a few eyebrows in Europe. Most of the heroin peddled on the streets of Europe is from Afghanistan.

British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell, whose country is leading the counter-narcotics effort in Afghanistan, had said in an interview with the *Financial Times* back on Feb. 18, 2002, that there was an international commitment to support the Afghan government in its fight against the narcotics problem.

He had said then that "the U.S. and United Nations have ignored repeated calls by the international anti-drug community to address the increasing menace of Afghanistan's opium cultivation, threatening a rift between Europe and the U.S. as they begin to reconstruct the country."

The *Financial Times*, quoting an unnamed diplomat, said the European governments believe one of the reasons the United States is "out to lunch on the issue," is that Afghan heroin is not a significant player in the U.S. drug market, accounting for less than 5% of consumption. Colombia, he said, was the focus of the U.S. anti-drug campaign. This is in sharp contrast to Europe, where Afghan heroin is viewed as a main source of the region's trade in hard drugs.

U.S. Nexus With Warlords

It is also difficult to assess when exactly Washington forged its ties with the warlords in order to oust the Taliban militia. It is to be remembered that a number of warlords were guerrilla commanders who had fought against the Soviet invaders in the 1980s. *Jane's Intelligence Weekly* wrote on Oct. 22, 2001, that in the non-Taliban areas of northeastern Afghanistan, "heroin refineries—generally run by chemists

Poppy-Growing Areas in Central Asia



from the Mashriqi region of southeastern Nangarhar province—operate under the protection of local commanders." The Mashriqi region is that of Haji Abdul Qadir, Haji Mohammed Zaman, and Hazrat Ali.

Hazrat Ali was one of the main local commanders directing the ground forces attacking the Tora Bora cave stronghold in search of Osama bin Laden during the first phase of the U.S. invasion. Haji Mohammed Zaman bitterly opposed the U.S. bombing of villages under his control. Later, a local *loya jirga* (council), convened under control of Haji Abdul Qadir's eastern *shura*, requested the end of the bombing campaign.

Some local observers claim that the United States struck a deal with Hazrat Ali, allowing him to resume his former drug ties in exchange for his collaboration against al-Qaeda.

Mansoor Ijaz, a Pakistan-born member of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* on Nov. 12, 2001 about the importance of securing the cooperation of local warlords in ousting al-Qaeda from its caves:

“Now that the Northern Alliance has captured Mazar-i-Sharif, the U.S.-led military campaign soon will test how much of the effort can be entrusted to its Afghan allies on the ground and how much of it U.S. forces will have to take up themselves. The willingness of northern Afghan warlords to wage the grueling ground battles needed to smoke al-Qaeda from its caves, will test Afghanistan’s historical tendencies to shift allegiances without notice,” Mansoor Ijaz surmised.

Mansoor Ijaz’s article, and the recruitment of Hazrat Ali, Haji Abdul Qadir—who was later killed in Kabul in 2003 on his first day of work as one of the vice-presidents to the interim Afghan President Hamid Karzai—and Haji Mohammed Zaman by the U.S. troop commanders in the first phase of battle against the Taliban, suggest that it was decided at the outset of the campaign that the United States should avail itself of all the help it could get. No one who is willing to support the United States against the Taliban, should be turned away from receiving Washington’s favor just because the individual is a drug producer or a drug trafficker.

The logic, however, was extended even further. In the later part of 2003, and the entirety of 2004, these warlords were allowed to get fatter and stronger using billions of dollars of opium and heroin money. In other words, Washington told President Karzai to befriend these drug warlords for his survival and to protect the U.S.-led anti-Taliban campaign.

With the Presidential election over, and the Taliban considered a spent force, it is getting increasingly difficult for the United States to justify its continuing close relationship with the drug warlords.

Empty Rhetoric

At the Berlin conference on Afghanistan in April 2004, President Karzai called on the Afghan farmers to fight opium production with the same commitment as they would fight for a *jihad*—a holy war. Karzai has promised the international community to eradicate 25% of the crop in 2004, but experts and observers consider this an optimistic aspiration when the limitations of the national eradication strategy are considered.

At the same time, Washington cannot ignore Moscow’s vocalized anger about the proliferation of Afghan drugs. On Aug. 28, 2003, the *Moscow Times* reported that Russian deputy drug control chief Alexander Mikhailov was bitterly complaining of a rising tide of heroin from Afghanistan that had swept through Russia, with drug traders quickly spreading their operations across the country’s 11 time zones and distributing drugs among young children.

“A heroin attack from the south has become the most acute problem for us,” Mikhailov told reporters in Moscow. During the first half of this year alone, Russian border guards have confiscated 2.9 tons of drugs, half of it heroin. That accounts for roughly 10% of the actual flow, Mikhailov pointed out.

Russia has between 3 million and 4 million drug users out of a population of about 145 million, and the consumption of

heroin has jumped 23 times between 1998 and 2002, Mikhailov said. About 70% of heroin in Russia originated in Afghanistan, which accounts for about three-quarters of the world’s opium, the raw material for producing heroin. While Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad, and Yekaterinburg remain the main drug hubs, many small and medium cities have also developed a drug habit, Mikhailov said.

The UN report on the opium explosion in Afghanistan came on the heels of the U.S. announcement that it would undertake a major new offensive against drug production there. According to one estimate, Washington expects to spend an extra \$780 million in the next fiscal year on measures including the eradication of poppies and alternatives for farmers.

Trouble Ahead

U.S. officials describe the new plan as an across-the-board commitment to support the new Afghan government in its battle against the growing drug trade. The subsistence farmers of Afghanistan, struggling to survive, are the important beneficiaries of this cash crop, and are unlikely to heed Karzai’s call voluntarily. Already, violent protests have taken place in different provinces against the government-led eradication program, when it was being implemented by local officials.

Some claim the protests were also the result of the flood of farmers reporting nasty skin infections in parts of eastern Nangarhar province. The farmers allege that their opium poppies were sprayed with poison from the air earlier this month, destroying food crops, and leaving many with “illnesses such as eye and respiratory problems,” according to a doctor at the 20-bed Khogyani District Hospital.

The Afghan government, on Nov. 18, launched a probe into claims that unidentified foreign troops sprayed fields in Hakimabad and neighboring villages in Khogyani, Shinwar, and Achin districts, in one of the country’s biggest poppy-growing regions. But Nangarhar provincial governor Din Mohammed said there was “no doubt that an aerial spray has taken place.” “I don’t know who might be behind this, but you know it is a fact that the airspace of Afghanistan is under the control of the United States,” he added.

In addition, BBC reported in early November on American plans to take some of the largest drugs barons to the United States to prosecute them there. Robert Charles, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, said recently that aggressive eradication would be backed up by a public information campaign, better law enforcement, and perhaps most crucially, real alternatives for farmers.

“You don’t go in and eradicate in an area without making provision . . . for marked up, or added, alternative development resources, or alternative livelihoods,” Charles added.

Whether anyone in the Bush Administration takes this obvious truth seriously, is another question.