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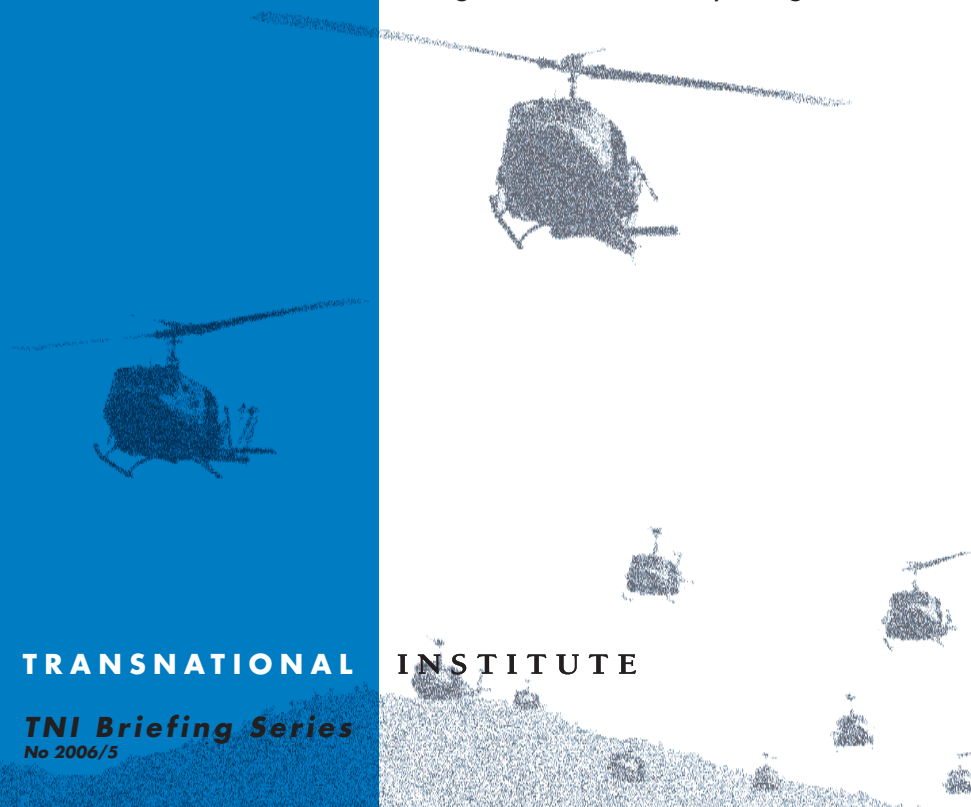
Losing Ground Drug Control and War in Afghanistan

Drugs and Democracy Programme



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This publication makes use of the many informal talks TNI has had with officials involved in policy making around Afghanistan and drug control. Given the highly politicised nature of the issues, we chose open conversations over formal interviews in the interests of gaining a deeper understanding of the policy dilemmas at stake. We do not publically credit by name, therefore, many of those officials cited in this briefing.

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A dramatic upsurge in opium poppy cultivation and the unexpectedly forceful Taliban offensive in Afghanistan have triggered a wave of panic that is sweeping through the international community.

At a press conference to announce the opium figures for 2006, which are the highest ever recorded, Antonio Maria Costa, head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), called for *“robust military action by NATO forces to destroy the opium industry in southern Afghanistan.”* Costa stated that in southern Afghanistan, counterinsurgency and counter-narcotics efforts *“must reinforce each other so as to stop the vicious circle of drugs funding terrorists and terrorists protecting drug traffickers,”* which was *“dragging the rest of Afghanistan into a bottomless pit of destruction and despair.”*¹ Stressing the need for more development assistance to farmers and for strengthening efforts to curb heroin demand, Costa specified that he did not see a role for foreign troops or UNODC to engage directly in the eradication of poppy fields. However, he said: *“I call on NATO forces to destroy the heroin labs, disband the open opium bazaars, attack the opium convoys and bring to justice the big traders. I invite coalition countries to give NATO the mandate and resources required.”*

At the same press conference, Thomas Schweich of the US State Department called for more aggressive eradication efforts. *“While we agree that we must improve our interdiction capacity, the simple truth is that eradication is much easier. The fields are easy to find... The poppy field is the true and literal root of the problem and we must go after it aggressively. ... If we wait to attack this problem, the ties between the narcotics community and the insurgency will grow stronger. ... We must hit hard and hit now, or we will prolong our efforts both in terms of time and lives lost.”*²

This Drugs & Conflict briefing takes a closer look at the recent, worrying dynamics in Afghanistan:

the all-time record opium harvest this year, the fierce battles going on in the south of the country, and the problematic international policy responses exemplified by the quotes above. The main focuses of the briefing are on the opium elimination efforts in the country, and the controversy about involving military forces in anti-drugs operations. In addition, there are smaller sections providing background information on related drug control issues, such as the Afghan national drug control strategy, its new counter-narcotics law, and the role of Afghanistan within the global opiates market. The final chapter offers some overall conclusions and recommendations.

It sometimes feels as though politicians look at the Taliban, drug traffickers and opium fields with a similar distorted logic – viewing each of them as malign elements, which have to be killed, arrested and eradicated to reduce their numbers until the problem disappears. But the causes underlying the current developments in Afghanistan are deep-rooted and complex, and quick fix solutions based on this destructive logic are illusory. After some initial promising steps, peace-building efforts, reconstruction and sustainable approaches to reduce the country's dependence on the opium economy are now rapidly losing ground.

The warnings were already in the air in 2005. The Afghan Deputy Minister of Interior for Counter-Narcotics General Muhammad Daoud, said: *“People will need other sources of income as soon as possible, or we'll be the witness to a big disaster.”*³ And General James Jones, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, was quoted last year saying that if *“you pull at the thread of counter-narcotics the wrong way ... you should be careful of unintended consequences.”*⁴ As we speak, forced eradication operations are being prepared for the coming months before the poppy can be harvested. It is time to rethink some of the strategies now being put in place, which risk further escalating the spread of insecurity and undermining reconstruction in Afghanistan.

¹ UNODC, *UN drugs chief calls for extra resources to help NATO target Afghan opium*, Press Release, Brussels, 12 September 2006.

² Schweich, Thomas A., Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006, Remarks at United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Press Event*, Brussels, Belgium, September 12, 2006.

³ Quoted in: Aizenman, N.C., *Afghans Report Decline of Poppy Crop, Officials Credit Karzai's Appeals, but Warn Aid Is Needed to Ensure Success*, Washington Post, 6 February 2005.

⁴ The Financial Times, *Poppy Crackdown Could Alienate Warlords And Imperil Afghan Poll, Say US Generals*, 3 January 2005.

"Eradication has not worked anywhere; it has only created social conflict. It will be another war against drugs. And who in this country needs another war?"
(Leo Brandenburg, Project for Alternative Livelihoods Team Leader, Jalalabad)

"Stopping poppy cultivation has two sides, good and bad. The good side is because it is bad for human beings, and not good for the world. Therefore it is better to stop opium cultivation. But the bad side is for people like us. We are very poor, and we have no other possibilities."
(Farmer in Dar-e-Noor District, Nangarhar Province)

Today, I thank God for getting the harvest this year", said Gul Agha, a farmer in Helmand province who harvested 90 kilograms of raw opium in May 2006.¹ Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium, and recent reports indicate that production in 2006 has set a new record. According to UNODC, opium cultivation covered an estimated 165,000 hectares in the 2005/2006 growing season, a 59 per cent increase on the previous season. UNODC estimates that opium production rose from 4,100 metric tons during the 2005 harvest to 6,100 metric tons in 2006, representing 92 per cent of world production.²

It is hard to find reliable data on any issue in Afghanistan, and opium cultivation and production figures are no exception. These numbers should therefore be treated with caution, but the consistently high production figures in Afghanistan over the last 15 years (with the exception of the 2001 Taliban opium ban) are a clear indication of the magnitude of the problem, which is impossible to solve overnight.

The failure to bring down opium production in Afghanistan has resulted in huge international pressure on the government of Afghanistan to increase repressive drug control programmes, including eradication and the strict implementation of opium bans. But this pressure for quick

solutions is unrealistic and, from a military, economic, and social perspective, unwanted.

*"You do not have the time that you have in other countries to solve it", says a US official in Kabul. "The drugs problem will take ten years to fix, maybe 20 years. But we've got to do something in the short term to get a reduction in opium production."*³ It is not only the US that wants instant results. There is a similar feeling among some diplomats from EU member states: *"The Afghanistan government has committed itself to a reduction in opium production. It has to go down, and there is no political time and space to wait for development."*⁴

The resultant, repressive policies will have a major negative impact on the livelihoods of opium farmers. By pursuing a reduction in opium production without first securing rural livelihoods, there is also a strong risk that such policies will not be sustainable, and may further contribute to the declining security situation in the country.

Regional Differences

There are significant regional differences in opium cultivation in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the opium economy has shown itself to be quite dynamic, with several shifts in the pattern of cultivation levels. The main increase in cultivation has taken place in southern Afghanistan, where armed conflict has increased.

Nangarhar, Helmand and Kandahar provinces have traditionally been the main opium growing regions in Afghanistan. But while opium production (in metric tons) in Nangarhar province has declined significantly in the last three years, the southern province of Helmand has seen a sharp increase in opium cultivation over the same period. Opium cultivation has also spread from just eight major producing provinces ten years ago to 28 of the country's 34 provinces by 2006. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase in cultivation in the north, especially in Balkh province, traditionally not a major opium producing region, which became the third largest producing area

¹ Abdul Samad Rohani, *Poppy Growers get Bumper Yield in Helmand*, Pajhwok Afghan News, May 2, 2006.

² Or 82 per cent of global cultivation (in ha). UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, Executive Summary, September 2006.

³ Interview with a US official, Kabul, May 2006.

⁴ Interview with a diplomat from EU member state, Kabul, May 2006.

in 2005.⁵ In 2006 the provinces with the highest cultivation levels (in ha) were Helmand, Kandahar, Farah and Uruzgan in the south, and Balkh and Badakshan in the north.⁶

Nangarhar was reported to be the second largest opium producing province in 2003-2004, representing about one fifth of total production.⁷ While political and socio-economic instability contribute to large-scale opium cultivation in eastern Afghanistan, the lack of security and law enforcement are not the only reason for it. It *"would be wrong to assume the expansion in opium poppy cultivation is simply a function of the absence of legal constraints. Drought, increasing population pressure, falling wheat prices and the absence of secure alternative sources*

*of income have all coincided to create the environment in which fewer and fewer households in eastern Afghanistan believe they can meet their basic needs without recourse to opium poppy cultivation."*⁸

Yet Nangarhar saw an astonishing 96 per cent decrease in production the following year. The strict implementation of a nation-wide ban on opium cultivation by the then provincial governor of Nangarhar, Haji Din Mohammad (relieved of his duties in June 2005), was largely responsible for this decline. Some observers attribute this to the fact that the former governor was a friend of Karzai with ministerial ambitions, who therefore decided to take bold steps to curb production. Apart from the threat of eradication, local leaders promised farmers that significant amounts of aid would follow their compliance with the ban. There is also speculation that the ban was feasible because the previous year had seen a bumper harvest in the province, so there was still a considerable opium stock around to absorb the shock.

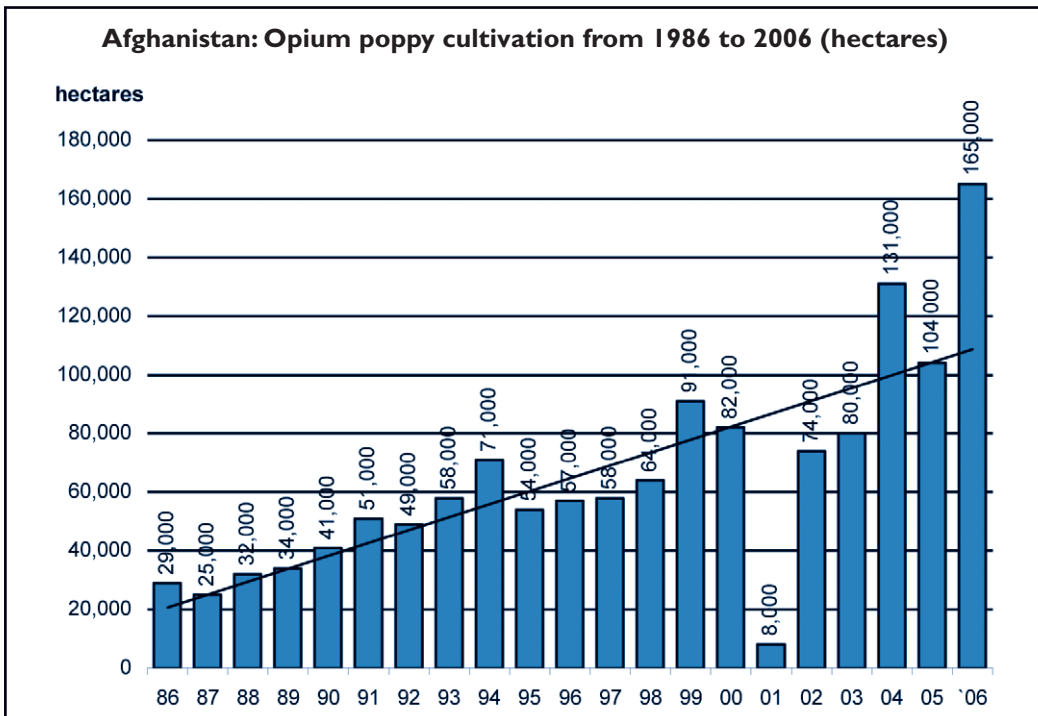
⁵ Weir, A., *Licit Livelihoods in an Opium Economy: Alternative Livelihoods in Afghanistan*, Chief Technical Advisor, FAO Alternative Agricultural Livelihoods Programme, Kabul, Afghanistan, May 2006, and: UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, Executive Summary, September 2006.

⁶ UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, Executive Summary, September 2006.

⁷ Mansfield, D., *Pariah or Poverty? The Opium Ban in the Province Nangarhar in 2004/05 Growing Season and its Impact on Rural Livelihood Strategies*, Project for Alternative Livelihoods in Eastern Afghanistan (PAL), Development-oriented Drug Control Programme (DDC), Policy Brief No.1, Jalalabad/Eschborn, September 2005.

⁸ Mansfield, D., *Diversity and Dilemma: Understanding Rural Livelihoods and Addressing the Causes of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Nangarhar and Laghman, Eastern Afghanistan*, PAL – Internal Document No.2., December 2004.

