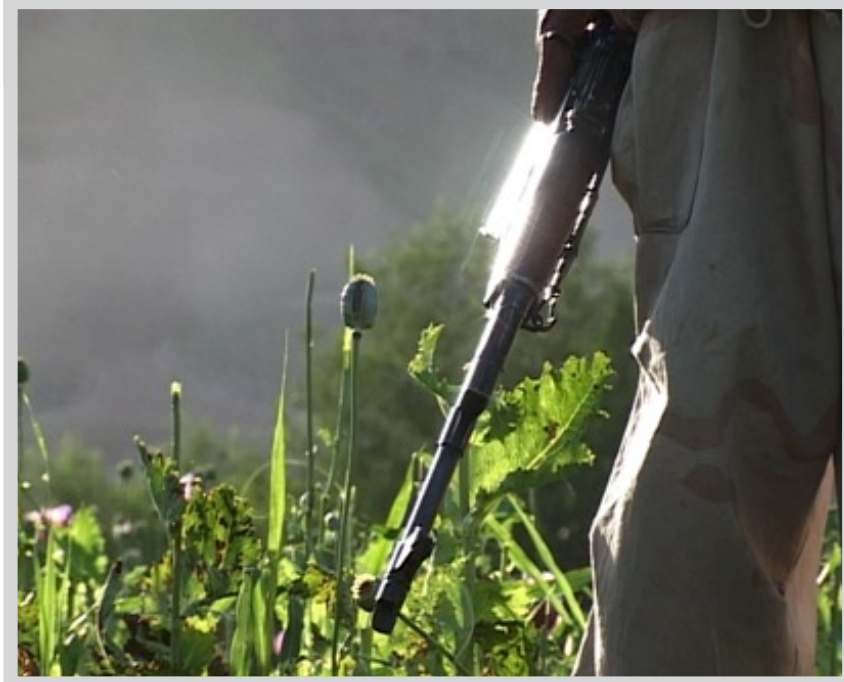
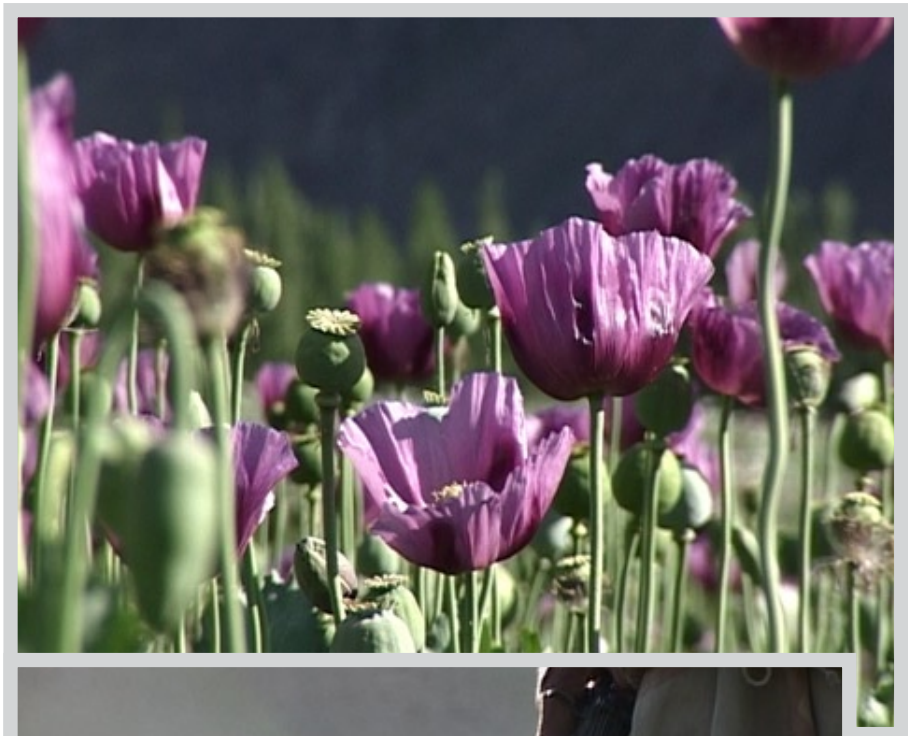


Documentary - July 2004

Bitter-Sweet Harvest: Afghanistan's New War
IRIN Web Special on the threat of opium to Afghanistan and the region



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1. Overview

The risk of losing the peace

You need not go far from the southern city of Kandahar, the former spiritual stronghold of the Taliban, to find poppy fields. A 20-minute drive away, farmer Mahbub is busy harvesting his crop, despite the Interim Authority's ban in January 2002 on poppy cultivation. Sap from the poppies is turned into opium - a class-A drug sold for millions of US dollars worldwide.



Is opium bleeding Afghanistan of its chances of democracy?
Credit: UNODC

"There is no way I will stop growing poppies unless you can offer me an alternative crop which will give me the same amount of money," Mahbub told IRIN, scraping the sap from a poppy head, which is then refined into the lethal drug.

Elsewhere in the country, the sentiment is much the same. Standing on his farm holding a shovel and shouldering a Kalashnikov assault rifle, Khak Nasrullah gazes over his sprouting crop of poppies on his land, wondering how he will spend the US \$17,000 he is set to earn from the 60 kg of opium he hopes to harvest this season.

"I will buy a power generator and a strong tractor," the 42-year-old farmer told IRIN in Argu, one of the largest poppy-growing districts in the northeastern province of Badakhshan.

Located some 75 km from Feyzabad, the former stronghold of the Northern Alliance, in the centre of the province, Argu has a population of 100,000. Deep within its muddy streets, its tiny bazaar surrounded by wooden stalls has become a major dealing centre and exchange point for hundreds of thousands of dollars each poppy season.

More than two years after the fall of the Taliban regime, as Afghanistan works to rebuild itself, poppy cultivation continues to prove a major obstacle in the country's quest for peace and stability. Experts in global counter-narcotics and political analysts warn of the fledgling Central Asian state again descending into lawlessness, with opium as the single largest element of the economy.

The risk of Afghanistan following Colombia and becoming what some describe as a 'narco-state' is high. Afghan President Hamid Karzai is asking Afghans to wage a holy war or 'jihad' - on what he regards as the greatest security threat to the country: opium.

Afghanistan in the global opium market

Afghanistan tries to recover after 24 years of civil war
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

Afghanistan is the leading world producer of opium, replacing the 'Golden Triangle' of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, which led global production in the 1960s and 1970s. As eradication efforts in the 'Triangle' improved, opium production increased significantly in the 'Golden Crescent', comprised of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan in the 1980s.

Subsequent, strictly implemented, eradication campaigns in Iran and Pakistan have left Afghanistan today as the main producer, supplying over 75 percent of opiates globally. In 2004, the estimated quantity of opium produced within Afghanistan is expected to be at least 4,000 mt, representing a rising trend, which, according to statistics, looks to outstrip any reduction achieved through eradication efforts.

Opium and the economy

How opium is viewed economically depends on your perception. "It is a curse - it is a beautiful flower; the flower of death for the addicts at the extreme end of the drugs chain and for the farmers," Antonio Maria Costa, head of the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), told IRIN.



