

Why Afghanistan's neighbours fear drugs influx

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The fear is that more drugs could be finding their way out of Afghanistan via Central Asia

Could increased fighting in northern Afghanistan lead to an influx of drugs transiting through Tajikistan and Central Asia to Russia and Europe? That is the worry of senior officials in the region.

"The drug situation depends on Afghanistan, because all the drugs we catch come from Afghanistan," Lt Gen Rustum Nazarov, head of Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency, told me in Dushanbe.

He said that Afghanistan already produces 90% of the world's opium and that flow could increase if the Afghan government loses control of the porous Afghan-Tajik border, much of it formed only by the Panj river.

Hundreds of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and Central Asian fighters from half a dozen different groups have seized control of large tracts of the northern Afghan provinces which border Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

"We are looking at a worsening military situation in Afghanistan and the flow of drugs will increase the more the warlords and extremists get to control the Afghan side of the border," said Gen Nazarov.

Much of the funding for these militant groups comes from drug trafficking, according to Gen Nazarov and Western diplomats in Dushanbe. The Central Asian militant groups are the prime traffickers for drugs heading to Russia, Europe and, increasingly, to China as well.

"All the Central Asian groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Ansarullah, as well as the various factions of the Taliban and Islamic State, are involved in trafficking drugs," Gen Nazarov said.

Islamic State is a relatively new player in the region and has been extending its influence in Afghanistan in recent months. In times past Afghans would only deliver drug shipments to the border and hand them over to Central Asian groups, but now Afghans representing the Taliban and other Afghan groups are living in Moscow and other towns in Russia, according to Tajik drugs officials, in order to get a share of the huge profits that ensue once the drugs reach Russia and Europe.

The price of heroin rises from \$20,000 (£12,800) per kilogram on the Tajik-Afghan border to an astronomical \$400,000 in Paris or London. International traffickers are now being eased out of the business in Europe by Afghans and Central Asians working directly with the sources of supply in Afghanistan, says Tajik drugs officials and Western diplomats in Dushanbe.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned recently that "the volume of drug production in Afghanistan is growing at a threatening pace and the income is being absorbed not only by terrorist groups in the country, but also beyond its borders". In 2014 the Tajik Drug Control Agency caught six tonnes of heroin and opium but that is still a miniscule share of the 6,500 tonnes produced in Afghanistan.

'Worsening'

The UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says that the total area under cultivation for opium in Afghanistan rose by 7% in 2014, even though production is largely confined to only nine of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

General Nazarov estimates that 20-22% of Afghan drugs exit for Europe through the northern route via Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Another 45% goes through Iran and some 38% goes through Pakistan. It is impossible to verify such figures - other drug control agencies do not release estimates.

The Tajik Drug Control Agency is one of the star performing organs of a government in which corruption and inefficiency is generally widespread. The agency has been praised by the UNODC, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, as well as the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation.

Gen Nazarov recounted a time during the Soviet era in the 1970s when Tajik border guards caught only 10-15 kilograms of drugs a year - and most of that was marijuana. He says the flow of opium and heroin started after the civil war in Afghanistan began in the 1990s.

The first heroin was caught on the Tajik border in 1995. The Drug Control Agency was set up four years later. What angers officials in Russia and Central Asia is the question of why Nato and US forces did not deal more effectively with the drug problem after they arrived in Afghanistan in 2001.

"They had no policy towards curbing drugs and now we have to deal with an ever worsening situation," says Gen Nazarov. The drugs epidemic is likely to get worse. Both China and Russia are experiencing huge increases in domestic drug addiction, which provides traffickers with a new market and further incentives.

There is still no international plan on how to end the continuing increase in drugs production in Afghanistan itself. Until that happens Afghanistan's neighbours will continue to suffer.

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