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It is clear, however, that powerful drug trading networks are responsive to the changing environment and profit from the absence of security and lack of rule of law. *"This increase in production and the spread of cultivation throughout the country indicates the power and capacity of the so-called 'drugs mafia' in Afghanistan... [There] are clear indications that the relocation of production to the north in general and to Balkh province in particular is encouraged by the provision of technical support, credit and improved poppy seeds by experienced farmers from Nangarhar."*⁹ The same report states that there is also evidence that Nangarhari traffickers have become increasingly involved in the production and export of heroin.

By contrast, the southern provinces, especially Helmand, have seen a huge increase in opium production recently. A mixture of force and the promise of development aid had brought down cultivation in Helmand province from an estimated 30,000 ha in the 2001-2002 growing season to approximately 15,000 ha during 2002-2003. However, this proved unsustainable. Cultivation went back up to about 30,000 ha the following year.¹⁰ Cultivation levels continue to rise. At the time of the 2006 harvest a British drugs official predicted: *"It's going to be massive. My guess is it's going to be the biggest ever."*¹¹

This assessment proved to be correct, with a 2006 cultivation level of 69,000 ha, more than double the 2005 figure of 26,500 ha and surpassing the previous record cultivation level of an estimated 45,000 hectares in 1999. According to 2006 UNODC figures, Helmand is now the largest producing area in the country and, indeed, the world, surpassing Burma, the world's second largest producer, where opium cultivation during the same period further declined to an estimated 21,500 ha.¹²

There are significant differences in opium cultivation within provinces, with changes in pro-

duction levels determined by a complex set of factors. Within districts, even down to the individual household level, cultivation levels may differ greatly, and therefore may merit a different approach. Without acknowledging these differences, it is not only highly questionable whether efforts to stem production levels will produce any sustainable results; they may in fact be counter-productive.

The World Bank has classified rural households involved in the opium economy in Afghanistan into three types: (1) "better off" and not dependent; (2) less affluent but not dependent; and (3) poor and highly dependent.¹³ Generally speaking, farmers in the first category have other sources of income apart from opium, live in the centre of the district or province, have better access to services, land and irrigation, and markets where they can sell agricultural products and labour. Farmers in categories (2) and (3) do not have such opportunities, and need alternative sources of income.

A recent study suggests that poppy cultivation is diminishing in districts where the population has better access to assets, including governance and security. In some provinces, there has been progress in reducing opium cultivation in the more accessible and wealthier districts while, at the same time, cultivation levels have increased in the more remote districts.¹⁴ This centre-periphery classification adequately describes what is happening in Nangarhar province where, after two subsequent years of declining aggregate opium cultivation levels, opium cultivation has increased again in outlying mountainous areas. However, in areas closer to the provincial centre, where there is often better access to land, irrigation, commodity and labour markets, the reductions in opium cultivation have been sustained. The overall cultivation level in Nangarhar province (estimated to be around 5,000 ha in 2006) has not returned to its peak level of 28,000 ha, reached in the 2003-2004 growing season. These distinctions do not apply in southern Afghanistan, however, where armed conflict has increased and the ability

⁹ Weir, A., op.cit.

¹⁰ Mansfield, D., *What is Driving Opium Poppy Cultivation? The Pressures to Reduce Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan in the 2004/05 Growing Season*, Independent Consultant, A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government, March 2005.

¹¹ Walsh, D., *Afghan Province to Provide One-third of World's Heroin*, The Guardian (UK), June 14, 2006.

¹² UNODC, *Executive Summary Golden Triangle Opium Survey 2006*.

¹³ World Bank, *Treating the Opium Problem in World Bank Operations in Afghanistan*, Guideline Note, 2006.

¹⁴ Mansfield, D., *Exploring 'Shades of Grey': An Assessment of the Factors Influencing Decisions to Cultivate Opium Poppy in 2005/2006*, Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit (UK Government), February 2006.

of the government to provide services is almost absent. *“There is a real danger that achievements at the district and provincial level in some parts of the country may be obscured beneath the headline total cultivation figure”*, the report warns.¹⁵

Declining Security in the South

The situation in the south is incomparable to the rest of the country. The increase in armed conflict and the lack of a government presence outside of provincial capitals, in terms of access to as well as the delivery of government services, have all greatly contributed to the increase in opium cultivation in the south.

While the provincial governors, representing the state, are engaged in eradication efforts, anti-government elements have allegedly stimulated the rural population in the south to increase opium cultivation. There have been allegations that the Taliban has tried to stimulate opium cultivation in the south by issuing so-called *shabnameh* (‘night letters’), offering protection for those who decide to grow poppies, and at the same time threatening people that do not comply. This presents farmers with a difficult dilemma. *“We don’t know what to do. The government tells us not to cultivate poppy, the Taliban tells us we should. If we don’t cultivate the Taliban will kill us, if we do the government will only destroy our crop.”*¹⁶ According to a Western military source: *“Opium growing has become a political issue. If you grow opium, you are against the government. If you do not grow it you are with the government.”*¹⁷

According to an Afghan doctor from Helmand: *“The Taliban are encouraging people to grow poppy, because the government want to stop it and the Taliban are against this policy. For the Taliban it is a golden chance to attack the US. The Taliban told the farmers, you should grow as much opium as you can; if you do not grow opium we will do something against you.”*¹⁸

Drug networks operate in an unstable environment. Both anti-government elements and drug traders exploit the same space. However, there is so far only anecdotal evidence that the Taliban has stimulated farmers to grow opium. There is also no sound evidence of large-scale Taliban involvement in the drug trade. *“There should be a natural alliance between drug traffickers and Taliban – both benefit from instability”*, says a US official in Kabul. *“But I think the Taliban is not a major player in the drug trade, and I do not see it from Al Qaeda either. It is drug criminals who are doing it, and they have some relations with the Taliban.”*¹⁹

It is also a misconception to suppose that the Taliban is behind all armed resistance to the Afghan government and the international security forces in Afghanistan. Rather, the armed resistance is instigated by various actors, including criminals, deposed warlords, the Taliban, and other people staging a “genuine rebellion” against the government in Kabul. There are also many local tribal conflicts. The population growth of the last few years, combined with three years of drought and the worsening security situation, have resulted in increased land pressure. Local conflicts are often about the rights to land and water, both of which are in short supply.

This picture is confirmed by a Western military source. *“I am a bit vague about how to characterise the anti-government opposition. There are a lot of grey areas. When conflict happens, people often blame the other side as belonging to the Taliban, but what they are saying is, this other tribe is Taliban.”*²⁰

The lack of security in the south is not something new. In fact, large areas of the Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces have been ungoverned spaces since the removal of the Taliban. *“What you have is a perception of the security situation going down”*, says a Western military source. *“Because of [the Western military] presence there now, the friction builds up. But it has always been latently there.”*²¹



¹⁵ Ibid. p. i.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁷ Interview with Western military source, Kabul, May 2006.

¹⁸ Interview with Dr. Gul Kahn, Kabul, May 2006.

¹⁹ Interview with US official, Kabul, May 2006.

²⁰ Interview with a Western military source, Kabul, May 2006.

²¹ Interview with a Western military source, Kabul, May 2006.

Poppies and Poverty

Afghanistan is a poor country by any standards. Decades of destruction by civil war have caused great hardships for the Afghan population. The World Bank estimates that around 3.5 million rural Afghans are extremely poor, another 10.5 million are vulnerable to extreme poverty, and the remaining 3.5 million people, while less poor, are nonetheless still vulnerable to poverty.²² Afghanistan has one of the lowest human development indicators in the world. It was ranked near the bottom of the 2004 UNDP Human Development Index, above only Burundi, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sierra Leone. According to that report: *“with respect to poverty, the majority of the Afghan population can be classified as poor.”*²³

Despite this, some international observers feel that many of the farmers in Afghanistan who grow opium do not need to do so. They therefore propagate more repressive measures, including the eradication of opium fields, arguing that farmers in some areas who now grow opium never did so in the past. *“Farmers are breaking the law; there is a need and greed aspect to it. In the past, there was no poppy everywhere. There has been a lot of expansion, which is really activity that is beyond a need. It is not as simple as saying the farmers have needs and it is the only thing they can grow. There are farmers that want a TV or a motorcycle.”*²⁴

UNODC has even gone so far as to claim that: *“While poverty remains a key factor for poppy cultivation at the farm level, there is no causal relationship between poverty and cultivation.”*²⁵ In the 2006

Afghan opium survey, the agency states: *“The largest opium poppy cultivation provinces are not the poorest. Village survey data on income in the previous year show that the average annual income of opium poppy growing households in 2005 was 36 per cent higher than non-growing households.”*²⁶

Following this line of thinking, poverty is simply seen as a function of income. Such narrow definitions of poverty are hopelessly outdated. Current definitions of poverty include a whole range of socio-economic and security related factors that define the ability of people to live with dignity. Other UN agencies and the World Bank now commonly use such definitions.

Poverty is not only deprivation of economic or material resources but a violation of human dignity too

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR): *“Economic deprivation – lack of income – is a standard feature of most definitions of poverty. But this in itself does not take account of the myriad of social, cultural and political aspects of the phenomenon.*

*Poverty is not only deprivation of economic or material resources but a violation of human dignity too.”*²⁷ In a 2001 document the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defined poverty as *“a human condition characterized by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.”*²⁸

“Human poverty”, the 2004 UNDP National Human Development Report for Afghanistan explains, *“is a multidimensional problem that includes inequalities in access to productive assets and social services; poor health, education and nutrition status; weak social protection systems; vulnerability to macro-*

²² World Bank, Afghanistan; *Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment*, Human Development Unit, South Asia Region, March 7, 2005.

²³ UNDP, Afghanistan; *National Human Development Report 2004; Security with a Human Face: Challenges and Responsibilities*. Afghanistan ranked 173 of the 177 countries included.

²⁴ Interview with representative of international agency, May 2006.

²⁵ UNODC, *Strategic Planning Framework for Afghanistan*, August 2006, p. 3.

²⁶ UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, Executive Summary, September 2006, p. 28.

²⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *What is Poverty? Human Rights in Development*, <http://www.unhcr.ch/development/poverty-02.html>

²⁸ United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2001). *Poverty and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 10/05/2001, 10 May 2001, E/C.12/2001/10.

and micro-level risks; human displacement; gender inequities and political marginalisation.”²⁹

While there may be some opium-growing households that have a relatively higher income than non-growing households, these would still be classified as being poor because of a whole range of other factors. According to the World Bank: *“Poverty in Afghanistan is multidimensional, involving a complex interplay between low assets (physical, financial and human), years of insecurity and drought, indebtedness, poor infrastructure and public services, traditional roles and other factors.”*³⁰

At the launch of the 2006 Afghan Opium Survey at a press conference in Brussels, UNODC Chief Costa repeated the claim that there is no self-evident relationship between poverty and poppy cultivation. The Afghan government clearly does not share this point of view, however, and the Afghan Minister of Counter Narcotics (MCN), H.E. Habibullah Qadiri, who was also present, publicly contradicted him.³¹

Afghan government officials also disagree with UNODC figures claiming that the income of poppy growing farmers is much higher than that of farmers who grow other crops, such as wheat. *“This is a very artificial calculation”,* says Mohammad Ehsan Zia, Afghan Minister for Rural Rehabilitation and Development. *“Farmers who grow opium lose other possible sources of income. For example, agriculture and animal husbandry go hand in hand in Afghanistan. Farmers who grow other crops can also keep animals, such as a dairy cow, a donkey for transportation, goats or sheep. But if they grow poppy they don’t have fodder from their plants to feed the animals. Instead they have to buy it, and if they lack the money they have to sell their animals. We must not only focus on what people get from their land but also on other possible sources of income.”*³²

‘The Greedy not the Needy’

Eradication in Afghanistan is the responsibility of the Afghan government. It is seen as a law enforcement job, and is carried out by the US-controlled Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). According to Deputy Interior Minister for Counter Narcotics Gen. Muhammed Daoud, who is responsible for the programme: *“Those who cultivate poppy, they invite instability, terror and corruption to their provinces which inhibits social and economic reconstruction of their own community.”*³³

The Afghan President Hamid Karzai has told provincial governors that they need to reduce opium cultivation in their respective provinces. Provincial governors have further delegated the responsibility for reduction of poppy cultivation to the district authorities. In many cases they have been told that they could be dismissed if poppy was to be found in their districts. These district authorities, in turn, summon elderly tribal leaders and *shura* members from the villages to convince them not to grow opium. According to one report, district leaders promised that assistance from the Afghan government or the international community would be forthcoming if they complied with the opium ban. *“Fieldwork suggests that once the season began and some farmers started cultivating opium poppy, tribal elders and the shura members from each village were once again summoned to the district centre and told that villagers should eradicate their opium poppy or face arrest.”*³⁴

Government officials acknowledge that the ban will create hardships for local communities dependent on growing opium, but feel that this kind of pressure is needed to stop it. According to Dr. Mohammed Zafar from the Ministry of Counter Narcotics: *“Drugs cause corruption and create instability in our country, that is why we should use force too. However, this should be balanced with the livelihoods of the farmers. First we should target the traffickers. But at the same time the farmers should be educated. I know that there are problems for the farmers. But at the*

²⁹ UNDP, Op.cit. p 4.

³⁰ World Bank, *Afghanistan: Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection*, p ii.

³¹ Press conference in Brussels of the 2006 Afghan Opium Survey UNODC, 12 September 2006.

³² Tillmann Elliesen, *“Afghanistan must sit in the driver’s seat”*, Interview with Mohammad Ehsan Zia, Minister for Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, October 1, 2006.

³³ Pajhwok Afghan News, *Over 8,500 hectares of poppy crop destroyed*, May 15, 2006.