Afghanistan tries to recover after 24 years of civil war
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

But tens of thousands of farming families in impoverished Afghanistan don't share that view. According to UNODC statistics, an estimated 1.7 million people are directly involved in opium production, as widespread and family-based poppy cultivation proliferates in 28 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

Rural surveys suggest more and more farmers are choosing poppy cultivation as whole communities struggle to survive amid the resulting chaos of the last two and a half decades of war, and more recently, years of drought.

With Kabul's authority particularly weak in these areas, farmers choose to plant illicit crops, knowing the risk of prosecution remains negligible.

According to an Economist Intelligence Unit report from May 2004, the aggregate value of opium production in 2003 was \$2.3 billion, representing more than 50 percent of Afghanistan's legal gross domestic product.

And with raw opium prices estimated at \$280 per

kg, the per capita income from poppy cultivation for individual farming families is several times higher than the average for non-poppy cultivating farmers.

In short, in a country as poverty-stricken as Afghanistan, reportedly the world's second poorest according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), there is a massive incentive to continue growing poppy. For individual farmers the benefits can mean the difference between life and death.

"It's not an illicit crop but rather a blessing which saves the lives of my children, grandchildren and two widowed daughters," one female opium farmer in Kandahar told IRIN openly.

But whatever short-term benefits the lucrative cash crop offers, the dangers posed by opium to Afghanistan as a country are considerable.

Internationally condemned as illegal



"It is a curse...it is a beautiful flower: the flower of death."

Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

The cultivation and trade of opium is illegal under Afghan and international law and therefore problematic for the international community, which sees high levels of heroin addiction and drug-related crime on the streets of Moscow, London and beyond.

Opiates are specifically prohibited under the '1988 Convention', which is the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, and is policed by the quasi-judicial Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). Some Afghans also know that the crop is illegal under international law and that it damages their credibility in the world. One villager in northeast Afghanistan told IRIN that "if we continue to grow opium Afghanistan will have a bad name. If it was a good thing our forefathers would have cultivated it".

According to a recent UNODC survey, among farmers who did not grow poppy, 24 percent cited religious reasons as the primary motivating factor against its cultivation. At government level, President Karzai is aware that he needs to achieve results in reducing the opium supply. At the Berlin donors' conference in April 2004, the US closely linked its aid package of \$2.3 billion to the Afghan government's implementation of its opium reduction strategy.

A corrupting influence

Secondly, the temptation for government officers, law enforcement officials and local authorities to become involved in the multi-million dollar trade has proved too much for many and an entrenched culture of corruption prevails.

Helaluddin Helal, the deputy Minister of the Interior, and Mirwais Yasini, head of the Counter-Narcotics Directorate, both told IRIN that the corrupting



Afghan farmer weighing opium paste
Credit: UNODC

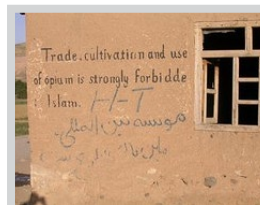
influence of the opium economy was all-pervasive, severely threatening the rule of law.

Such corruption comes precisely at a time when Karzai's new government needs to

rebuild authority and trust and show his people the benefits of reconstruction and national unity. Despite that, UNODC's Costa, who described corruption as the "major lubricant for drug traffickers" believed the country had yet to demonstrate the necessary commitment in its campaign against poppy cultivation.

Thirdly, the opium business provides a lucrative and virtually risk-free resource base for warlords and provincial commanders who want to resist central control and continue to see Afghanistan under the rule of the gun instead of the rule of law. This danger is perhaps the greatest threat to Afghanistan, for it undermines all the processes currently guiding the country towards democracy and the development of civil society.

This is a fear voiced by most commentators, donors and Afghan politicians. A vivid example of what may occur elsewhere is the attempt made to reject government control in the province of Ghor in June, when a warlord enriched by opium overran the capital town, Chaghcharan, and declared independence.



Opium production is forbidden by Islamic religious law. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

Once local commanders are fortified with narcotics, with militias and a population under their control, it is feared they will fight hard to maintain control rather than cede power to Kabul. The country's

national Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme has been slow to have an impact on Afghanistan's gun culture, allowing druglords and warlords time to recruit their militias and fill any existing power-vacuum.

Meanwhile, resurgent Taliban remnants and other groups, regarded as terrorists by the government and the international community, are reportedly being funded by the opium economy. They present not only Afghanistan, but also the region of Central Asia and the rest of the world with potential long-term problems. The US State Department says it is this threat which is driving its policy to support rapid eradication of poppy production.

Opium as a major threat



Militia men in the North of Afghanistan: Strongmen and Warlord still hold sway in the provinces.
Credit: IRIN

Militia men in the North of Afghanistan: Strongmen and Warlord still hold sway in the provinces.
Credit: IRIN

President Karzai believes opium represents the greatest security threat to Afghanistan and is urgently seeking international support to fight those, both organised (warlords) and farmers, who perpetuate and expand this illicit crop. His stated fear, and that of many in the international community, is that Afghanistan could be derailed by opium before the institutions that could establish the rule of law can be put in place.

But while presidential elections planned for October 2004, and parliamentary elections set for April 2005 offer Afghanistan a chance to move towards national

unity within a democratic process, rising insecurity throughout the country threatens to derail this unprecedented Afghan experiment in democracy.

In neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, poppy cultivation was largely stamped out during the 1980s and 1990s using strict methods of law enforcement. Both countries have existing state institutions and functioning police, and national armies able to enforce counter-narcotic laws. Conditions in Afghanistan, however, are not comparable and for some experts Afghanistan has effectively already become a narco-state: a state where regional strongmen hold more power than central government.

If they are correct, the struggle to disengage powerful interests from opium production - with so few viable or lucrative alternatives for those involved - will be long and hard.

2. Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan

The Process: How Afghan poppies become heroin



The poppy takes between 5-6 months to flower
Credit: IRIN/David Gough

The botanical name for opium poppy is 'Papaver somniferum'. According to historians it was Genghis Khan, the

Mongol conqueror, who first introduced the plant to Afghanistan.

Poppy is grown mainly by small farmers on small plots in remote regions of Afghanistan. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) conducted a survey in late 2003, interviewing more than 1,000 farmers in different areas. The survey found that the average land holding of poppy-cultivating farmers is just over two hectares, of which they plant about one third with poppy. The survey also showed that four out of five poppy farmers owned their land and made their own decisions about what to plant. However, in the southern provinces, the findings suggested a higher degree of large land holdings controlled by drug lords, who use



Each capsule can be lanced 6 or 7 times
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

outside labourers to work their fields.

Poppy flourishes in dry, warm climates on irrigated or rain-fed plots of land. It has higher drought-resistant qualities than most crops, particularly wheat.

The planting cycle is six to seven months and is very labour-intensive at certain periods: as the poppy establishes itself much weeding is required, and labour is again needed during the harvest period.

