Afghanistan - Drugs Are Good For War

Income from opium is on the rise, fuelling the Taliban resurgence, helping fund Al-Qa'eda and keeping Afghan warlord armies in the field

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In early October, Sher Mohammed Akhunzada, governor of Afghanistan's southern Helmand province, called an urgent meeting. With thousands of Helmand's cash-strapped farmers due to start planting poppies later in the month for next year's opium crop, Akhunzada summoned his administration and invited the United States military, the United Nations and Western non-governmental agencies to ask them for help in money, aid projects and law enforcement to persuade farmers not to go ahead. Until the late 1990s, Helmand produced 40% of Afghanistan's opium, which is refined into heroin.

Some 50 provincial officials showed up, as did a U.S. civil-affairs officer and members of the U.S. special forces. But the meeting included no UN official and only one representative from the international NGO community, which has been forced to drastically curtail travel and aid projects in Helmand due to rising violence by the Taliban and drug traders. Only two days earlier, seven of the governor's troops had been killed by a rocket-propelled grenade fired at their car in northern Helmand-apparently by drug traffickers.

The failure to curb poppy cultivation threatens Afghanistan's stability. UN and U.S. diplomats admit that drug income is fuelling the Taliban's resurgence, helping to fund Al Qaeda and keeping Afghan warlords' armies in the field. "A good deal of the revenue raised through drugs goes to the coffers of warlords and terrorists," says Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime in Vienna. These beneficiaries of the drug trade also earn income from smuggling and from customs and agricultural taxes that are collected but not delivered to the central government.

Not surprisingly, the meeting in Helmand failed to bring the governor-or the province's farmers-substantial aid or any alternative to planting poppies. "In the past two years, nothing significant in reconstruction has been done in Helmand, even though it is most strategic for the country's stability," Akhunzada told the meeting. He pointed out that in the two years since the fall of the Taliban, he has reduced the poppy crop in Helmand, "but while the Taliban are paying their fighters $1,000, I only have promises to offer people, not aid."

In 2002 Afghanistan produced 3,400 tonnes of opium, making up 76% of the world's heroin production. This year's harvest figures, due soon, are likely to see an increase, and next year's crop will be determined by how much is planted in the next few weeks. The situation has been largely ignored due to lack of money or international will. The 11,500 U.S.-led coalition troops in the country and the 5,300 Nato-led peacekeepers in Kabul are not mandated to destroy drug laboratories, disrupt trafficking or help President Hamid Karzai's government take action.

"A dangerous potential exists for Afghanistan to progressively slide into a 'narco-state' where all legitimate institutions become penetrated by the power and wealth of drug traffickers," the International Monetary Fund said in a September report on the Afghan economy.

On a visit to Kabul in September, U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld was asked what the U.S. was doing about drug production. In a rare moment of uncertainty, he replied, "You ask what we're going to do and the answer is, I don't really know."

U.S. Army officials, who have the authority and money to carry out small-scale development projects, say it takes the Pentagon three months and 12 signatures from higher officials to clear

the smallest of projects, such as digging a well.

Without military support, the UN Office of Drugs and Crime has virtually thrown up its hands. Instead, it spends more money tightening border controls in Central Asian states that border Afghanistan than in Afghanistan itself. The agency estimates that last year's opium production was worth $20 billion, earning farmers $1.2 billion. In 2002, the official Afghan economy grew 30%, but adding the opium trade would raise the figure to 60%, according to the IMF.

The 300,000 residents of Lashkargah, in the Helmand River valley, live with no electricity, running water or paved roads, cloaked in a permanent pall of dust. But the poverty is deceptive. In the centre of town, thousands of vehicles sit ready for sale-the latest four-wheel drives, pick-up trucks and Mercedes-Benz luxury cars. Pashtun men, surrounded by bodyguards, buy several vehicles at a time, paying cash.

The Helmand River valley is the key to preventing poppy production. In the 1950s the U.S. Agency for International Development built a dam on Kajaki Lake, where the river starts in north Helmand. It was a highly successful project. Millions of hectares of land on either side of the Helmand River became immensely fertile and Helmand became the fruit-and-bread basket for Afghanistan. Hundreds of Americans and their families lived in Lashkargah in the 1950s and 1960s; the former U.S. AID building still boasts a dance floor, a cinema, a bar and a library-all now in disuse.

During the war with the former Soviet Union in the 1980s, Helmand's irrigation system collapsed and farmers began planting poppies, which had always been produced in Afghanistan in small quantities for use in traditional medicine. By the mid-1990s, Helmand was producing 40% of the country's crop.

In the 1980s, "Helmand became a poppy laboratory as its farmers spread their knowledge to other provinces," says Steve Shaulis, who heads the Central Asia Development Group (CADG), an agency carrying out agricultural reconstruction. "Today, poppy production is a countrywide activity." Shaulis, the only Western civilian at the governor's meeting, is trying to turn the tide by providing farmers the means to grow cash crops, process them to add value and then export them. "We can't stop farmers growing poppies, we can only take their arguments for growing poppies away one by one, by offering real alternatives," says Shaulis.

CADG, with U.S. and British aid money, has tripled cotton production in Helmand with new seeds and expertise, and Helmand almonds and dried apricots are now sold in Europe and the Far East. The profits are ploughed back into the projects, while separate U.S. funds go to community work.

Farmers are being encouraged to grow two cash crops a year and to plant orchards-which take time to grow but are highly lucrative-to make up for the loss of income from poppies. "We follow an integrated approach to developing agricultural products, developing infrastructure and marketing in one package," says Shaulis.

But continuing with poppy production is easiest when the country's agriculture has been shattered by 23 years of war, and a recent drought. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that Afghanistan's arable land area fell by 37% during the war from 1979. To make matters worse, 60% of Afghanistan's cattle died in the 2000-02 drought.

Until Western countries and military forces help the Kabul government with law enforcement, more money directed at agricultural restoration and a strong message of zero tolerance for drug trafficking, the efforts of NGOs are a drop in the ocean. Nato, which has recently committed to expanding peacekeeping outside Kabul, has yet to decide whether it will intervene in drug trafficking.

"Farmers are waiting to see what message is given by President Karzai, the international community and the U.S. military about incentives not to plant poppies," says Shaulis. "If there is no tough message, no aid and no law enforcement, farmers will shrug and go ahead."