³⁴ Mansfield, D., *What is Driving Opium Poppy Cultivation?*

same time there are problems for our national interest also.”³⁵

The eradication efforts are part of the Afghan National Drugs Control Strategy, which is supported by the international community. The Central Eradication Poppy Monitoring (CEPM) Cell provides information on eradication targets, using criteria developed by the Ministry of Counter Narcotics, under whose wing it operates. The CEPM is co-funded by the UK. According to Peter Holland, head of the UK Government's Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit (ADIDU): “The area that we are particularly focussing on is providing targeted information to make sure that any eradication is carried out in areas where alternative livelihoods already exist, so it is targeting those we describe as the greedy, not the needy. We also support UNODC and the government of Afghanistan to verify that eradication has taken place.”³⁶

UNODC estimates that by mid-2006 the Afghan government had eradicated 15,000 hectares of poppy, three times more than the previous year.³⁷ Holland estimates the “eradicable” area at some 50,000 hectares, but says the lack of capacity makes it impossible to eradicate more than what is being done now. “We are going to look into what was planned, and what was carried out. There are issues of access and capacity. Target areas are in fact areas that have easy access.”³⁸

Eradication efforts have differed from area to area. As provincial governors are mainly in charge of the eradication, the response therefore differs from province to province. While some governors have actively supported the eradication campaign, others have decided to ignore it. According to an Afghan economist: “Some governors are not doing anything, they may benefit from it, or their friends may benefit from it.”³⁹ A 2006 study

further suggests that eradication has taken place in an inconsistent way, not only at the provincial level but even at the village level. The majority of farmers that were interviewed for the research felt that most eradication was targeted against “the poor” and people living near the road.⁴⁰ Other research has confirmed the inconsistent pattern of eradication.⁴¹ According to a study on Helmand and Ghor provinces, eradication, and possibly also interdiction, has given powerful local actors greater control over the opium economy.⁴²

Creating a Risk

The total eradication during the 2005-2006 growing season was estimated by UNODC at some 15,000 ha, which is less than 10 per cent of the estimated 165,000 hectares that were harvested. According to one international observer in Kabul: “You had four years of failed eradication. This year [there is] more eradication, but poppy production is also up. Eradication will hardly effect the total production.”⁴³

While calls for an eradication-led approach are getting louder, there is no empirical evidence that this will actually lead to a reduction in opium cultivation. On the contrary, experience from the field shows that the simultaneous use of alternative development and eradication – often referred to as the ‘carrot and stick approach’ – is counterproductive. A thematic evaluation on alternative development by UNODC found that: “Alternative development projects led by security and other non-development concerns were typically not sustainable — and might result in the spread or return of illicit crops or in the materialization of other adverse conditions, including less security.”⁴⁴

“We need to be very clear on what we want to

³⁵ Interview with Dr. Mohammed Zafar, Director of Drug Demand Reduction, Ministry of Counter Narcotics, Kabul, May 14, 2006.

³⁶ Answers by Mr Peter Holland, head of Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (ADIDU) Defence Committee: Evidence, 7 March 2006.

³⁷ UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, Executive Summary, September 2006, p. 17.

³⁸ Interview with Peter Holland, Head of ADIDU, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London 28 April 2006.

³⁹ Interview with Afghan representative of the World Bank, May 2006.

⁴⁰ Mansfield, D., *Exploring ‘Shades of Grey’*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Senlis Council, *Helmand at War, The Changing Nature of Insurgency in Southern Afghanistan and its Effects on the Future of the Country*, London, June 2006, p. 43-45.

⁴² Pain, A., *Opium Trading Systems in Helmand and Ghor*, AREU, Kabul, January 2006, p. 21.

⁴³ Interview with international representative in Kabul, 16 May 2006.

⁴⁴ United Nations, *Alternative Development: A Global Thematic Evaluation*, Final Synthesis Report, New York 2005, ISBN 92-1-148205-4.

achieve with eradication”, warns a Western military source in Kabul.⁴⁵ But it is often unclear what the exact goal of eradication is supposed to be. Is it to reduce opium cultivation by physically destroying part of the crop? Does it aim to create a risk-factor associated with opium cultivation, in order to discourage farmers from growing poppies? Or is the aim to reduce the funds that will finance anti-state groups?

Western diplomats are quick to stress that eradication is only part of the strategy. *“Counter narcotic policy is not eradication first. By eradicating in targeted areas, you are creating a risk. Alternative livelihoods on their own are not going to make people jump ship... If I could generate a risk for a farmer other than eradication, I would. But if a farmer has access to means to grow other crops, access to land, water etc, for them eradication should be there to tip them over the edge.”*⁴⁶

Under the new narcotics law, it is also an offence for a landowner to force people or tell people to grow poppy. *“We need to send warning shots, that if we discover poppy growing on [someone’s] land, they will go to jail.”*⁴⁷

Experience from the field in Afghanistan shows that this assessment does not hold, however. The risk of eradication is not, by definition, a central determinant in household decisions to grow opium. According to a 2006 study: *“Simply looking at the risk that destruction of the crop imposes on rural households is insufficient, as a farmer will not associate any real financial costs with the loss of crop unless there are other legal income opportunities available.”* Rather, this report argues, *“the risk associated with the insecurity context in which most opium poppy farmers live is a central determinant of their behaviour and raises deep questions about the very notion of ‘legality’.”*⁴⁸

We need to send warning shots, that if we discover poppy growing on someone’s land, they will go to jail

The same report suggests that in some cases, especially in areas with poor markets, eradication can even lead to an increase in opium cultivation to recover from previous loss of income that was caused by eradication. *“What has to be addressed is the very ‘riskiness’ of the context (social, market and institutional relations) in which most farmers take decisions... One cannot speak of creating legal livelihoods until there is a legal and legitimate context within they can function.”*⁴⁹

The eradication of opium fields in 2006 was taking place until the end of the harvest period. Farmers whose fields were eradicated close to harvest time were hit extra hard, as they had already invested their capital and labour into opium cultivation. Furthermore, due the shortage of water in many areas, farmers were unable to grow another crop. *“We grow poppy now because at the moment*

there is water, but not after this period”, said a young farmer in Achin District, whose opium field was eradicated just before the harvest. *“When the rain comes, we will grow corn. Otherwise we do not grow anything, because we have a problem with water here.”*⁵⁰

According to a doctor from Helmand: *“Farmers say: ‘why didn’t you eradicate my field when the poppy plants were still small, so we could have had a chance to grow something else’. People spend a lot of money on this.”*⁵¹ Western diplomats admit the problem: *“Some eradication was done at the end of the harvest. We would like to see eradication as early as possible, so farmers can still grow other crops. My preference would be four weeks after planting.”*⁵²

The Ugly Cloud of Spraying

Afghanistan’s growing opium production has

⁴⁵ Interview with Western Military source, Kabul, May 2006.

⁴⁶ Interview with a Western Diplomat, Kabul, May 2006.

⁴⁷ Interview with a Western Diplomat, Kabul, May 2006.

⁴⁸ Mansfield, D., and Pain, A., *Opium Poppy Eradication: How to raise risk when there is nothing to lose?* AREU Briefing Paper, August 2006, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 8.

⁵⁰ Interview with a farmer in Achin District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁵¹ Interview with a doctor from Helmand Province, 14 May 2006.

⁵² Interview with a Western diplomat, Kabul, May 2006.

also brought up the issue of the aerial spraying of opium crops. “What is on the horizon is the ugly cloud of spraying”, says a US diplomat. However, President Karzai has publicly stated he is against it, arguing that spraying would create a health risk to children and adults in villages that were already poor.⁵³

Experience from Colombia shows that aerial fumigation has not led to a decrease in coca production levels. Instead, it has caused human, social and environmental destruction. It has created a vicious circle, leading from fumigation to pollution, and from there to destruction of rural livelihoods, migration, deforestation, illicit crop cultivation and finally to more fumigation. In this process, fumigation has further contributed to an increase in human rights violations, the erosion of state legitimacy, support for anti-state actors in rural areas, the extension of war to new areas, and a blurring of the boundary between anti-insurgency and counter-narcotics activities.⁵⁴ This does not bode well for Afghanistan.

“We have to think about the consequences of air eradication in terms of its impact on the environment, on the people, and also, given the experience of aerial eradication in other countries, especially in Latin America, the effectiveness of it”, says Muhammed Daoud, Deputy Interior Minister for Counternarcotics. “Has it really been effective there?”⁵⁵

The Stomach Problem

While there is no clear proof that eradication leads to a reduction in opium cultivation, the evidence of the negative impact it has on farmers is overwhelming. When sharp decreases in opium poppy cultivation have been achieved, these have resulted in the uprooting of rural livelihoods, increase indebtedness, migration to other districts and provinces or neighbouring countries, growing frustration and a lack of trust in the government. For instance, farmers in Nangarhar Province, who stopped growing poppy after two consecutive years of the strict implementation of

an opium ban, were hit hard. “The main problem is the stomach problem,” says one farmer. “If they try to stop opium cultivation quickly, it is difficult for the people and farmers. But if it is well planned, step by step, the farmers could have the possibilities to find work, other income.”⁵⁶

The impact of opium bans and eradication on the livelihood of farmers has been severe. According to an aid worker based in Nangarhar: “The effects on farmers were devastating. People have stopped growing under heavy pressure. They get rid of livestock, and they have no access to health and medication. Their assets are being depleted. They will still have the same debts, but have nothing to eat.”⁵⁷ “Many people have difficulties with food”, says a Pashai farmer from Nangarhar. “My family has eight members. I do not have enough land, and the money I earn from the wheat I cultivate is not sufficient to feed them all.”⁵⁸

Farmers do not simply depend on opium as a cash crop. In an economy dominated by opium, access to credit, land and water is only possible by growing opium. It “provides access – sometimes the only access – to other assets, including credit and land, as well as allowing households to maximise their returns on one of Afghanistan’s most scarce agricultural resources – irrigated land.”⁵⁹ “The families here are very poor, life is very hard. The problem is that we have limited land. There are only mountains here, no agricultural land. There is no canal, no river, and no water source.”⁶⁰

The opium ban has also resulted in farmers having decreasing access to credit. Traditionally, traders would pay in advance for a certain crop, mostly opium, below market prices. After the harvest a certain amount of the crop was given to the creditor to repay the debt. This informal system is known as *salaam*. The threat of eradication has a negative impact on the availability of such credit, as creditors, who are often local shop owners

⁵³ Taylor, G., *The Afghan Narco-Terror Connection Seen as Global Problem*, The Washington Times, May 21, 2006.

⁵⁴ See: *Vicious Circle: The Chemical and Biological 'War on Drugs'*, Transnational Institute (TNI), March 2001.

⁵⁵ Taylor, op.cit.

⁵⁶ Interviews with ex-poppy farmers in Dar-e-Noor District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁵⁷ Interview with Leo Brandenburg, PAL Team Leader, Jalalabad, May 11, 2006.

⁵⁸ Interviews with ex-poppy farmer in Dar-e-Noor District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁵⁹ Mansfield, D., *Pariah or Poverty?*

⁶⁰ Interviews with ex-poppy farmers in Dar-e-Noor District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

in the bazaar, are unwilling to take risks. “Opium was the only credit system”, says an international aid worker. “When you take opium away you take credit away.”⁶¹

According to a 40-year old farmer in Achin District: “We are all poor people, we all have debts, and very little land. Every household borrowed money from the shop in the bazaar to buy food, for cultural reasons such as a marriage, which is very expensive for us, or if someone is sick.”⁶² An old farmer in Dar-E-Noor says: “We borrow money if someone is sick and must go to the doctor, or if we need to buy sugar, tea, flower. We borrow it from the shopkeeper. If a child dies, we need money for the funeral. If children get married we also borrow money. We buy from the shop, and pay back later with a kind of interest.”

Furthermore, there has been an increase in accumulated debts among farmers after the opium ban. “People are really in a bad situation,” says a doctor from Helmand who works for an international NGO. “The shopkeeper wants his money back from the farmers. The people do not know what to do. People had to borrow money to buy medicines, and things for their children. People were happy with the poppies, they could solve their problem.”⁶³ Farmers in Dar-E-Noor District face the same problem. “More and more people have debts, but they are not able to pay the money back, which leads to conflicts.”

In order to service their debt, some families or family members have migrated to find work. “For the last three years we did not grow any opium here at all”, say farmers in Dar-e-Noor. “A big part of the population has difficulties, and some families have left the region. They went to Kunar province, they rented land and cultivate poppy there. Some other people are working there, as the harvesting and cultivation of poppy needs more work. Some of our family members went to Pakistan to find work because of financial difficulties. Some also went to work for the Afghan police.”⁶⁴ According to an old farmer in Achin

District: “If we have water, we can produce enough and we can live here. Otherwise we go to the city, or to Pakistan, to find work.”⁶⁵ Another farmer from in Dar-e-Noor says: “I have a big family, and lent money for sugar, wheat, and clothes. I can pay back my debt if I work in Jalalabad or Peshawar. I was in Pakistan for seven years. If I have no other possibilities, I will have to go again.”⁶⁶

Eradiation: A New Source of Income?

There is growing resentment among farmers against the provincial authorities, who have banned opium and, in some cases, eradicated poppies but have not delivered on their promise to provide development aid and alternative income opportunities for the rural population to offset the impact of the ban. Instead, corruption is widespread, and farmers perceive eradication to be unequal. Farmers accuse some members of the provincial authorities who have carried out or ordered the eradication of poppy fields of being involved in opium production and/or trading themselves.

Eradiation has also become a new source of income for local authorities. Individual farmers within villages may escape eradication by paying bribes. The threat of eradication itself has also been used to extort money from farmers. Corruption in Afghanistan is endemic, and takes place at all levels in the government. In Helmand province, the governor basically used the threat of eradication to improve his own economic position by letting people pay not to have their crops destroyed.⁶⁷

Eradiation is based on power relations, and is often negotiated. In a village in Achin District in Nangarhar Province, for instance, government representatives eradicated only part of the opium fields. “The government people came here and eradicated 70 per cent of our fields and left the rest to harvest,” says a 40-year old farmer. “They said that there were still a lot of fields left. We discussed among

⁶¹ Interview with Leo Brandenburg, PAL Team Leader, Jalalabad, May 11, 2006.

⁶² Interview with farmer in Achin District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁶³ Interview with a doctor from Helmand, Kabul, 14 May 2006.

⁶⁴ Interviews with ex-poppy farmers in Dar-e-Noor District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁶⁵ Interview with ex-poppy farmer in Achin District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁶⁶ Interviews with ex-poppy farmer in Dar-E-Noor Districts in Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁶⁷ Interview with representative of international NGO, Kabul, May 2006.

ourselves, and decided to share the income from the rest of the fields among us.” Local people, who also have to deal with the local power relations, largely carry out the actual eradication. “Opium farmers are not stupid; they only eradicate the bad fields, with low yields,” says an international aid worker in Nangarhar. “They make a photo or video, and that farmer is compensated by the warlord or by the village.”⁶⁸

“The government promised us money, but we got nothing, they lied”, says a widow with children. “We want the government to give us seeds and fertilizer. The government people are supposed to help us, but they put the money into their own pockets.”⁶⁹

European diplomats stress that counter-narcotics cannot be separated from other problems because of corruption. “Corruption in this country is endemic, and it includes government officials. As soon as you decide that you will not do 100 per cent eradication, you have to make a selection, and as soon as you do that, and decide at random eradication, there is bound to be corruption.”⁷⁰

The perceived inequality of eradication, and the corruption related to it, has caused great frustration among opium farmers whose fields have been destroyed. “The government came and eradicated most of our opium fields, but they only eradicated here, not in other areas,” says an old farmer from Achin District. According to an international aid worker based in Nangarhar: “Farmers here say ‘in Helmand and other areas poppy cultivation has even increased’. So people here have started to grow opium again, away from the roads and towns.”⁷¹

“The government made a lot of promises to us, but none of them were delivered”, says a farmer from Achin District. Another farmer adds: “The Achin district leader came here. He promised us that he would give money, but we didn’t get anything, because all of them are liars... Therefore if you give us money, please hand it to us directly.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Interview with Heimo Posamentier, GTZ PAL Project, Jalalabad, 9 May 2006.