Approximately three months after the poppy seeds are planted, brightly-coloured flowers bloom at the tips of greenish, tubular stems. Normally in Afghanistan these flowers are white and purple, but can also be red. As the petals fall away, they expose a spherical or oval-shaped seed capsule. Inside the pod is an opaque, milky sap. This sap is opium in its natural form.

When the poppy is ready for harvest, in the final weeks of its cycle, the sap is extracted by slitting the capsule vertically in parallel strokes with a special tool fitted with small blades. As the sap oozes out, it turns darker and thicker as it is exposed to the sun, forming a brownish-black gum. A farmer collects the gum with a home-made scraping implement, and normally wraps the subsequent balls, or lumps of opium in plastic.



As soon as the capsule is lanced the heroin sap starts to emerge. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

The custom in Afghanistan is that each capsule is slit six or seven times, over a period of days or weeks, before the internal juices are exhausted. When the opium gum or paste has been collected, the hundreds of seeds remaining in each capsule are processed by farmers for oil. Only a fraction of the seeds from each harvest



Harvesters have to scrape off the sap from every poppy up to 7 times. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

is needed for subsequent harvests; the remaining seeds are crushed into an edible oil. Farmers in the northeastern province of Badakshan told IRIN that from 10 kg of seed they could process 5 kg of rich oil, which they either sold or used for household consumption. In addition, the dried stalks and empty pods are collected in sheaves and can be used as animal fodder later in the year.



A farmer displays some of his raw opium. Credit: IRIN/David Gough

In some cases opium is traded in markets with minimal efforts to hide the transactions, but most opium appears to be purchased directly from the farmers by buyers and dealers. In a range of complex credit agreements based on advance-sale of opium harvests, many farmers are already committed to particular dealers and merchants by the time they accumulate their yield.

Then the opium enters the black market. A merchant or broker buys the packages for transport to a morphine 'refinery'. According to author Alfred W. McCoy in 'The Politics of Heroin', most traffickers do their morphine refining close to the poppy fields, since compact morphine bricks are much easier to smuggle than bundles of pungent, jelly-like opium. At the refinery, which may be little more than a small house or shack equipped with oil drums, the opium is mixed with lime in boiling water. A white band of morphine forms on the surface, while a precipitate of

organic waste sinks to the bottom. The morphine is drawn off, reheated with ammonia, filtered and boiled again until it is reduced to a brown paste. Poured into moulds and dried in the sun, it is now morphine base. Morphine base can be smoked in a pipe or is ready for further processing into heroin.

The first to process heroin was C.R. Wright, an English researcher who unwittingly synthesised heroin (diacetylmorphine) in 1874, when he boiled morphine and a common chemical, acetic anhydride, for some hours. The modern technique entails a complicated series of steps in a well-organised 'laboratory'. The final product is a fluffy, white powder known in the trade as 'number four heroin'.

Up to the end of the 1980s, virtually all heroin sold on the streets was heavily diluted and was rarely more than 10 percent pure. Purity has risen sharply since the mid 1990s, routinely hitting 50 to 60 percent, as dealers have tried to expand their market beyond those addicts who inject heroin into their veins with hypodermic needles. Higher purity means consumption methods can include inhalation and smoking - methods which avoid the threat of AIDS through use of intravenous needles.



About 10 kg of opium makes 1 g of heroin. Credit: UNODC

On average every 10 mt of raw opium reduces to 1 mt of heroin.



Dealers buy opium directly from the farmers. Credit: UNODC

According to UNODC statistics, in 2003 approximately 3,600 mt of heroin on the world market originated from Afghanistan, representing 75 percent of global consumption. A quarter of a million Afghan farming families, cultivating an estimated 80,000 hectares in 28 provinces, contributed to the production.

2. Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan

Afghan women and opium



Young girl harvesting opium resin. Credit: UNODC

An interesting result of the labour-intensive nature of opium production is its effect on the rural household economy, the

division of labour and opportunities for Afghan women. In an otherwise ultra-traditional Islamic society opium offers women some degree of independence, through access to cash and status through their labours.

In a context of rural poverty and a chronic cycle of debt for rural families, the opportunity to grow the lucrative cash crop is seen as a blessing by many rural households. Easy to sell, albeit illicit, the opium enables the poor farmer to access credit, cash income, land and labour.



Afghan refugees using opium in Pakistan
Credit: UNODC

When asked by IRIN why she cultivated an illicit crop, Bibi Deendaray, a 55-year-old female farmer in Kandahar province replied: "In fact I should say it is not an illicit crop but rather a blessing which saves the lives of my children,

grandchildren and two widowed daughters. In general, it is the only means of survival for thousands of women-headed households, women and children in our village whose men are either jobless or were killed during the war".

However, the labour demands of poppy are high, requiring households to maximise their use of labour. "An absence of alternative income opportunities... has led to women's labour being perceived as having a low-opportunity cost", claimed the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) June 2000 report, 'The Role of Women in Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan'. Although this report was written when the Afghans were under Taliban rule, the conditions have not changed. The same conditions also apply for children who are often used, from a young age, to work the poppy fields. In some areas teachers claim that most children are absent from school during weeding and harvest-time due to the labour needs on their household plots of poppy.

The religious practice of 'purdah' in Afghanistan restricts the rural woman from seeking off-farm alternative ways of livelihood. 'Purdah' in effect requires the woman to maintain hidden from men, while conducting reproductive and productive tasks in the compound. Working outside the compound is normally rare, but with poppy, women actively participate in the various stages of the cultivation process, which demands intensive manual attention during its six-month growing cycle. "Women play a significant role in opium cultivation," declared the UNODC study. This contrasts to the low-level involvement women play in the cultivation of wheat outside the compound, estimated to be approximately 13 percent of women surveyed.

Dr Anis Aghdar, head of the Women's Affairs Department in Faizabad, Badakshan province, felt that opium cultivation has both positive and negative aspects as far as women are concerned. She told IRIN: "When a woman grows poppy she has a chance to earn an income and become a breadwinner like a man". For certain female-headed households opium allows women to earn cash, and in some families men allow their wives to keep a portion of the

profits or raw opium for their work, according to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in rural areas. Dr Aghdar predicted that "Eradication will have a serious effect on women cultivating poppy. Like someone in a job who is suddenly sacked with nothing to fall back on".

But the involvement of women in opium is a double-edged sword, providing new opportunities for some women while also giving them increased workloads where they have to perform their normal duties and help with opium. The opium cultivation work is often arduous for the women. As one female testified in the UNODC report: "As we carry out heavy jobs we are always suffering from illnesses. During the weeding we are in the fields for three to four days consecutively and we feel severe pain in our legs. We suffer from headaches during the collection of opium".

The workload for the women is further amplified when a reciprocal labour agreement is arranged between the household and an itinerant harvester. According to the findings of the UNODC report, outside labourers may assist a household in the harvesting of opium in exchange for three meals per day prepared by the women. Also, as family members help other households with the harvesting, the women are left with an increased workload. Apart from the cultivation, women also oversee the livestock, dairy production, the processing of grain, and fruit and poultry management.

The UNODC report also noted that the scant attention women were able to give their daughters restricts them from transferring useful skills to them such as embroidery and tailoring. Were it not for the use of unpaid family labour, the real profitability of poppy could be significantly reduced, the study suggested.