⁶⁹ Interview with villagers in Achin District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

⁷⁰ Interview with a Western diplomat, Kabul, May 2006.

⁷¹ Interview with Leo Brandenburg, PAL Team Leader, Jalalabad, May 11, 2006.

⁷² Interviews with farmers in Achin District, Nangarhar Province, May 2006.

The Right Sequence

The consistently high opium production figures in Afghanistan have resulted in huge international pressure to come up with quick solutions to bring these numbers down. Calls for repressive policies, including the eradication of opium poppies and strict enforcement of opium bans, are growing ever louder. Some now justify eradication by targeting what they claim are ‘the needy not the greedy’. UNODC has even argued that there is no relationship between poverty and poppy cultivation.

These statements do not adequately reflect a very complex situation in what is one of the poorest countries in the world. There is no sound evidence that eradication and other repressive policies automatically lead to a reduction in opium cultivation. In reality this relationship is mixed at best. Yet it is undeniably clear that eradication has had dramatic consequences on the livelihoods of farmers.

Repressive anti-narcotics policies, such as crop destruction and opium bans, combined with the corruption of government officials, further stimulate the breakdown of the relationship between the people of Afghanistan and the state institutions. These policies are very likely to contribute to growing armed resistance against the government and international security forces.

Without rural livelihood opportunities in place for farmers, efforts to reduce opium cultivation are doomed to fail miserably in the long run as they are unsustainable. But they will also cause immeasurable suffering to rural communities, with the poorest of the poor suffering disproportionately. As the World Bank has warned: “There is a moral, political and economic case for having alternative livelihoods programs in place before commencing eradication.”⁷³

⁷³ World Bank, *Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty*. A Country Economic Report, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Sector Unit South Asia Region, World Bank Report No. 29551-AF, 2004.

The Afghan National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS), first launched in 2003 and updated in early 2006, identifies four priorities: disrupting the drug trade; strengthening and diversifying legal rural livelihoods; reducing the demand for illicit drugs and treatment of problem drug users; and developing state institutions at the central and provincial level.¹ Building on these priorities, eight pillars were defined: public awareness; international and regional cooperation; alternative livelihoods; demand reduction; law enforcement; criminal justice; eradication; and institution building.

Some argue that the main problem with the NDCS is that it offers a wish list rather than a well-defined strategy, and that it fails to prioritise and sequence its goals. This is partly a reflection of disagreements among the Afghan government and the international community on how to deal with the drugs problem. It also points to another problem: the lack of ownership of decision-making on drug policies by the Afghan government.

*"The problem is that the international community is competing in Afghanistan, they are following their own interest", says an Afghan government official. "But these things should be decided by us, like whether we should support harm reduction in Afghanistan or not."*²

There has also been some criticism that there is a difference between theory and practice in the implementation of the NDCS. A European source says: *"All countries agree it is a good strategy, but some may think this is not really what we are doing, some think we are doing mainly eradication. The US would like to focus more on eradication, but they also realise the need for a comprehensive approach."*³

The first priority of the NDCS is to disrupt the drug trade by targeting the traffickers and their backers, who profit most from it, whereas poor farmers may have little choice but to cultivate poppy. *"Whereas excessive eradication may have a detrimental impact on wider security, govern-*

*ance and economic development goals, focussing on the trafficking network with its links to other forms of criminality can help to contribute to the achievement of those goals."*⁴

At the same time however, under the new counter-narcotics law it is illegal to traffic any quantity of opium. This "zero tolerance" approach also targets many small-scale dealers who operate at the bottom of the trade, living at the subsistence level. In places where there is no banking system, small opium stocks are used as a "savings account". Law enforcement programmes can easily become the pawn of local forces, which may then manipulate them to suit their interests.

An eradication or interdiction operation that is seen as biased, and manipulated by corruption and favouritism, can create new tensions and further destabilise the country. Destroying the fields of those who have been "unable to corrupt" the eradication forces, arresting small-scale drug traffickers or confiscating small quantities of opium, will not only have a questionable and, arguably, limited effect on overall drug production and trafficking, but it may also create resentment and a feeling of social injustice, particularly if the big traders can buy their way out.

Confronting large-scale traffickers – more evidently criminal in nature – could have a greater impact on the drug trade. However, this strategy is not devoid of political risk, as it will confront powerful interests, unleashing resistance that could undo efforts to stabilise the country. Moreover, any such action will be more dependent on political will than on law enforcement capacity, as it will confront individuals that are highly influential in government. The Karzai government is increasingly being criticised for "moving but not removing" corrupt high-level officials involved in the drug business.

Although the NDCS includes eradication as an official government policy, it stresses that *"the drug control policy is not eradication-led"*.⁵ According to NDCS, eradication is needed to

¹ NDCS, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, *National Drug Control Strategy, An Updated Five-Year Strategy for Tackling the Illicit Drug Problem*, Kabul, January 2006, p. 19.

² Interview with Afghan official, Kabul, May 2006.

³ Interview with European official, April 2006.

⁴ NDCS p. 18.

⁵ NDCS, p. 21.

incentivise the shift away from poppy cultivation in areas where legal livelihoods exist. Providing alternative livelihoods is another pillar of the NDCS, in order to “mitigate the short-term impact on those who have lost their livelihoods either through self-restraint from planting poppy or eradication of their poppy crops”.⁶ The activities included in the NDCS under the alternative livelihood component typically include crop substitution (by providing seeds and fertilisers), cash for work (road construction, renovation of irrigation systems) and improving access to finances. Little emphasis is put on participatory processes to ensure that those most in need are the primary beneficiaries of the project.

The NDCS also calls for the introduction of harm reduction policies for injecting drug users as a public health measure to prevent the

transmission of blood-borne diseases like HIV and hepatitis C. “In particular, the arrest and punishment of drug users needs to be reduced and those dependent on drugs diverted into treatment and harm reduction programmes.”⁷ The NDCS further calls for the establishment of community-based and residential treatment facilities for drug users, and the rapid scaling up of services, which are currently very limited.

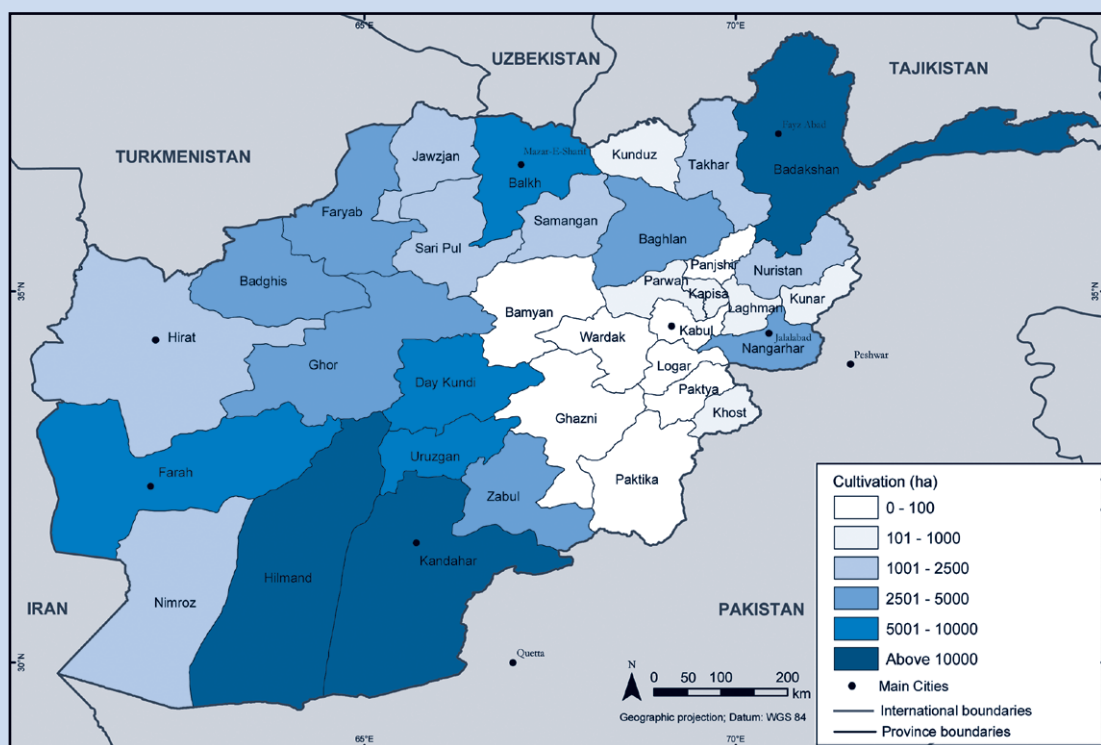
Trust Funds

Afghanistan has the lowest rate of revenue to GDP in the world, which makes it critically dependent on international donors.⁸ This makes the country particularly vulnerable to foreign policies and interests. Amid concerns about

⁷ NDCS, p.19

⁸ Jalali, A., *The Future of Afghanistan*, Parameters, Spring 2006

⁶ NDCS, p. 40.



Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan by province, 2006

Source: MCN - UNODC Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006

efficiency, transparency and security, foreign donors have often preferred to directly fund their own implementing agencies, rather than developing national capacity. However, without commanding its own budget, the Afghan government is unable to increase its responsibility and build the legitimacy and capacity necessary for its credibility.

To try to solve this dilemma, a number of trust funds have been created, where the donated money is un-earmarked, allowing the government to make decisions and learn by doing, while the donor countries monitor expenditure. One such fund has been created for activities related to counter-narcotics, managed by the MCN and administered by UNDP. While the UK and the EC are the major contributors to the fund, and other nations have pledged to contribute to it, the US still resists the idea and prefers to contribute to the programme according to its own agenda.

Counter-narcotics Agencies

The structure of counter-narcotics organisations in Afghanistan is complex. There are a myriad of different organisations involved, sometimes with overlapping responsibilities. This is a reflection of competition within the Afghan government, as well as within the international community, over how to deal with the drugs problem in Afghanistan.

There are two ministries responsible for counter-narcotics. The Ministry of Counter Narcotics (which was the Counter Narcotics Directorate until December 2004) under Minister Habibullah Qaderi is, in theory at least, responsible for policy and coordination of all of the government's counter-narcotic efforts. It was set up under the guidance of the UK, the lead nation for international drug control assistance.

The Ministry of Interior has a special Deputy Minister for Counter Narcotics, Muhammad Daoud. This powerful ministry, which is strongly influenced by the US, has the lead in implementing counter-narcotics policy. The ministry has various agencies, including

the Counter-Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA), which has investigation, intelligence and interdiction units.

The National Interdiction Unit (NIU) is operational within the CNPA, and was created to “*achieve enforcement as soon as possible*” and to attack “*command and control structures of mid and high-value organisations*”.⁹ The NIU consists of some 110 CNPA officers, who are supported by and working with US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents. These teams have been provided with airlift support by the US air force.

The Afghan Special Narcotics Force (ASNF) is a paramilitary unit under the Ministry of Interior, equipped to tackle high value drug operations, especially heroin laboratories and larger drug stockpiles and markets. It is deployed in “*sensitive interdiction operations against hard targets*” and “*does not conduct independent investigations*”.¹⁰ The main ASNF and DEA operations in 2005 were in Nangarhar and Badakshan.

According to the US Embassy in Kabul, the CNPA, working together with the DEA, seized 42.9 metric tons of opium and 5.5 metric tons of heroin in 2005. In addition, the ASNF destroyed over 100 tons of opium and 30 tons of heroin.¹¹ UNODC reported in 2006, quoting CNPA and ASNF figures, that the Afghan authorities had dismantled 26 heroin laboratories in 2005, and another 248 heroin laboratories during the first eight months of 2006. Most of them were located in the border areas.¹²

In the justice sector, the Afghan government set up a Criminal Justice Task Force (CJTF) consisting of teams of police, judges and prosecutors, to try the people behind drug trafficking. Cases developed by the CJTF will be brought before the Central Narcotics Tribunal



⁹ US House of Representatives, *Afghanistan and Opium: A Primer*, Committee on Government Reform, Afghanistan Backgrounder, Staff Report, October 2006, p. 23.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 22.

¹¹ *Recommendation on Afghanistan Counter Narcotics Certification*, Cable from US Embassy in Kabul to US Department for INL/FO, R 220338Z February 2006.

¹² UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, p. 126.

(CNT). The CNT is a central court based in Kabul, with exclusive national jurisdiction over mid- to high-level drugs cases. These cases are all to be transferred from the provincial courts to the CNT. This includes cases of trafficking more than 2 kg of heroin, 10 kg of opium, or 50 kg of hashish or precursor chemicals.¹³ According to the UK government, which is supporting the CJTF, 190 people have been sentenced on trafficking charges since 2005.¹⁴ Very few of them are considered to be large-scale drugs traffickers.

The US-controlled Afghan Eradication Force (AEF) is responsible for eradication targeted by the Afghan central government. Formerly called the Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF), which was deemed unsuccessful and therefore reformed, the AEF is deployed to those provinces where local authorities are seen as not doing enough to enforce the poppy ban. The AEF consists of mobile units with air support.

In order to have some say over the eradication process, the UK, in consultation with the Karzai government, created the Central Eradication Planning Cell (CEPC) under the Ministry of Interior. The CEPC was set up to “ensure that eradication by the CPEF is targeted in a way which takes account of alternative livelihoods.”¹⁵

The Poppy Elimination Programme (PEP) was set up to support eradication at the provincial

level by the governors. In 2005 PEP teams, consisting of eight to ten Afghan and international experts and advisors, were deployed to seven key opium producing provinces. Their aim was to reduce cultivation with the aid of public information campaigns, alternative livelihood programmes, and governor-led eradication campaigns. PEP teams are responsible for the information campaign discouraging poppy cultivation, assessing the levels of poppy cultivation, and monitoring and verification of eradication activities. PEP teams report to the Minister of Counter Narcotics, who is responsible for monitoring the governor-led eradication.