Analysts from the community development NGO, the Aga Khan Foundation, told IRIN that patterns of social relations and divisions of labour were changing in some areas due to women's access to income. "Traditional roles are changing, with some women paid by their husbands," an Aga Khan representative told IRIN. In some cases, he said, "the increased income for women had led to positive changes in nutritional levels and consumption patterns amongst women and children".

Despite the participation of women in the agricultural process, the substantial decision-making powers are in the hands of the men. A member of the women's rights agency, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), explained to IRIN that "Afghan society is backward and women have long been deprived of their rights. They wake up around 4:30 in the morning to do the cooking and cleaning and children and they remain within the family compound". The agency felt that lack of geographical access and the practice of 'purdah' made it very difficult for alternative livelihood projects to target women who would probably have little choice but to continue cultivating opium. "NGOs cannot reach

many women or many areas, giving rural women few alternatives," the agency said.

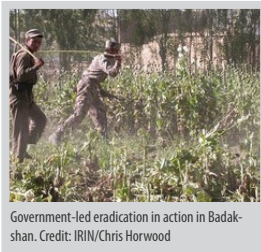
Håkan Josefsson, aid administrator of the Swedish Afghanistan Committee, which has a long history in assisting rural Afghan farmers, told IRIN: "Education is the most important solution for women to find other ways of income other than cultivating opium poppy".

The general view of those interviewed by IRIN in Afghanistan was that despite some interesting short-

term benefits, opium cultivation could not offer sustainable solutions to women for either their economic needs, nor for increased rights for women. Not least, women involved in opium are setting themselves in opposition to their country's new laws and are cultivating an illicit crop which will, one day, be eradicated by the government.

3. Eradication Efforts in Afghanistan

Poppy eradication: The issues, the players and the strategies



Government-led eradication in action in Badkshan. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

The international community and the Afghan government are committed to seeing poppy cultivation eradicated from

Afghanistan. As the largest producer of opiates, accounting for at least 75 percent of global production, Afghanistan is a major concern for those seeking to eradicate heroin supply.

With forecasts suggesting the 2004 harvests will show record levels of opium production, the government and international donors are redoubling their efforts to curb this illicit, but lucrative, economy.

Minimal risk perception

In the 2000/2001 cultivating period, the Taliban used violent reprisals and severe punishment to cause opium production to plummet from 3,276 mt in 2000 to only 185 mt in 2001 - a fall of a staggering 94 percent. In areas under its control, the Taliban was uncompromisingly tough, allowing it to complete, according to the London-based Independent newspaper "one of the quickest and most successful drug elimination programmes in history".

The Afghan president, Hamid Karzai and his government, working within the bounds of a new national constitution and seeking to implement the rule of law with respect for human rights, are obliged to use different methods to reduce poppy cultivation: methods that appear to have had little success to date, with today's production levels twenty times higher than those of 2001.

"Eradication of poppy has to reach a threshold of credibility in order to work," insisted Antonio Maria

Costa, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), when describing to IRIN the limitations of current eradication programmes in Afghanistan. He likened the current lack of credibility to someone facing a three to four percent chance of being caught for robbing a bank. With such a low risk of punishment "wouldn't you rob a bank?" he asks. A recent study by the UNODC repeats this finding, saying that "eradication levels have not yet reached the deterrence threshold".

Calling for 'Jihad'

At the Berlin conference on Afghanistan in April 2004, President Karzai called on the Afghan farmers to fight opium production with the same commitment as they would a 'jihad' - a holy war. But the subsistence farmers of Afghanistan, struggling to survive, are the primary beneficiaries of this lucrative cash crop and are unlikely to heed Karzai's call willingly. Already, violent protests and demonstrations have been recorded in different provinces against the government-led eradication programme as it is implemented by local officials. Karzai has promised the international community to eradicate 25 percent of the crop in 2004, but experts and observers consider this an optimistic aspiration when the limitations of the national eradication strategy are considered.

State instruments and other counter-narcotics agencies



Stop & Search interdiction teams checking cars leaving Kabul. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

In Afghanistan, the Ministry of the Interior (Mol), reporting to the president, is responsible for the national eradication programme. The Central Eradication Planning Cell (CEPC), within the Mol, has a number of elements implementing the counter-narcotics strategy. These include the following:

The Central Poppy Eradication Force

Supported by the US State Department through personnel, equipment and finance, aims to have four teams of 150 eradicators throughout the country. It is responsible for the physical eradication of poppies in selected areas. These teams are protected by a team of 75 private (international) security personnel, also funded by the US.

Counter-Narcotics police

This specialised branch of the police conduct investigations and stop and search interdiction in Kabul at present, but expect to expand to other areas. They have vaults of confiscated narcotics, which they publicly burn from time to time.

Specialised units

Task Force 333 is said to be a more covert squad of crack agents who aim to eliminate processing laboratories, target known drug lords and trafficking vehicles. Little information is available concerning this task force, although those interviewed suggested special forces from the UK and US were involved in the training. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, "In January 2003 British military forces, with US air support, destroyed 30 heroin factories in Nangarhar province". It is not known to what extent Afghan units were involved in these strikes.

Governor-led programmes

The president and the CEPC have, through dialogue and private meetings, involved the provincial governors in their current eradication plans. The British government has assisted with funding. The responsibility of each governor is to oversee and organize the physical eradication of a designated percentage of poppies estimated to be growing in their province, and in areas identified geographically on provincial maps. They are given funds, in installments, to cover the costs of implementing the eradication. Final payments are meant to be made following verification by the Counter-Narcotics Directorate.

The Counter-Narcotics Directorate (CND)

This is separate from the MoI and is placed instead under the auspices of the National Security Council. The CND is meant to support all the line ministries and governors in relation to eradication, monitor the CEPC, while also assisting the UNODC with its survey work. It is not entirely clear what the extent of CND's responsibilities are at this stage, or what authority it would have to conduct the monitoring of the work of the CEPC.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC has an advisory presence in Kabul but is also active in implementing annual opium surveys and various other studies. These annual surveys, including the Farmers' Intentions Survey, provide unique data, which at present is essential for analysis of the opium crisis. (Many of the UNODC reports are featured in this IRIN Web Special; see also the Links and References

section.) UNODC not only advises and offers institutional support on opium production issues, but also on demand-reduction treatment centres, law enforcement capacity building and work with the Ministry of Justice concerning the legislative and crime portfolio.

The UNODC brings with it international experience in tackling narcotics and organised crime. Based in the Austrian capital, Vienna, it has 21 field offices throughout the world, including all the major narcotics producing countries. Experience in countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Thailand show that eradication of a thriving opium economy takes decades of sustained commitment. Political and institutional conditions in Afghanistan at present differ considerably from its neighbours when their counter-narcotic wars were being fought, suggesting it may be much harder in Afghanistan to succeed.

Towards a national counter-narcotics strategy

The National Drug Control Strategy 2002-2007 was developed by the Counter-Narcotics Directorate with assistance from the UK government as well as the UNODC and is discussed in more detail below. According to the National Security Council's National Drug Control Strategy of May 2003, the Afghan five-year eradication policy has five core elements.

The first element is a **"vigorous enforcement action against drug traffickers"**. With an unforgiving geographical environment and porous borders into six adjacent countries, enforcement against traffickers



Confiscated opium paste being destroyed
Credit: UNODC

is virtually impossible at present. In addition to an absence of trained and well-resourced enforcement officers, Afghan police and border guards are poorly paid and easily bribed. The small interdiction teams in Kabul conduct

stop and search patrols along the main roads into the capital, but their seizures are limited. Trafficking routes generally do not pass through Kabul and smuggling is well organised by wealthy armed networks which at present continue virtually unimpeded.

The second element of the strategy is to provide **"development assistance to opium poppy growing areas in the framework of national development programmes"**. The multi-sector reconstruction and development needs of Afghanistan are huge and it will take decades to achieve widespread results. Providing rural areas with infrastructure, health, clean water, education and alternative employment to such a level that poppy cultivation is less attractive is not a short-term possibility. Government initiatives and non-governmental organisation programmes seeking to reduce poppy through development intervention testify to the difficulties in this regard. According to the US State Department, experience from other

countries shows that crop-substitution programmes and alternative livelihood schemes only become effective when anti-narcotic laws are enforced.

The third proposed strategy is **“treatment and rehabilitation for drug users”** within Afghanistan. Collecting data on addiction in Afghanistan is problematic, but estimates of the number of opium addicts in Kabul alone range from 30,000-60,000 individuals. The large numbers of returning refugees from Iran and Pakistan, where addiction rates are high, have contributed to the problem. The independent Nejat Centre for drug rehabilitation is the main agency offering treatment but has space, according to its chief medical representative, for only 10 addicts at any one time. A very limited number of centres in other cities offer forms of treatment, but overall facilities are completely unable to meet the needs. In some cases the treatment takes place in prisons, where those convicted of drug crimes live alongside those put into prison for detoxification.

The fourth element of the Afghan counter-narcotics strategy is to **“involve social organisations and individuals... in prevention and rehabilitation programmes”**. In the rural areas at present there are low levels of social stigmatisation associated with poppy cultivation or opium trading. However, due mainly to government messages by radio, most people are aware of the opium ban. In a recent UNODC survey, more than 95 percent of farmers interviewed admitted they were aware that poppy was now illegal in the country. In such an ultra-traditional Islamic country, where the production of opium is considered ‘haram’ (forbidden), only 17 percent of farmers who were not planning to grow poppy in 2004 cited this as the reason. Other farmers told IRIN that despite their Islamic principles the economic imperative forced them to cultivate poppy.

The final element listed in the Afghan five-year strategy is regarded by most donors and drug experts as the most important, namely **“Increasing the role of local and provincial governments and their public administration to promote and implement drug control activities, particularly opium poppy eradication and law enforcement activities”**. At present there are limitations in implementing effective rule of law. In many cases local and provincial government are implicated in the opium economy according to a recent speech from the Minister of the Interior, Ali Ahmad Jalali.

According to those who spoke to IRIN in Kabul, many governors, local authorities, police and the military are allegedly implicated in the continued production of opium and cannot be relied upon to implement a meaningful eradication and law enforcement policy. The head of the Counter-Narcotics Directorate, Mirwais Yasini, told IRIN: “As long as you don’t have a clean law enforcement capacity you can never expect to eradicate the drug”. As with most sectors in Afghanistan, the issue of corruption pervades and undermines the government’s well-intentioned objectives.

Donors slow to prioritise poppy eradication

The international community was initially slow to react to the corrosive impact of poppy cultivation, which threatens to undermine its support for reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. According to Antonio Maria Costa, the head of the UNODC, the opium trade in Afghanistan “...is a very major threat. Perhaps the major threat [facing Afghanistan]”. Since 2002 the amounts of investment in poppy eradication and law enforcement have been small in comparison to the hundreds of millions of dollars donated for reconstruction and the political process.

But donors, along with the Afghan government, are now starting to develop a more strategic approach to eradication. Apart from increased funding for eradication programmes and interdiction initiatives, some specialised advisors and personnel have been sent to Afghanistan to assist the government. However, the resources to implement their strategies are limited and the challenge they face is formidable. The Economist Intelligence Unit on 15 May 2004 reported that last year’s opium harvest was valued at US \$2.3 billion, or more than 50 percent of Afghanistan’s legal gross domestic product (GDP). Few human resources, in particular, have been targeted to combat the crop’s expansion through interdiction and law enforcement. The low level of interdiction activity is allowing a space for warlords, regional commanders, drug traffickers and farmers to spread poppy cultivation throughout Afghanistan rapidly and with impunity. UNODC surveys illustrate that this rapid expansion is continuing.

Among the international donors the British have taken a lead in working with the Afghan government in its effort to cripple the spectre of opium, but the US is also heavily committed to the task. Unlike the US, who have had officers of the US Drug Enforcement Administration active in the area for years, the British are relatively new players and are primarily motivated by the UK government’s commitment to reducing drug-related crime in the UK, where 95 percent of the heroin consumed originates in Afghanistan.

For both the UK and US governments, who both cited the Taliban’s involvement in the drugs trade as one of the justifications for the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, the dramatic expansion of poppy cultivation following the downfall of the regime, is a source of criticism.

(For a discussion of the approaches of both the UK and US governments, see the separate report Donor-supported Approaches to Eradication in this IRIN Web Special.)

3. Eradication Efforts in Afghanistan

Donor-supported approaches to eradication



Two members of the governor-led eradication teams in Badakshan. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

A number of donor nations are working directly with the Afghan government in its fight to enforce the rule of law and reduce the impact

of the opium economy. Initially not seen as a high-priority issue, opium has become more centre stage since President Hamid Karzai himself described it as a major security threat to Afghanistan and requested ordinary Afghans to declare 'holy war' against the trade.

The governments of the United Kingdom and United States stand out among the various contributing donors as being heavily committed to assisting the government to eradicate poppy cultivation. London primarily because it experience the consequences of the trade on its streets in the form of more drugs and drug-related crime. Washington understands that heroin profits support terrorism and destabilisation in the region and further afield.

Other donors are committed to the fight against heroin production in Afghanistan through rural development schemes and capacity building within the judiciary, police and border guard. But the US and UK remain the leaders in making serious levels of investment in different aspects of opium reduction strategies, in terms of financial resources as well as in the provision of expert personnel.

Attacking heroin supply - the British support for eradication in Afghanistan

Following the 2001 Bonn Agreement, which laid out modalities for peace, reconstruction and recovery in Afghanistan, international donors met in Geneva in April 2002. At this conference the UK took a lead in coordinating efforts to help the Afghan government combat narcotics. The British opium policy in Afghanistan includes capacity building and institutional support for counter-narcotics policing in Kabul and the provinces, while also providing funding for alternative livelihood schemes.

The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has highlighted the problem of Afghan heroin in Britain, linking UK policy in Afghanistan to his government's desire to reduce drug-related crime at home. A central motivation for British support to the Afghan government, therefore, is to see a significant reduction in the supply of Afghan heroin on British streets.