Farmers and eradication teams reached agreements on where and how much eradication would take place in a village

UNODC estimates that some 15,300 ha of opium poppy fields were eradicated in 2006. Out of this figure, provincial governors were responsible for some 13,050 ha (compared to an estimated 4,000 ha in 2005). About 80 per cent of the eradication took place in

four provinces: Helmand (24 per cent), Kandahar (22 per cent), Balkh (18 per cent) and Sari Pul (15 per cent).¹⁶

Although governors reported that 23,563 ha had been eradicated, joint UNODC/MCN field surveys found that only 57 per cent of these claims could be verified. “*This seems to confirm reports from those provinces that farmers and eradication teams reached agreements on where and how much eradication would take place in a village.*” The remaining 2,250 ha were eradicated by the AEF, amounting to 1,807 ha in Helmand and 456 ha in Badakshan.¹⁷ According to UNODC “*the quality of the eradication carried out by AEF was generally of a much higher standard than Governor-led eradication.*” In 2005 the CPEF was estimated to have eradicated 209 ha in five provinces.

¹³ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Counter Narcotics, Criminal Justices. http://www.mcn.gov.af/eng/criminal_justices.htm

¹⁴ Foreign & Commonwealth Office Afghanistan, Counter-narcotics web page. www.fco.gov.uk

¹⁵ Rammell, B., *Afghanistan Counter Narcotics Implementation Plan*, Ministerial Statement, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, London 10 March 2005.

¹⁶ UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, p. 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57 - 59.

Afghanistan's counter-narcotics law, drafted with UN assistance in 2002, was originally considered a "major step forward", although it was agreed at the time that several issues still needed to be clarified.¹ However, according to Western officials involved in the revision process, the US – which felt that the process was moving too slowly – pushed forward a new version, frustrating efforts by other actors involved (the governments of Afghanistan, Italy and the UK, and UNODC) to create a law more based on consensus. The same Western officials described this new version, drafted by the US Department of Justice Senior Federal Prosecutors Programme in Afghanistan and adopted as law in December 2005, as "hardly implementable".

The new law does bring about a number of improvements, including more clarity over the roles and responsibilities of the various law enforcement organisations, as well as the duties of other ministries involved in counter-narcotics issues. A 'Drug Regulation Committee' is established that could in principle license opiates production for pharmaceutical purposes. It is also worth mentioning that there is no death penalty for drug related offences. However, the law as a whole is a typical example of a foreign-driven process. It neglects the importance of local ownership of decision-making – not only governmental but also civil society ownership – essential for its understanding and enforcement, and seems disconnected from the Afghan reality. An example of its 'alien' character is the fact that alcohol is not included in the list of controlled drugs, despite it being a prohibited drug in the country, and one that is seen as very harmful within Afghan culture and religion, more 'haram' than opium or hashish, which both have a long history that involves non-problematic and even beneficial traditional uses.

The law (art. 16) penalises any possession of opium and even of poppy derivatives such as seeds and straw (neither of which are controlled by international conventions) even though there exist traditional uses of opium for medicinal and other purposes. For example, cooking

oil is extracted from the seeds, and the seeds are even exported for culinary uses (bakery etc.). Poppy straw is used as fuel for burning by poor farmers. Opium is also often used as a 'savings account' in Afghanistan, a country without a functioning banking system.

Sentencing for possession of opium is severe and follows a scale according to the quantities found. For example, possession of between 10-100 g of opium leads to imprisonment of 6-12 months, while storage or selling of 1-5 kg of opium can result in a sentence of 5-10 years. Possession of 1-5 kg of poppy seeds or straw would lead to imprisonment for 1-3 years, plus a fine. Cultivation of opium poppy is a criminal offence (art. 25, 26). Someone who plants less than 1 *jerib* (1/5 ha) can be sentenced to 6-12 months in prison. For every *beswa* (1/100 ha) more, one month is added to the sentence. Consumption of drugs and possession for personal consumption (<1 g of heroin or morphine; <10 g of opium of hashish) is also punishable with prison sentences up to 1 year, though if "*a medical doctor certifies that a person is addicted ... the court may exempt the person from imprisonment and a fine. In this case the court may require an addicted person to attend a detoxification or drug treatment centre.*" (art. 27).

The extradition of Afghan citizens to the US is also a controversial issue. There is no extradition treaty with the US but the law (art. 35) enables extradition simply by reference to the 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Just prior to the adoption of the law, in October 2005, the first Afghan citizen accused of trafficking was extradited to the US, a move justified by reference to the 1988 UN Convention. There is no reciprocity regarding extradition, however, and the US made Afghanistan sign a bilateral immunity agreement to assure no US military could ever be handed over to the International Criminal Court for crimes committed in Afghanistan.²

¹ NDCS. Page 24.

² Agreement between the Government of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan and the Government of the United States of America regarding the surrender of persons to the International Criminal Court, 20 September 2002. <http://foia.state.gov/documents/IntAgreements/0000B947.pdf>

In the face of the record 2006 opium harvest, political pressure is mounting to achieve short-term reductions in production. Combined with the deteriorating security situation, a wave of panic is sweeping through the international community, in particular those countries with a military presence in the south of Afghanistan. The simultaneous dramatic upsurge in opium poppy cultivation and the unexpectedly forceful Taliban offensive are seen as somehow related developments. In particular, the option to involve foreign military forces in counter-narcotics activities is gaining ground in Washington and London. The political capitals want to see results and call on NATO to add its weight to these demands. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) seconded such calls when presenting the new annual figures on opium cultivation in September. UNODC head Mr Costa called for “*robust military action by NATO forces to destroy the opium industry in southern Afghanistan.*”¹ His plea was met with great reluctance from military commanders in the field and, indeed, from the Afghan government itself. Military anti-drug operations can easily backfire by creating resentment among the Afghan population, fuelling further instability in a region that is already spiralling out of control.

The International Forces

There has been a gradual increase in the presence of international forces in Afghanistan since they first entered the country to topple the Taliban regime in response to the terrorist attacks on US soil. Their composition and objectives have also evolved over the last five years. A first US/UK-led coalition – operating under the Combined Forces Command Afghanistan (CFC-A),² which reports to the US Central Command (CENTCOM) – was formed to deny Al-Qaeda the use of Afghanistan as a safe haven, to destroy its training camps and infrastructure, and to capture or physically eliminate its leadership. Codenamed Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the operation commenced on 7 October 2001 with a massive bombing campaign

and cruise missile launches from US and British ships. It succeeded in removing the Taliban regime from power in two months. Since then, however, a resilient Taliban and anti-government insurgency has obliged the coalition to expand its presence, and today it continues to engage in offensive operations in the south and east of the country. While the US is the largest contributor to these forces, other nations (including Canada, France, the UK, the Netherlands, and Australia, amongst others) make a substantial contribution with the deployment of Special Forces, all of them directly involved in offensive operations.

A second international force is the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a multinational force with a UN mandate to assist the central government in providing and maintaining the security needed for the reconstruction of the country. The deployment of ISAF was agreed as part of the Bonn Agreement in December 2001. The UN Security Council approved the force with the mandate “*to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, so that the Afghan Interim Authority as well as the personnel of the United Nations can operate in a secure environment.*”³ It was first deployed in Kabul and its environs, with the US government opposing its expansion to other areas of the country, as it feared this would interfere with Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). But successive UN resolutions have extended ISAF’s mandate outside Kabul and prolonged its mission. The multinational force, first run by individual countries (UK, Turkey, Germany and the Netherlands), has been under the unified command of NATO since August 2003. ISAF then started to be deployed gradually in the rest of the country, beginning with the north and west. On 31 July 2006, OEF formally transferred command of the troubled southern provinces to ISAF, with the UK, Canada, the Netherlands and the US contributing the bulk of the forces in the area. Ultimately, by the end of 2006, ISAF will be in command of international forces in the entire country, operating with an estimated 21,000 troops.

NATO members have long resisted British and American ambitions to engage ISAF troops in counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and counter-

¹ UNODC, *UN drugs chief calls for extra resources to help NATO target Afghan opium*, Press Release, Brussels, 12 September 2006.

² Formally the CFC-A is a coalition of many countries, but in command structure and number of troops it is largely a US/UK-led effort. See for more details: <http://www.cfc-a.centcom.mil/> or <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom.htm>

³ UN Security Council resolution 1386, December 20, 2001. For more info on ISAF see: <http://www/jfcb.nato.int/ISAF/>

narcotics operations. Instead, ISAF was meant to have a peacekeeping role, promoting governance, security and reconstruction. Following its expansion to the south, ISAF has nevertheless been given more robust rules of engagement, and its troops are now engaged in large offensive operations in the south, encountering unexpected levels of resistance.

ISAF's main structures in the field are the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT). Despite being under a unified command, these joint civil-military structures have different compositions and act differently according to the troops' country of origin, which makes any kind of unified reconstruction programme in the provinces virtually impossible.

Moreover, the idea of the PRT is not without controversy. Originally conceived of by the US military, their role was to engage in reconstruction in areas where the lack of security prevented the work of relief agencies. The provision of small reconstruction projects was intended to "win hearts and minds" but also made it possible for the military to gain information on the enemy's actions and to continue its counter-insurgency operations. Many relief agencies have argued that the deliberate mixing of military and humanitarian objectives in areas where war is still being waged has put them at risk.⁴

Finally, a complete description of the international forces cannot be made without including the presence of numerous Western private security companies. These entities, employing armed foreigners for security-related purposes, should be considered as a third component of the international forces present in the country. Companies such as DynCorp, USPI and Blackwaters are contracted by the US government for diverse activities, including training the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA), training and support of the eradication teams, provision of security for infrastructure projects, etc. The extensive use of the private sector in security matters is a source of concern as they operate under loose control, do not respond to the country's military hierarchy and have no UN mandate to operate in the country. Their lack of accountability and transparency,⁵ has been severely criticised by a recent report.⁵

⁴ For a discussion on the issue see USIP report *PRT and military relations with International and Nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan*, September 2005.

⁵ Nawa, F., *Afghanistan, Inc.*, A Corpwatch investigative report, April 2006.

The Counter-narcotics Role

The US-led coalition's role in counter-narcotics has evolved over time. In 2001, the US decided to rely on local forces to defeat the Taliban and keep control over the country. While this may have seemed convenient in terms of allowing a rapid and low cost response to the 11 September attacks, it also brought to power individuals that not only had very poor human rights records but also rapidly became accomplices in the narcotics trade and corruption. As the priority of OEF was to fight the "War on Terror", US troops were instructed to turn a blind eye to the drugs issue and to continue cooperating with those individuals as long as the latter remained useful to advancing counter-terrorism objectives.⁶ However, by 2004 the scale of the problem compelled the Bush administration to act, involving CFC-A forces in interdiction missions. As US troops were authorised to conduct military operations against drug trafficking targets, they began destroying - or transferring to Afghan authorities - drugs encountered in the course of military operations. Furthermore, they became actively involved in several operations aimed at destroying laboratories and arresting drug traffickers.⁷

A programme was started to provide training, equipment and logistics to support the Afghan counter-narcotics strategy, from its public information campaign to the eradication, interdiction and law enforcement operations. In the east and south, US PRTs actively campaigned for the poppy ban, assisting government officials and working alongside USAID in the provision of Alternative Livelihood Programmes (ALP).⁸ The US Central Command (CENTCOM) budget for counter-narcotics efforts grew from just \$1 million in 2002 to \$73 million in 2004, reflecting the increased role given to the military.⁹ For the 2007 fiscal year, the State Department alone has requested about \$420 million in counter-drug funding

⁶ Felbab-Brown, V., *Afghanistan: when counter-narcotics undermines counterterrorism*, The Washington Quarterly, Autumn 2005.

⁷ Statement by Mary Beth Long, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counter-narcotics before the US House of Representatives Committee, at http://www.house.gov/international_relations/109/lon031705.htm

⁸ Author's personal observation, Jalalabad, April 2005.

⁹ De Grasse, B., and Bajraktari, Y., *Dealing with the illicit drug trade: the Afghan quandary*, USIPeace briefing, April 2005. http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2005/0407_dealing.html

for Afghanistan, which includes all of the operational costs of the Poppy Elimination Programme (PEP) teams, and four mobile teams of the Afghan Eradication Force (AEF). In response to the new harvest figures for 2006, the US Senate passed an amendment in September 2006 to increase Department of Defence 'counter-narcoterrorism' funding by no less than \$700 million to "combat the growth of poppies in Afghanistan and to eliminate the production and trade of opium, and heroin, and to prevent terrorists from using the proceeds for terrorist activities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere."¹⁰

The US plan for stepping up military involvement in counter-narcotics activities appears to have been met with reluctance from other nations contributing to the ISAF.¹¹ First and foremost, the military itself sees these efforts as a law enforcement challenge for which it is not prepared, and that does not serve its military objectives of counter-insurgency, peace-building and stabilisation. The Canadian forces currently deployed in the volatile southern province of Kandahar have gone to great lengths to stress that they are not the driving force behind eradication, as they fear that this would endanger their peace stabilisation operation.¹² Lt-Col Henry Worsley, a British commander in Helmand province, seems to share the same concerns. "Our position is quite clear, we are not going to get involved in eradication" he said.¹³ Rob de Wijk, a senior Dutch military analyst, has voiced concerns about the current US-supported eradication strategy which, in his view, increases the dangers faced by the Dutch mission in Uruzgan.¹⁴

*For any outside agency
to get involved in
eradication would be a
mistake*

A Western source closely involved in the subject, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the subject, considered that "for any outside agency to get involved in eradication would be a mistake."¹⁵

This reluctance seems to have been shared by some of the political decision-makers in countries contributing troops to ISAF. Despite this, the US and the UK governments want the military to play a bigger role in counter-narcotics issues, in apparent disagreement with their own military forces. According to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid: "like the US army, the British military is balking at demands from the British Foreign Office and Prime Minister Tony Blair to help stem the virulent narcotics trade."¹⁶ NATO ministers seemed to have reached a compromise, agreeing that any eradication and interdiction effort would have to be conducted under an Afghan initiative, at least in appearance. But to provide room for those

countries that wanted their militaries to play a role in such operations, NATO ministers finally agreed that ISAF would "support the Afghan government counter-narcotics effort."¹⁷ A plan of action spelling out the nature of this support lies behind the vague phrasing of the

final communiqué. According to an official familiar with the document, ISAF's role was translated into a permissive rather than obligatory plan of action, thus giving latitude to different policies. In a written answer to a British Parliamentary question, the UK Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram said that "under the terms of NATO's Operational Plan, ISAF troops can support Afghan counter-narcotics forces and operations in a number of ways, including by training Afghan forces, sharing information on the opium trade, supporting the counter-narcotics information campaign, and providing enabling support for Afghan counter-narcotics efforts."