In February 2004, the UK government joined the Afghan government and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in co-hosting an international counter-narcotics conference in Kabul. The central debate at the conference addressed the Afghan national drug control strategy, to which the UK has committed approximately US \$130 million over the next three years.

The compensation approach

According to an Economist Intelligence Unit report, when the UK first launched its support programme for the reduction of opium production, "An initial plan to purchase the entire crop at a cost of \$50 million - \$150 million was jettisoned for fear it might prompt other farmers, not yet involved, to cultivate poppy for profit: instead growers were offered payments to destroy their crops".

The approach adopted during 2002, and into 2003, was to instead offer cash compensation to individual poppy cultivators for destruction of the poppy in their fields. Offering between \$250-\$300 per 'jerib' (five



Farmers imploring eradicators to leave their crops. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

'jeribs' are equivalent to one hectare), the British, in collaboration with Afghan authorities, disbursed approximately \$3.5 million in compensation. Specialist British police and counter-narcotics agents in Kabul worked with Afghan authorities who implemented the programme through local provincial officials.

The exercise was abandoned when evidence showed that farmers saw this approach as an incentive to replant, or increase cultivation, in anticipation of greater compensation for subsequent harvests. In some case farmers complained that officials administering the payments pocketed much of the cash in the process, which took place in remote rural areas.

The Economist Intelligence Unit on 15 May 2004 further reported that "the scheme fell prey to corrupt seizures of opium paste, non-payment of farmers and violent protests in Helmand, where eight farmers died [in 2002] when security forces fired on them". A senior representative of the Aga Khan Foundation, who works closely with rural communities in poppy cultivating regions, told IRIN the approach was "a total failure".

The governor-led approach

The revised, but not dissimilar, approach adopted since 2003 has been to work with the government to pay governors to eradicate poppy in the areas under their jurisdiction. This governor-led eradication approach was initiated by President Karzai himself and enjoys the support of donors, including the British government.

The money provided is meant to fund the transport and personnel needed to travel to fields and beat down the crops before harvest - without compensation to the farmer. IRIN saw evidence in the northeastern province of Badakshan in mid-2004 that the governor, who had been paid a \$115,000 first installment (50 percent) up front, carried out partial and symbolic eradication with men and vehicles requisitioned, not hired, for the task. Villagers interviewed considered the approach to be flawed in so far as effective eradication was not being undertaken.

Members of the British team in Kabul and in Badakshan told IRIN that many governors were unreliable, were implicated in the opium trade, and that eradication would be a slow and complex struggle. One village leader in Badakshan complained to IRIN that people came with "bags of dollars", that there was much corruption, and in the end what eradication did occur resulted from coercion by the drug lords themselves so that they could appear to be doing the job.

Under the governor-led reduction strategy, President Karzai's stated ambition for 2004 is that poppy growing will be eradicated from 25 percent of the currently cultivated areas. Recognising the complexity of the problem at the rural level, and understanding the possible involvement of local officials, President Karzai is trying to co-opt governors into being part of the solution instead of confronting them head-on. It is a 'softly-softly' approach that seeks to increase the credibility of eradication without stirring up a hornets' nest of opposition in the rural areas where Kabul's control is, at best, tenuous.

Commenting on the Afghan government's reliance on law enforcement, a Regional Drug Strategy Manager with the UNODC told IRIN that "the structures that one takes for granted in other countries are just not here. Implementation of any laws is questionable if there are no means to implement the law."

A number of observers have highlighted the divergent approaches of the UK and US governments. The US favours a robust strategy for eradication and has expressed impatience with the British approach, which some officials regard as "overly restrictive". Robert B. Charles, the Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, told the US House Committee on International Relations in April 2004 that the UK had shown "a preoccupation with avoiding any possibility of resistance" when targeting eradication.

Denying the enemies - The US approach to eradication



Newly trained Stop & Search interdiction team in Kabul. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

Newly trained Stop & Search interdiction team in Kabul

Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

According to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), only five percent of all opiates reaching the US

originate in Afghanistan. Unlike the British approach, the US focus is not on supply reduction in the fight to reduce drug-related crime back home; instead the primary concern is to stem the lucrative resource base that poppy offers enemies of the US. If the trade can be reduced by 80 percent, IRIN was told, the US will have achieved its objectives.

A recent anti-drugs TV advertisement campaign in the US told viewers that anyone using drugs was a 'de facto' financier of terrorism. A State Department official in Kabul told IRIN that the US policy on eradication is "fast and furious, aiming to eliminate the illegal trade in opium in three to five years".

An unfinished history

US policy on narcotics in recent decades has been driven primarily by political realities, shifting alliances, and the resource-value of illicit narcotics. During the 1950's and 1960's, in an effort to contain the spread of Communism in South East Asia, the US forged alliances with a number of groups in the area known as the 'Golden Triangle' (Laos, Myanmar, Thailand), alliances that author Alfred McCoy says indirectly led to an expansion in the trafficking of opium, resulting in the region becoming the main provider of heroin to the western world (see "The Politics of Heroin in South East Asia").

The 1980's saw a surge in the global supply of heroin due, in part, to increased Opium production in Myanmar and Afghanistan and a failure of interdiction efforts. McCoy argues that Western covert aid to the mujaheddin guerrillas during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan contributed to the expansion of opium production in the country and helped link heroin laboratories in neighbouring Pakistan to the world market (see www.a1b2c3.com). Later, during the Taliban period, the Northern Alliance (key allies of the US in the subsequent fight to remove the regime) was also involved in the production and export of heroin.

With its focus on combating global terrorism, US support for poppy eradication in Afghanistan is today being driven by the need to stem the flow of funds to America's enemies. A US State Department drugs expert in Kabul explained to IRIN that opium and heroin provide an important resource base for the

Taliban remnant, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's fundamentalist Islamic group and al-Qaeda. This is the central motivation for the style and urgency of the present US counter-narcotic strategy in Afghanistan.

The four pillars of the policy

Forced eradication is one of four pillars that make up the multi-million dollar investment representing the US drug policy in Afghanistan. The three other pillars are: support of law enforcement effectiveness, interdiction capacity and 'alternative development' initiatives.

In 2003, the US ploughed tens of millions of dollars into 'alternative livelihood' schemes and some smaller amounts into supporting the nascent, counter-narcotics police units. The alternative livelihood programmes, which included community development and crop substitution schemes, yielded poor results. In some cases implementing



Family members look on as eradication teams go to work in Badakshan. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

non-governmental organizations have returned US funds, claiming the concept of alternative livelihoods was unworkable at present. This year the US has minimised its investment in rural development, preferring to fund hard-hitting eradication initiatives designed to wipe out fields of poppy and raise significantly the credibility of eradication. IRIN was told by a State Department expert in Kabul that the US was dropping its investment in alternative development efforts from \$36 million in 2003 to only \$6 million in 2004.