¹⁰ Tiron, R., *Key house GOP Members Support Dem Anti-Narcotic Measure*, The Hill, Washington DC, 19 September 2006.

¹¹ Revealed to the authors by several Western sources in private interview in Kabul, May 2006.

¹² Brewster, M., *Canada treads dangerous line over poppy eradication in southern Afghanistan*, Canadian press, April 23, 2006.

¹³ Sengupta, K., *British Forces Stay Away as Afghan Opium War Begins*, The Independent, March 1, 2006.

¹⁴ De Wijk: *Missie Loopt Gevaar Afghanistan Getergd Door Harde Aanpak Papaverteelt van Amerikanen*, Trouw, March 29, 2006.

¹⁵ Interview with the authors in Kabul, May 2006.

¹⁶ Rashid, A., *NATO's Afghan Troop Dilemma*, BBC News, December 19, 2005.

¹⁷ Final Communiqué, Ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Council held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, on 8 December 2005, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2005/p05-158e.htm>

Without doubt, the “Afghan strategy” – as Western supporters would like to present it – cannot be implemented without the resources and active involvement of the foreign forces present in the field. Brig. Robert Purdy, in charge of counter-narcotics within ISAF, said that his forces would back Afghan forces in their poppy eradication drive in the south of the country, specifying that their efforts would be supportive, rather than independent.¹⁸ An ISAF spokesperson described the role foreseen for NATO troops in counter-narcotics activities as “second tier security”.¹⁹ This means that the PRTs would assist the Afghan counter-narcotics agencies, providing accommodation to international experts such as the USAID employees implementing alternative livelihood programmes and Western advisers working along the eradication (PEP) or interdiction (NIU) teams. Furthermore, in the course of their field missions, the PRTs would publicly advocate the Afghan government counter-narcotics campaign and poppy ban, and would transmit to the Central Eradication Planning Cell (CEPC) any information collected regarding poppy cultivation, opium processing and trafficking. Although they would provide eradication and interdiction teams with essential logistic support, PRTs would coordinate with them to avoid being seen in the same areas when those operations take place; they would “deconflict”,²⁰ to use the military terminology. US forces under CFC-A command are now actively participating in the Afghan strategy, providing airlift, medical evacuation, *in extremis* support, and helicopter assets and pilot training to NIU operations.²¹

This was recently reiterated by Gen. Eikenberry, commander of CFC-A in Afghanistan, when he described his troops’ support to counter-narcotics operations as follows: “we do provide an enormous amount of support for these efforts of interdiction and law enforcement. We provide intelligence support. We provide support for planning. We provide transportation support. That is, if an interdiction force is required to move by helicopter to an area where they’ll conduct

their interdiction operations from, our forces will provide those helicopters. [We will make provisions] if that force requires medical evacuation support, or if they require close air support should they get into a dangerous situation.”²² Coalition forces in the south have arrested several individuals and seized narcotics. According to a US military spokeswoman, coalition forces also have the authority to detain suspects or confiscate materials if they suspect illegal activity.²³

Finally, private military contractors hired by the US government play a considerable support role. Dyncorp – a private company also involved in aerial sprayings and logistics support to the US-sponsored Plan Colombia – was awarded a multimillion contract to train the new Afghan National Police. Among its recruits, DynCorp mentors the Afghan Eradication Force (AEF), the force sent to destroy poppy fields. Although they prefer to remain confined to their training centres, well protected behind high concrete blocks, instructors have also been participating in field eradications. It is quite unlikely that a farmer whose field is being destroyed under the supervision of a foreigner would make the difference between a US contractor and any Western soldier.

Aside from the immediate, operational implications of international military forces becoming involved in counter-narcotics activities – directly or indirectly – fundamental questions remain about the appropriateness of certain aspects of the counter-narcotics strategy. In particular, the US and UK-supported drive for a rapid poppy ban and eradication, in an environment of extreme poverty and feudal oppression by the landowners, has the potential to further exacerbate tensions and poverty. This runs contrary to the objective of achieving an enduring peace with a sustainable reduction in drug cultivation. This is partly recognised by the Western powers that support this strategy, who prefer to avoid being seen as the motors behind it and instead hide behind an “Afghan façade”. All the roads, schools or hospitals constructed in the country bear a sign with the flag of the country that has funded it. On the contrary, there is no flag of the country funding eradication in the fields that have been destroyed.

The current level of insecurity and instability in

¹⁸ Pajhwok Afghan News, *ISAF to Support Afghan Forces in Anti-poppy Drive*, May 13, 2006.

¹⁹ Telephone interview with Maj. Knitting, ISAF spokesperson, April 7, 2006.

²⁰ A military strategy that attempts to route planes and other vehicles so they do not conflict with each other.

²¹ Schweich, T., Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for INL, *Afghanistan Progress Report: Counter-narcotics Efforts*, March 9, 2006.

²² Defense Department Documents and Publications, Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, Radio Interview, May 10, 2006.

²³ Associated Press, *Coalition Forces Seize 130 Kilos of Narcotics in Afghanistan*, May 17, 2006.

the country requires a robust peace enforcement mission, but this objective would best be served if the international forces avoid becoming involved in a counterproductive new “war on drugs”. British Lt. Gen. David Richards - who recently took command of ISAF - said that it would “*focus on actions that actively assists the GOA [Government of Afghanistan] in nurturing and further developing the consent of the people to the GOA and its international partners.*”²⁴ This would include helping the GOA to establish sustainable economic growth, defeat the insurgency and help put in place the institutions needed for the country's security and governance. In this perspective, it is a contradiction in terms to seek “the consent of the people” while at the same time supporting a counter-narcotics strategy that does not fully take into consideration the dependence of farmers on poppy cultivation.

Law enforcement operations in areas with poor security and weak governance are fraught with the danger of being used to further the interests of a few, local strongmen. Eradication and the arrest of traffickers, if perceived to be influenced by factional bias, cor-

ruption and favouritism, as is often the case, can play into the hands of those opposing the government. Foreign military forces can easily and inadvertently be drawn into factional conflicts. If they are seen to be supporting iniquitous actions, they will quickly lose the popular support they dreadfully need to stabilise the country. Addressing corruption, nepotism and patronage should therefore be the first priority. But this needs political will and international support for building an accountable and efficient government, rather than simply military support.

Finally, the local dynamics of oppression that have existed before the war and have been reinforced after years of conflict – those same dynamics that have benefited the “war profiteers” and permitted opium cultivation and trafficking to flourish – will need innovative approaches others than repression. Social changes, reconciliation and peace building take time and cannot be imposed from outside, let alone by foreign military forces that are increasingly associated with exacerbating tensions, bombing campaigns, and destroying the only well-functioning part of the survival economy.

²⁴ Commander's intent - COMISAF IX, 15 May 2006.

Defining Security

Security is not a unified concept. It may vary from person to person and from place to place, especially in a complex and internationalised context such as Afghanistan. This is often ignored when there is a discussion on the proper role of the military in providing a “secure environment”.

From a Western perspective, security threats are best represented by the continuing insurgency. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda are seen as the main threat to international security and stability. Making sure that Afghanistan does not again become a breeding ground for these groups is therefore the first security priority.¹ When discussing the deployment of armed forces to the country, the Western debate is therefore focused on the threat that these insurgent elements may pose to

their soldiers. This seems to be one of the main concerns in parliamentary debates in European countries, where “body-bags” are a very sensitive issue. According to Pakistani journalist Rashid: “*NATO troops seem far more concerned about their own security than the security of the Afghans they are supposed to be protecting.*”²

On the other side, Afghans may see local disputes over land and water, criminality, the corruption and abuse of power by officials, warlords and local strongmen as a bigger threat to their security. Insecurity for many Afghans also comes from the international forces themselves, particularly in the south, where strong-handed military operations (house-searches, bombings) have created a feeling of increased danger and have killed many civilians.

¹ See Rubin, B., *Constructing Sovereignty for Security*, for a critical view on state-building and the war on terror.

² Rashid, A., *ibid.*

THE REGIONAL CONTEXT: A NEW GREAT GAME?

From the Great Game to the Cold War and the present War on Terror, external players have long competed over their interests in Afghanistan. While some countries have sought to strengthen Afghan governments in order to bolster a buffer state, others have tried to destabilise the country. Many of Afghanistan's challenges are also regional in nature. The country's mixed ethnography brings it closer to each of its neighbours, its central position in the geography of the region makes it an essential passage for goods and people, and its water resources are shared in the region.

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, relations with Afghanistan have been tense. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) controlled all foreign support to the various Mujahedeen factions, including from Saudi Arabia and the US. Following the defeat of the Russians, the Mujahedeen factions started to fight each other, and resisted subordination to Islamabad. Pakistan then gave full support to the Taliban, which by 1996 had conquered most of the country, including the capital Kabul.

After 11 September 2001, President Musharraf chose to join the War on Terror and officially withdrew his country's support for the Taliban. However, Western military commanders say that Taliban forces continue to move back and forth across the border with Pakistan undisturbed. NATO Commander General David Richards has called for a policy of "partnership and cooperation" instead of confrontation with Pakistan to solve the problem.¹ During a visit to the US in September 2006, Afghan President Hamid Karzai openly accused Pakistan of failing to crack down on the Taliban. President Musharraf replied that Karzai was acting like "an ostrich" and ignoring the problems in his own land.²

While some analysts state that Pakistan does not have the control of its borders and is therefore unable to prevent insurgent elements from infiltrating Afghanistan, others say that the Pakistani military have only cracked down on some foreign fighters based in the country, but have left the

Taliban leaders untouched and continue to support them through the ISI. It is also possible that both scenarios could be partially true, and that Islamabad may be pursuing a two-tracked foreign policy.

Until recently, Pakistan was engaged in a massive military operation in Waziristan, a tribal region bordering Afghanistan. But in a recent deal, the central government agreed to withdraw its army from Waziristan, pay compensation for losses caused by the fighting, and free prisoners. In exchange, the pro-Taliban militants have agreed to stop attacks in the country and in Afghanistan. Some commentators see this agreement as an admission by the Pakistani regime that the military strategy has failed. Moreover, it gives the tribesmen the possibility to turn the area into a fully operational base for militants.³

To complicate matters further, tensions in the southern Pakistani province of Balochistan are on the increase and could also be a source of instability for Afghanistan. Ethnic Baloch people live in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, and tensions in one country often affect the neighbouring countries.

Iran's policy towards Afghanistan has partly been dictated by regional rivalries with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which supported the Taliban. In return Iran, with Russia and India, backed the Northern Alliance. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, Iran established a formal relationship with the new Afghan government. The election of the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, Iran's nuclear programme, and Iran's support for Hezbollah, have all strained that country's relations with the West. However, relations with the US-backed Karzai government remain stable. Iran has an interest in Afghanistan controlling its drugs production and trafficking, as the country remains severely affected by heroin consumption and violence fuelled by trafficking. It also does not want to see the Taliban return to power. But given the tensions with the US, in particular, it nevertheless remains suspicious of Western military forces on its borders.

¹ Regan, T., *British General: Time Running out in Afghanistan*, The Christian Science Monitor, October 9, 2006.

² Rohde, D., *The Afghanistan Triangle*, New York Times, October 1, 2006.

³ Rashid, A., *Losing the War on Terror: Why Militants are Beating Technology Five Years After September 11*, The Washington Post, September 9, 2006.

Opium production in Afghanistan in 2006 was estimated by UNODC at 6,100 metric tons, representing an increase of about 50 per cent compared to 2005. This is the highest production level ever recorded in Afghanistan. As a consequence, global opium production has also reached its highest point since 1990, at over 6,600 metric tons. The proportion of global opium production taking place in Afghanistan increased from 87 per cent in 2005 to 92 per cent in 2006.¹ The increases in production in Afghanistan run counter to developments in the other major producing region, the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia, where opium poppy cultivation has decreased from an estimated 158,000 hectares in 1998 to only 24,000 hectares in 2006. According to UNODC, if “the current trend continues, there will soon be only one heroin producing country left in the world – Afghanistan.”² Before jumping to the conclusion that the eradication

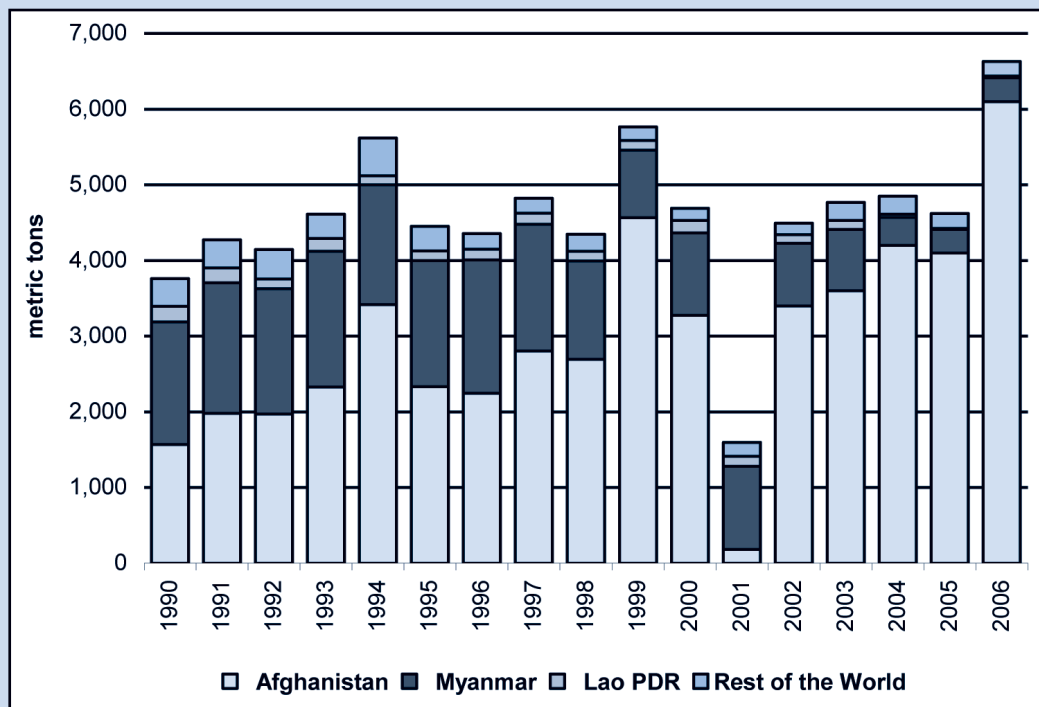
of Afghan opium fields would free the world from the burden of heroin addiction, however, a closer look is needed at the workings of the opiates markets and their potential to adapt to changing conditions.