The deterrence threshold

The US considers that adopting a 'zero tolerance' approach (the approach used in Colombia where a 100-percent eradication of the narcotics economy is sought) is neither necessary nor possible to achieve in Afghanistan. Instead it says eradication should be "random, certain and universal - with no areas exempt". The aim is to dramatically influence a farmer's planning decisions by increasing the fear of possible eradication of future crops. The UNODC Farmers' Intentions Survey 2003/4 suggests that only 17 percent of farmers surveyed do not plant opium because of fear of eradication. The same report admits that "eradication efforts have not yet reached the deterrence threshold".

The tools of eradication range from manual slashing of crops, use of tractors, rotor tillers and weed cutters, but chemicals are not used. The US currently finances the training and deployment of four teams of 150 men, in addition to a team of 75 agents of an international security firm who are needed to protect the teams

from attack as they conduct the eradication. These teams make up the Central Poppy Eradication Force under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior.

By mid-2004 the training and recruitment of these teams was underway, but only one group had already been deployed, to Wardak in central Afghanistan. The initial response of local inhabitants is an indication of the level of



Law enforcement of the opium ban is weak
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

animosity the eradication force may continue to face in the future. In May 2004, some staff were injured by a landmine in a poppy field, thought to have been laid to sabotage the work. In June, a convoy of eradicators narrowly escaped improvised explosive devices planted along the road they were travelling. In addition, staff are regularly threatened by angry locals. The demonstration in Helmand in the spring of 2002, when 2,000 disgruntled farmers staged a protest march, is an earlier example of farmers reacting to the government's eradication policy. According to a report in the London-based Guardian newspaper at the time, eight farmers were shot dead and another 35 wounded by security forces as the march turned violent.

Political risks

The "fast and furious" approach of the US, as well as the governor-led eradication policy favoured by the UK, are being resisted by farmers, and the resistance looks set to increase. President Karzai will need to calculate how far these approaches can be pushed before he and his government experience bitter resentment in rural areas. At a time when they are trying to convince Afghans to participate in a centrally-led democratic process towards national unity, the political price of rapid and random eradication may be too high.

A village leader in Badakshan, where partial eradication had just taken place, told IRIN: "If eradication is equal it will not be problematic; only if it is unequal do we disagree. Now it is unfair; in some districts not one poppy has been destroyed". With more than 80,000 hectares (400,000 'jeribs') of land planted with poppy in 2003 in 28 provinces of Afghanistan, and involving an estimated 1.7 million people, few experts trust any eradication policy to produce swift and equitable results in the short to medium-term.

3. Eradication Efforts in Afghanistan

Opium and alternative livelihoods



Wheat and poppy grow side by side but the value of wheat has fallen sharply. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

The experience from other countries where narcotic production has been successfully reduced or eradicated shows that when dealing with poor farmers, a combination of force and persuasion is needed.

The 'carrot and the stick' approach is where, on the one hand, law enforcement is implemented through eradication, and on the other hand, incentives are provided to encourage farmers to switch to alternative livelihoods. The initial optimism of those promoting and implementing 'alternative livelihoods' in the last two years has become tempered by the hard reality that realistic alternatives are elusive and remain unattractive to rural Afghans.

Alternative livelihood 'carrots'

"Alternative livelihoods" is the 'carrot' corollary to eradication's 'stick'. It is the attempt to attract farmers away from poppy cultivation, provide incentives towards different economic options and create rural environments where desperate farmers no longer need to depend on opium for survival. For many donors and planners it is the panacea that will solve the narcotics crisis in Afghanistan, but as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies involved in alternative livelihood schemes testify, successes are very rare. "We know it's bad to grow poppy but we have to do it," a farmer in northeast Afghanistan told IRIN. "There are no jobs and wheat is worthless. If the government gives us food and jobs then we will stop doing this."

The root cause of the swift spread of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is primarily poverty and opportunism. Rural areas often lack all basic services and functioning infrastructure, while income-generating opportunities are scarce. According to those implementing programmes, alternative livelihood projects can only work as part of a wider multi-sector alternative development package, requiring massive investment and commitment throughout Afghanistan. Anthony Fitz-Herbert, senior advisor on alternative livelihoods to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, told IRIN: "There is no magic bullet, alternative livelihoods is not a rabbit that can be pulled out of a hat. It requires long-term holistic rural development and nothing less".

Experts agree that even if such a programme is viable, it would take decades to achieve, while the rapid spread of poppy cultivation only takes a few planting

seasons. The relative difference in time needed between achieving results in poppy proliferation and alternative livelihood projects gives opium a huge advantage. It is difficult to see how the slower benefits of alternative livelihood schemes can compete with the short-term cash returns of poppy, not only from the individual farmer's perspective but also from warlords who may control large-scale poppy cultivation in their areas.

A dream crop

Opium is a dream crop from a farmer's perspective. It is drought-resistant, hardy, and one capsule alone contains hundreds of seeds for future crops. The whole season's harvest fits into a couple of plastic bags, is light in weight and requires no special storage conditions. In most cases the buyer comes to the farmer's farm, releasing him of the need to haul sacks of wheat to an uncertain market, possibly hours away by mule. In an environment where the rains are unreliable, infrastructure is weak and many rural communities are remote, poppy must seem like a gift.



In a village in Badkshan villages beg eradicators to leave their crops. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

The key attraction, however, is the price. As wheat prices tumble in markets overflowing with the crop, nothing compares with the price of opium. A major survey of farmers' intentions conducted by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in late 2003 found that 61 percent of farmers interviewed cited poverty and the high prices of opium as the primary motivation for poppy cultivation.

Opium prices have fluctuated considerably in recent years following the laws of demand and supply. Even with a bumper crop predicted for 2004, and the inevitable fall in opium prices, wheat is an unattractive cash crop alternative for farmers. According to the joint government and donor-financed National Crop Output Assessment released in mid-2003, the average yield of wheat per hectare realised an average of US \$222 for farmers. For the equivalent area of land under poppy cultivation the farmer could earn an average of \$12,700. On average, the income for farmers from wheat cultivations is approximately two percent of what the farmer can earn producing the illicit but highly lucrative opium. This staggering differential goes a long way to explain the challenges any alternative livelihood efforts may face.

Against the law and Islam

The cultivation of opium poppy is illegal in Afghanistan. Its cultivation, processing and trafficking is outlawed by the new constitution and contravenes international law. Although this may mean little to many Afghans at present, it will increasingly cause them to come into conflict with the authorities as the rule of law begins to take root. The recent UNODC survey indicated that more than 95 percent of farmers knew poppy cultivation was illegal; a fact many had only recently learnt from radio broadcasts.

An Islamic country, Afghanistan is ultra-traditional and devout, yet economic necessity, and to some extent greed, enable people to transcend the Quran's forbidding of narcotic production. For some, the fact that the opium or heroin is destined for non-muslim countries lessens the wrong, although this idea is belied by the reality that 85 percent of Afghanistan's opium is consumed in the region of Central Asia, where addiction rates are soaring. Addiction in Iran alone is now estimated to affect between 800,000 and 1.2 million people, and opiate users are estimated to number 3.5 million - over nine times the global national percentage average. Iranian users source their opium or heroin entirely from Afghanistan.