Heroin Consumption

There are three different types of heroin on the international market. The highest quality is white powder, a salt, known as ‘heroin nr 4’ or ‘China white’. This is mainly produced in Southeast Asia (for the regional market) and Colombia (for the east side of the USA). The lowest quality is Mexican ‘brown tar’ heroin, which is almost exclusively consumed in the USA, west of the Mississippi. The Afghan opium reaches the consumption markets largely in the form of brown base heroin, ‘brown sugar’, though an unknown but increasing share is further processed into ‘nr 4’. Afghan opium has an average 15 per cent morphine content and 6-7 kg of opium are needed to produce 1 kg of brown heroin, while 10 kg

¹ UNODC, *Afghanistan, 2006 Annual Opium Poppy Survey, Summary of findings*, September 2006

² UNODC, *Opium poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle*, October 2006.



Global potential opium production (metric ton), 1990-2006

or more are needed to produce 1 kg of white heroin. White heroin easily dissolves in water so can be readily injected or snorted, but also smoked. Brown heroin needs to be heated in a solution of water and mild acid before it can be injected. Brown base, like cocaine base, is the form of heroin most suitable for smoking, usually by placing it on an aluminium foil, heating it and inhaling the vaporizing heroin through a tube (known as 'chasing the dragon').

According to the latest UN World Drug Report (based on government figures), the total number of illicit opiate users in the world numbers around 16 million, 11 million of whom are heroin users. Over half of all opiates are consumed in Asia, with the largest number of users in India (3 million), China (1.7 million), Iran (1.2 million), and Pakistan (0.7 million). Outside Asia, Eastern Europe (including Russia) is the biggest market (2.3 million), followed by Western Europe (1.6 million) and the US (1.2 million). Afghanistan itself consumes only a small portion of its total opium production, very roughly estimated at around 200 metric tons, which equates to no more than 3-4 per cent of the 2006 harvest. A survey conducted by the government and UNODC estimated that there were 150,000 opium and 50,000 heroin users in Afghanistan, among a total of about a million drug users. More than half of them are smoking hashish, some 160,000 consuming alcohol and 180,000 pharmaceuticals.³

Regional Trends

The global opiates market has become regionalised. Afghan opium supplies the neighbouring countries, Central Asia, Russia and the whole of Europe. Mexican and Colombian heroin largely cover the American market, where only about 10-15 per cent of the supply comes from Asia. Accurate figures for Latin American heroin production do not exist, as no sound technology for satellite monitoring has been developed. Although it is claimed that Colombian poppy cultivation has been in decline as a result of the aerial spraying

programme, no shortage has been reported on the US market. Since Mexico has also started to produce a brown powder type of heroin (apart from its traditional black tar), its market now seems to be expanding eastwards within the US.⁴ Although still at low levels, poppy cultivation has also been increasing in Guatemala and Peru. So far, Latin American heroin seems to be able to meet US demand and there is no reason to believe that the situation in Afghanistan will have any serious impact on the US market in the short term.

There can be no doubt that opium production is strongly in decline in Southeast Asia. Thailand has been virtually poppy-free for quite some years, and both Laos and Burma/Myanmar have reduced production substantially and rapidly – causing serious problems for those farmers who had been involved in cultivation. As Southeast Asian opiates were mainly destined for the wider region (including significant markets in China and Australia), any initial signs that the market is responding are likely to become visible within that region first. Indian leakage from its licensed opium cultivation, or an expansion of illicit cultivation in either India or China, could be among those adaptations. It is too early to establish with certainty whether the ongoing reductions in Burma and Laos will be sustainable in the longer term; in both countries not much is being done to provide alternative livelihoods to former opium farmers.⁵ Inside Burma a “balloon effect” is already visible, with some areas outside of the traditional growing areas – where an opium ban has been enforced – showing increases in cultivation; and Laos – after years of steady decline – has seen an increase this year.

The regionalisation of the global market, however, does not follow a historically fixed pattern. The opiates market has seen major shifts over past decades. This year's staggering overproduction in Afghanistan – far more than is currently in demand in the region – may lead to the emergence of new trafficking routes,

³ UNODC/MCN, *Afghanistan Drug Use Survey 2005*, November 2005. http://www.unodc.org/afg/drug_use.html

⁴ National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2007*, October 2006. <http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs21/21137/index.htm>

⁵ See: TNI, *Downward Spiral, Banning Opium in Afghanistan and Burma*, Drugs & Conflict Debate Paper 12, June 2005.

especially further eastwards, where shortages are likely to appear and prices may rise. If the production capacity for white heroin nr 4 continues to increase in Afghanistan, both the Asian and eastern US markets (accustomed to white heroin instead of the traditional Afghan brown sugar) may become attractive outlets for its regional surplus. Conversely, if Afghan production were to decline sharply in the years to come, continuing demand from the area currently supplied by Afghan opium will increase incentives in other existing or potential production areas. The reality of major market shifts in the past, and the relative overall stability between global demand and supply over the past fifteen years (4000-5000 mt), give no reason to believe that the market would be unable to adapt to new circumstances this time.

Licit and Illicit Opiates: Fading Shades

The opium poppy is also cultivated in large quantities worldwide for pharmaceutical purposes. Usually, this licit market is considered as a phenomenon fully separate from the illicit opiates market, but this distinction is more and more difficult to maintain. The very delicate balance between the licit and illicit markets offers a range of additional options for market adaptations and consumer choices in response to an eventual decline in illicit production.

The licit and illicit opiates markets are comparable in size. The licit opiates trade is controlled under the same UN conventions that prohibit the illicit trade. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) administers licit manufacture and the trade in opiates to ensure that adequate supplies of drugs are available for medical use and to prevent the diversion from licit sources to illicit channels. In 2004 – the latest year for which full figures for the licit trade are available from the INCB – a total of 523 tons in morphine/thebaine equivalent was produced legally (on 84,500 hectares),⁶

while illicit production was estimated that same year at 495 tons of heroin equivalent (on 196,000 hectares).⁷ The licit market sector has become highly sophisticated, and most of the production – except in India – now skips the labour-intensive process of opium tapping. Instead, the whole poppy plant is harvested and pulverised, resulting in a poppy straw extract with a high alkaloid content that is used as the raw material for the isolation of morphine and thebaine.⁸ Australia and France are the largest licit producers, controlling almost half of global production between them, followed by traditional producers in India and Turkey (which together account for 30 per cent of global production), and Spain and Hungary (some 20 per cent).

Most of this produce is used for legitimate medicinal purposes, especially for pain relief. However, in the US, “*pharmaceutical drug abuse is higher than rates of use for most illicit drugs*”.⁹ Non-medical use of powerful prescription opiate painkillers, such as OxyContin and Vicodin, is especially high among teenagers and young adults. Diversion occurs via internet pharmacies, fraudulent medical prescriptions, and robberies of pharmacies. According to an analysis of mortality data, pharmaceutical opiates in the US nowadays “*are more likely than cocaine or heroin to be the cause of unintentional drug poisoning deaths*”.¹⁰ Also, in terms of drug-related emergency department visits, “*the total number of heroin mentions was fewer than those for prescription opioids*”.¹¹

⁷ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2006*, June 2006, p. 70.

⁸ The opium poppy contains a variety of natural alkaloids, especially morphine, codeine and thebaine. The family name ‘opiates’ includes the semi-synthetic substances produced from these alkaloids, such as heroin, oxycodone, hydrocodone, oxymorphone, nalbuphine, naloxone, naltrexone, and buprenorphine. The more inclusive term of ‘opioids’ is used to also include morphine-like but purely synthetic preparations such as methadone and dextropropoxyphene.

⁹ National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2007*, October 2006. <http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs21/211137/index.htm>

¹⁰ Center for Substance Abuse Research, *Opioid Analgesics Most Common Cause of Unintentional Fatal Drug Poisoning in the U.S.*, CESAR Fax, Vol. 15, Issue 37, 16, University of Maryland, September 2006.

¹¹ National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, *Under the Counter: The Diversion and Abuse of Controlled Prescription Drugs in the U.S.*, Columbia University, July 2005.

⁶ E/INCB/2005/2. International Narcotics Control Board, *Narcotic Drugs, Estimated World Requirements for 2006 - Statistics for 2004*, INCB 2006. http://www.incb.org/incb/en/narcotic_drugs_2005.html

Similar trends are visible elsewhere. The estimated 700,000 opiate users in Brazil almost all depend on pharmaceutical drugs. In North-East India, *"Stringent laws and enforcement activity against heroin trafficking and peddling in the early 1990s in Mizoram, and in the early 2000s in Manipur, also resulted in another shift towards injecting of dextropropoxyphene, a synthetic pain reliever."*¹² Spasmo Proxyvon ("SP"), a preparation based on dextropropoxyphene, has become the opiate of choice in Mizoram and, as compared to heroin, *"has been associated with higher risks of abscesses, non-healing ulcers and amputation, thereby increasing the morbidity of drug users."* A national survey on drug abuse in India confirmed the trend: *"The abuse of pharmaceutical products as a recent development was reported from many sites like Amritsar, Ahmedabad, Imphal, Dimaipur, Mumbai and Kolkata. The reasons for switching to injecting of pharmaceutical substances were reported to be due to non-availability and the increasing street price of heroin."*¹³

Shifting patterns between licit and illicit drug markets have been an ongoing phenomenon, with the distinctions between recreational use, self-medication, addiction, prescription or diversion becoming far more blurred than is generally acknowledged. The trend of increasing non-medical use of pharmaceutical opiates around the world is a phenomenon that overlaps with the illicit heroin market. These grey areas need to be understood better instead of simply sustaining a myth of sharp distinctions between the pharmaceutical and illicit drug markets.

Conclusion

Disturbances in the global market, both through a rapid supply increase such as is happening now, or through rapid decreases – such as the one that occurred in 2001 with the Taliban opium ban¹⁴ – can aggravate drug-related health problems on the demand side. Sudden increases in purity at street level may lead to more overdoses. Decreased purity can lead to dangerous adulterations, can prompt people to inject instead of smoke or to opt for pharmaceutical replacements which are not necessarily an improvement in terms of health damage. The prevailing simplicity under-

lying current supply reduction policy towards Afghanistan, namely that reducing production automatically leads to a reduction of drug-related health problems, needs to be challenged. More understanding is required about the functioning of the global market, about potential future pro-

duction shifts, about consumer choices in cases of scarcity, and about the interrelation between the licit and illicit opiate markets. There are several harm reduction policy options that are available, which are proven to reduce overdose deaths and other drug-related health problems (consumption rooms, substitution treatment, heroin maintenance, needle/syringe programmes, etc.). The idea that heroin problems in Europe or the US can be solved by attacking production in Afghanistan is a persistent policy illusion.

The idea that heroin problems in Europe or the US can be solved by attacking production in Afghanistan is a persistent policy illusion

¹² UNODC, *Drug Use in the Northeastern States of India*, Executive Summary, 2006.
http://www.unodc.org/india/drug_use_in_ne.html

¹³ Government of India, *National Survey on Extent, Pattern and Trends of Drug Abuse in India*. Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment & UNODC Regional Office for South Asia, 2004.

¹⁴ Jelsma, M., *Learning lessons from the Taliban opium ban*, *International Journal of Drug Policy* 16 (2005) 98–103.

"When we saw the Taliban go and the foreign soldiers come we were so full of hope. We were 100 per cent sure that, with the world behind it, our Government would improve our lives. But now our hopes are crushed."¹

The worsening armed conflict and the all-time record opium production in Afghanistan have worried everyone, and for good reasons. It is not easy at this point to come up with clear recommendations as to how the current downhill trend in security and drug control might be turned around. Quick fixes and one size fits all solutions unfortunately do not exist. Peace building, reconstruction and reducing the dependence on the opium economy will be long-term processes, more difficult now than most thought even one year ago. A number of conclusions can be drawn, however, in order to avoid policies that further deteriorate the situation.

NATO, Peace Building and Reconstruction

The obvious problem in the south of Afghanistan now is that war is on the increase again, suicide attacks and aerial bombings occur daily, and people are once more being displaced as general insecurity reigns. If the escalating spiral of violence is not broken, any other objective in terms of reconstruction or drug control is simply an illusion. This violence is often attributed, too simplistically, to the Taliban alone, with the fight against it viewed in the context of 'anti-terrorism'.

"Everywhere we've gone downhill here," said Tatlatbek Masadykov, head of the UN assistance mission in Afghanistan's southern headquarters in Kandahar. "We've never improved the situation. The security issue isn't just to do with the Taliban — it's to do with bad, weak governance. Fifty per cent of this problem is internal. People don't naturally want the Taliban back, not at all, but they increasingly think the Government offers them nothing but insecurity, and that though the Taliban offer

them nothing either, they may perhaps give them some stability and an end to corruption."²

Excessive Violence

Another underestimated factor is the resentment caused by the excessive violence of foreign troops. The US Air Force has conducted more than 2,000 air strikes over the past six months. Operation Mountain Thrust, the large-scale offensive operation by US-led forces in 2006, caused so many casualties that president Karzai publicly protested: *"It is not acceptable that in all this fighting, Afghans are dying. In the past three to four weeks, 500 to 600 Afghans were killed. Even if they are Taliban, they are sons of this land."*³

British, Canadian and Dutch ISAF troops are also now involved in almost daily battles. The ISAF mission under NATO command was meant to bring another approach in the south of the country, distinct from the controversial Operation Enduring Freedom. But US officials now *"concede that the line between the two operations is blurred"*.⁴ Operation Medusa, which was intended to clear insurgents from Kandahar in October 2006, led the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the International Red Cross, Human Rights Watch and many others to issue statements condemning the killing of civilians. According to the Joint Co-ordinating and Monitoring Board - made up of the Afghan government, donor countries and the UN - more than 3,700 people have died so far this year. The majority appear to be insurgents, but it is estimated that at least 1,000 civilians have been killed this year. Some 140 foreign troops, mostly American, British and Canadian, have also been killed since January.

Withdrawal?

Many Afghans have joined the Taliban out of anger over this warfare. The foreign presence,

¹ Abdul Shakoor, shopkeeper in Kandahar, quoted in: *The face of Afghanistan five years after fall of the Taleban*, Anthony Loyd and Tahir Luddin, The Times, London, 11 November 2006.

² Ibid.

³ President Karzai at a press conference, Kabul 22 June 2006. Quoted in: Suhrke, A., *When More is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan*, FRIDE Working paper 26, September 2006.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, *NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance*, CRS Report for Congress, August 22, 2006.

which is intended to bring security, has in fact become one of the key factors contributing to the escalation. This has also led to significant differences and tensions within the NATO-led alliance. US, British and Canadian troops under heavy fire in Helmand and Kandahar request assistance from Dutch, French, German and Italian forces operating in other provinces who are reluctant to become drawn into the spiral of violence, and desperately try to uphold the ISAF vision of “winning hearts and minds” and providing a secure and stable environment for reconstruction.

Many fear that a withdrawal of foreign forces could lead once again to full-scale civil war. On the other hand, it is becoming more and more clear that the insurgency cannot be defeated by military means and that foreign military operations have become the main mobilising factor behind it. In other provinces, too, where many applauded the removal of the Taliban and originally welcomed foreign forces in their territory, hostility is now growing rapidly and the operational conditions for international aid agencies are deteriorating every month. One British officer, after leaving the military, even referred to the current dynamic as a “textbook case of how to screw up a counter-insurgency”. “All those people whose homes have been destroyed and sons killed are going to turn against the British,” he said. “It’s a pretty clear equation — if people are losing homes and poppy fields, they will go and fight. I certainly would. We’ve been grotesquely clumsy — we’ve said we’ll be different to the Americans who were bombing and strafing villages, then behaved exactly like them.”⁵

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Reconciliation

The resultant dilemma calls for a fundamental rethink. This includes difficult and controversial topics such as creating the conditions for reconciliation talks with the various insurgent factions, including the Taliban. Some initiatives have already been taken in this regard, showing the potential for pursuing this option and recognising that anti-government groups in Afghanistan do not form a monolithic ‘Taliban’ block.⁶ At the initiative of local residents of Musa Qala in Helmand, a deal was apparently struck with British troops to retreat from the area while the village elders promised to distance themselves from Taliban groups. According to one of the British officers involved, if the deal holds it could provide a good template for the rest

of Helmand, and has the potential to gain significant support from the local population, which is desperate after months of heavy fighting and many losses. “At the moment we are no better than the Taliban in their eyes, as all they can see is us moving into an area, blowing things up and leaving, which is very sad.”⁷

Rethinking the strategy will also require regional talks with Pakistan and Iran about a strong and constructive engagement to prevent further escalation. There is an urgent need to devote more attention to state-building efforts and Afghan ownership over policy decision making now far too dependent of its donor relations. Another urgent issue is to address the corruption and misbehaviour of state officials and police commanders, and to make a serious commitment to establishing the rule of law throughout the country. Last but not least, the brutality of some

⁵ Captain Leo Docherty, a former aide-de-camp to the commander of British forces in Helmand Province, quoted in: Lamb, C., *Top soldier quits as blundering campaign turns into ‘pointless’ war*, The Sunday Times, London, 10 September 2006.

⁶ Rubin, E., *In the Land of the Taliban*, New York Times Magazine, October 22, 2006; and Suhrke, A., *When More is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan*, FRIDE Working paper 26, September 2006.

⁷ Smith, M., *British troops in secret truce with the Taliban*, The Sunday Times, London, 1 October 2006.

of the military tactics used by foreign forces has to end (treatment of prisoners, harassment during house searches, civilian casualties of bombing raids, etc.), and a discussion needs to be opened about whether and how to retreat those forces to provincial capitals or to Kabul – including debating scenarios for eventually pulling them out of the country.

Drug Control

The establishment of the opium economy in Afghanistan over the past twenty years is a consequence of warfare, the destruction of infrastructure and the legal economy, and a massive displacement of people. A sustainable reduction is only possible if these root causes can be addressed, licit livelihood opportunities are created, state building is strengthened and good governance practices spread around the provinces.

Taliban and Opium

Causal connections are too easily made between the growing insurgency and the booming opium economy. Some picture the opium boom as being spurred by Taliban forces, which they see as promoting cultivation in order to fund their offensive and deepen instability. Others see the offensive as being spurred on by increased opium production, with increased income for the Taliban allowing it to engage in more and larger scale operations. In fact, both of these dynamics – the growing insurgency and increased opium production – can be seen to have roots in the same generalised insecurity, enduring poverty, disappointment over government performance and the international community's reconstruction efforts, resentment about harassment by local warlords and foreign forces alike, and anger over forced eradication taking place in a corrupt environment and without alternatives being put in place. Now, indeed, both factors are starting to mutually reinforce one another. This threatens to lead to even harsher drug control measures, enacted in the context of counter-insurgency operations, and neglecting the root causes behind both dynamics. These harsher measures include calls for NATO involvement in drug control, and recurring pressure for the

use of more aggressive eradication techniques, such as aerial spraying with herbicides or the deliberate introduction of a poppy-killing fungus epidemic.⁸ Such moves towards a Colombia-style 'Plan Afghanistan' would be the worst possible path to take. Colombia is a dramatic example of how such measures can put in motion a vicious cycle resulting in further escalations.⁹

Keep NATO Out

A first important line to draw is to keep NATO forces fully out of drug control operations. There is a general recognition that involving foreign forces directly in the eradication of poppy fields would be counterproductive. But the permissive NATO mandate to support Afghan drug control operations can still easily draw ISAF troops into this field. This would only further compromise and complicate an already untenable crisis situation. Early indications of massive poppy planting in the south of Afghanistan in October/November have led to predictions of another huge harvest in 2007.¹⁰ Large-scale eradication is being planned for December 2006 and January 2007 in Helmand, the principal producing province. The UK has apparently put a 600-strong battalion of paratroopers on standby to jump into Afghanistan from six C-130 Hercules aircraft, amid fears that heavy fighting might be triggered by these eradication efforts.¹¹

⁸ Experiments have been going on in Uzbekistan (originally with US, UK and UNODC support) and in the US (after the UK and UNODC withdrew from the controversial bio-war project) to develop a *Pleospora* fungus-strain that kills opium poppy plants. For latest developments see: Bigwood, J., *Repeating Mistakes of the Past: Another Mycoherbicide Research Bill*, Drug Policy Alliance, March 2006. <http://www.drugpolicy.org/docUploads/Mycoherbicide06.pdf>

⁹ TNI, *Plan Afghanistan*, Drug Policy Briefing 10, Transnational Institute, February 2005; and Jelsma, M., *Vicious Circle, The Chemical and Biological "War on Drugs"*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, March 2001. See also many other TNI reports on these issues at www.tni.org/drugs

¹⁰ Pajhwok Afghan News, *Poppy Cultivation on the rise in Helmand*, 14 November 2006.

¹¹ Smith, M., *Paras ready to jump on Taliban as drug war looms*, Sunday Times, London, 5 November, 2006.

Silver Bullet I: Destruction

Silver bullets do not exist and that reality needs to be accepted. The idea that the opium economy can be destroyed once and for all by sending in NATO troops, or through chemical spraying, or by unleashing opium-eating fungi, are illusions kept alive by US politicians which sometimes find a sounding board for political reasons elsewhere. Such dangerous fantasies will not work and will have devastating consequences not only for the farmers and their families, but also for prospects of stabilisation and peace building in the country at large. For sound reasons, the Karzai government has until now maintained a clear position against aerial spraying – in spite of heavy US pressure. It is very worrying that recently, for the first time, a government representative stated that, given current record production figures, it may not exclude this option for the future. “This year, we’ll wait and see how it goes. Next year, the 2008 season, we will consider it.” However, there are also practical limitations. The same official pointed out the risk that, in Helmand, the Taliban can down low-flying spraying aircraft: “They have rockets. We can’t spray there.”¹²

Silver Bullet II: Licensing

Silver bullets fantasies have also appeared on the other end of the drug policy spectrum. Simplistic calls for the worldwide legalisation of drugs are not contributing much to the urgent and complex crisis Afghanistan faces right now. Proposals to just buy up the whole harvest, or incorporate the full Afghan opium production into the licensed licit opiate market for pharmaceutical purposes, also face many difficulties. The Senlis Council, an international thinktank, undertook substantial research and

an effective media campaign to promote the opium-licensing option as the solution, similar to the shifts made in India and Turkey, two other traditional opium producers.¹³ In policy circles its proposals have met with almost complete rejection. The Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics called the Senlis proposals “senseless for Afghans” and accused it of sending mixed messages that undermined the opium ban campaign. The US State Department called it a waste of “billions of dollars and many years on a complete folly of an experiment.”¹⁴

Under current circumstances, it is difficult to imagine how a controlled system could function properly in Afghanistan. Considerable doubts remain about how such a legal market could co-exist with a continuing illicit market – which will not easily disappear – and how the quantities involved could be absorbed in the global licit opiate market, even though there is no question about a huge growth

potential if the reasons for the chronic under-usage of much needed medicinal opiates in most Southern countries could be addressed. For the short term, this also fails to offer a silver bullet solution. Some initial exploratory steps in the direction of using part of Afghan illicit production for legitimate medicinal purposes, however, are well worth consideration. A not insignificant proportion already ends up on the licit market, since Iran processes all Afghan opium and morphine base confiscated on its territory into morphine for domestic use and codeine for export. Afghanistan should be encouraged to do the same: stop destroying confiscated opium and instead process it into

Intensifying a war on drugs in Afghanistan now would only add further fuel to the conflict, and that is the very last thing that is needed at this point in time

¹² Lt. Gen. Mohammed Daoud Daoud quoted in: Krane, J., Afghanistan Mulls Herbicide in Drug War; Associated Press, 30 September 2006.

¹³ Senlis Council, *Feasibility Study on Opium Licensing in Afghanistan for the Production of Morphine and Other Essential Medicines*, www.senliscouncil.net

¹⁴ Schweich, T.A., *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*, Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Remarks at United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Press Event, Brussels, Belgium, September 12, 2006.

valuable medicines that are much needed in the country. Whether or not conditions will arise in the future for introducing a licensing system for cultivation depends largely on the success of state building, conflict resolution and reconstruction efforts.

Drug Control Dogmas

More generally, for the sake of Afghanistan's future there is an urgent need for the international drug control community to re-think some of the persistent dogmas that are adding to the pressure on the country to apply repressive strategies to curb production. It is an illusion that what happens in Afghanistan will 'solve' problems related to heroin addiction in Europe, for example, whatever strategy is chosen there. Global markets adapt either by shifting production elsewhere, by replacements with pharmaceutical opiates, or by other consumer choices which do not necessarily lead to improvements in the health situation. This is not to deny that heroin originating in Afghanistan causes much harm to societies and users in the region and worldwide, and that efforts are required to gradually diminish levels of production over time. Heroin-related health problems, however, need to be addressed primarily by sensible policies in those consumption markets. Overdose deaths and transmission of blood-borne viruses through injecting drug use can be reduced by quality treatment services and harm reduction programmes such as methadone treatment, heroin maintenance, needle/syringe exchange and consumption rooms – not by stepping up eradication in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan could also benefit from greater cultural sensitivity among Western drug control officials regarding differences in values and traditions around the use of opium and hashish. In prevailing drug control dogma, it is still not accepted to make a distinction between problematic uses and cultural traditions, medicinal use, non-addictive consumption to cope with cold, pain, hunger or stress and other beneficial uses of the poppy plant. Many Afghans do understand the international community's worries regarding the flow of heroin originating in Afghanistan, even more so now that heroin consumption and injection-related

risks of HIV transmission have started to become more visible in the country's major cities. However, with regard to the domestic situation and their own cultural values, many Afghans are more concerned about the planeloads of alcohol flown in to serve the international presence in the country than about opium and hashish consumption, which are widespread in several provinces. Instead of 'zero tolerance', an attitude that respects cultural differences and recognises beneficial and medicinal uses would be a welcome gesture, including some leniency, for example, with regard to cultivation for personal consumption.

Sequencing

Intensifying a war on drugs in Afghanistan now would only add further fuel to the conflict, and that is the very last thing that is needed at this point in time. As the Afghan National Drug Control Strategy states: "*Excessive eradication may have an impact on the wider security, governance and economic development.*"¹⁵ Instead, drug control objectives have to mainstreamed into the overall peace-building, development and reconstruction efforts, and potential gains and losses have to be weighed against other objectives within an overarching plan. Prioritisation and the right sequencing remain essential. Forced eradication should not happen where alternative livelihoods are not sufficiently in place or where it is likely to exacerbate conflict. It will take a longer-term effort to reduce Afghan dependence on the opium economy, and its ultimate success will depend on improving the security situation, particularly in southern Afghanistan, bringing about more stable governance and the rule of law, and strengthening the legal economy to provide alternative livelihood options.

¹⁵ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, *National Drug Control Strategy: An Updated Five-year strategy for Tackling Illicit Drug Problem*, Kabul, January 2006, p. 18

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The worsening armed conflict and the all-time record opium production in Afghanistan have caused a wave of panic. We are losing ground. Calls are being made for robust military action by NATO forces to destroy the opium industry in southern Afghanistan. But intensifying a war on drugs in Afghanistan now would further fuel the conflict, which is the last thing that the country needs.

This Drugs & Conflict briefing focuses on opium elimination efforts and the controversy about involving military forces in anti-drugs operations in Afghanistan. It also provides background on the Afghan drug control strategy, its new counter-narcotics law, and the role of Afghanistan within the global opiates market.

Silver bullets do not exist. Peace building, reconstruction and reducing the dependence on the opium economy will be long-term processes. Their success or otherwise will depend on improving the security situation, bringing about more stable governance and the rule of law, and strengthening the legal economy to provide alternative livelihood options.

A first line to draw is to keep NATO forces out of drug control operations. There is also a moral, political and economic case for having alternative livelihoods in place before commencing eradication. Afghanistan is coming under added pressure as a result of persistent drug control dogmas, but these need to be challenged if the further spread of insecurity and undermining of reconstruction efforts is to be avoided.

Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activists and researchers committed to critically analysing current and future global problems. Its goal is to provide intellectual support to grassroots movements concerned about creating a more democratic, equitable and sustainable world.

Since 1996, TNI's Drugs and Democracy Programme has been analysing trends in the illegal drug economy and global drug policy, causes and effects on the economy, peace and democracy.

The programme does field research, fosters political debate, provides information to officials and journalists, coordinates international campaigns and conferences, produces analytical articles and documents, and maintains an electronic information service on the topic.

The goal of the programme and the Drugs and Conflict series is to encourage a re-evaluation of current policies and advocate policies based on the principles of harm reduction, fair trade, development, democracy, human rights, protection of health and the environment, and conflict prevention.