In Kabul, a US State Department official told IRIN that after investing \$36 million in 2003 in a wide range of alternative livelihood initiatives, the US saw little success and this year is investing more in the 'stick' of eradication; only \$6 million has been invested in the 'carrot' of alternative livelihoods. It was claimed that even specialised non-governmental organisations were not proposing crop substitution or alternative livelihood projects, finding themselves unable to convince farmers to participate in schemes to lure them away from poppy. Meanwhile, the government is hoping programmes such as the nationwide National Solidarity Programme will help to convince farmers to stop planting poppy.

The labour-intensive nature of poppy cultivation also has a detrimental effect on reconstruction initiatives in a country where daily wage rates have risen between two- and fivefold because of poppy. At certain periods of the year, the workforce is unavailable for anything else. Near Herat city, in western Afghanistan, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation reported in 2003 large fields of wheat rotting unharvested as farmers neglected their own field in order to work the poppy.

Farmers maximising their options



Alternative cash crops to opium have little attraction for farmers in rural Afghanistan
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

Opium is simply too lucrative and user-friendly for any other agricultural activity to compete. Ideas of introducing commercial rose plantations, saffron or cotton are simply not viable options as long as

a culture of impunity allows poppy cultivators and drug dealers to operate with minimal risk.

Farmers in post-war, post-drought Afghanistan have to make rational decisions to maximise their options just to survive. At present, with eradication programmes lacking credibility and law enforcement weak, the rational decision for farmer appears to be to continue growing opium. The findings of the UNODC survey indicated that "two out of three farmers interviewed [69 percent]...stated they intended to increase significantly their opium production in 2004". In respect of the impact of on-going alternative livelihood efforts, the report said "economic aid provided so far has had little or no overall impact on farmers' intentions to grow or not grow opium".

In some cases, farmers have little choice as they farm other peoples' land and do not select the crop planted. During two decades of war, the Taliban regime and years of drought, many farmers sunk into deep debt. After selling off all their assets and watching their livestock die of thirst and hunger, many sold their land, resulting in the rural economy being characterised by a vertical integration of land ownership, where large numbers of land holdings are held by a relatively small group of people.

Hundreds of thousands of farmers, of Afghanistan's approximately 26 million population, are now landless and work as sharecroppers or tenants on the land they previously owned, or as itinerate labourers. The wealthier landowners will make their own decisions as to what they plant, and clearly their most attractive option, albeit illegal, is still poppy.

Experts appear to agree that efforts to establish realistic, alternative non-poppy livelihood projects need to address the needs of small farmers to maximise their subsistence possibilities while minimising their debt levels to local merchants and money lenders. But they also need to address the profit-maximising desires of the middle and large landowner, who may be harder to persuade.

A senior representative of the Aga Khan Foundation in Kabul, with community projects in opium-producing areas, said the emphasis on alternative livelihoods in the last two years was misplaced. "It was a missed opportunity," he told IRIN. "They should have implemented serious interdiction for one or two years to develop a stronger perception of risk before introducing alternative livelihoods." As long as the rule of law is not in place, and enforcement of the opium ban is not implemented, those promoting alternative livelihoods are betting in a game where the odds are, at present, wildly high against them being successful.

3. Eradication Efforts in Afghanistan

Kandahar: destroy some, leave some



Government-led eradication teams slash down poppy during harvest. Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

Kaka Razaq was astounded when soldiers surrounded his scarlet poppy fields in the Dand district of the province of Kandahar, southern Afghanistan. He rapidly turned pale as he witnessed the armed men hauling out the lucrative crop he had been raising so diligently over recent months. "For God's sake please, this is all I have to feed my family," the 56-year-old farmer pleaded.

Razaq's opium fields were the first to be targeted in Kabul's southern poppy eradication drive that began in the province in early April.

Kandahar is one of the major poppy-growing provinces in a country that continues to produce the majority of the world's illicit heroin. But although people like Razaq were very unhappy that their fields were being destroyed, things could have been worse. With elections looming and the government's authority weak outside the capital, the eradication programme is not designed to remove all the offending crop - such a move would be grossly unpopular in a nation that earns billions from the drug. "This is my order, destroy half and leave the remaining half untouched," Kandahar governor Mohammad Yousuf Pashtun reminded his men.

Following a series of nationwide poppy eradication campaigns this year, Kandahar was the third province after Nangarhar in the east and Helmand in the southwest where poppy fields have been reduced since late March, according to the government's recently-formed Counter Narcotics Directorate (CND). The CND's office in Kandahar said global positioning system (GPS) surveillance had shown that there were about 2,000 hectares of poppy fields in the province.

"We measure every poppy field. Then one half is destroyed and the other half remains untouched," Pashtun told IRIN. The governor set out the dilemma that Afghanistan's government currently faces - bowing to international pressure to get rid of the crop but acknowledging that a heavy-handed approach to the trade could risk severe economic and social problems. "We have to balance the two extremes, to eradicate this illegal crop will lead to extreme poverty and devastation of the rural economy."

In more than two years since the fall of the fundamentalist Taliban regime - who had almost eradicated

poppy production in its final year in power - the narcotics industry has grown to account for about half of the country's annual domestic product, according to the United Nations. Output last year reached 3,600 mt, which is more than three-quarters of global supply.

Lack of official resources is another factor in the growers' favour. With few people and only two tractors to deploy in the eradication effort on the ground, farmers are optimistic provincial authorities will only get round to removing a small percentage of the poppy crop this season. With so much money at stake, poorly paid local police were also highly susceptible to bribes, growers confided in IRIN. Despite the limitations, the CND office in Kandahar is confident they can deal with the 50 percent of the crop scheduled for destruction.

"This will be quite different from previous campaigns. We have US \$ 50,000 allocated by central government for this Kandahar eradication drive, which will last around 25 days, and this will help a lot," Ahmadullah Alizai, head of Kandahar's CND told IRIN. "However the proposal was 75 percent, but as the province is still affected by drought, the authorities and people's representative have agreed to 50 percent eradication this year."

But destroying just half the poppy harvest is proving unpopular enough. A similar eradication drive in the eastern province of Nangarhar that removed just eight percent of poppy, was disrupted by hundreds of angry farmers vowing to fight the government's plan to destroy their crop. The demonstrators were asking for immediate alternative livelihoods, more assistance to their region and monetary compensation for fields destroyed.

Pashtun told IRIN he would not tolerate dissent and that local growers had to accept what they were doing was illegal. "We are not bribing the farmers, it is their responsibility to obey the government's order," he said. Pashtun said he had proposed a comprehensive plan to create alternative livelihoods and support the opium farmers following eradication. "If I do not succeed in my plan I have promised them [Kandahar people] that I will resign," the governor maintained.

Meanwhile, growers argue they are an easy target and that the powerful drug barons who organise the trafficking and reap the massive profits should also be targeted. "Unfortunately this will only be implemented against us poor and powerless farmers, it is an opportunity for the local police to squeeze us, not



An old farmer pleads with eradicators: In many places farmers are not so peaceful
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

the big drug lords," said Razaq, who has ten mouths to feed.

A local judge in Dand district told IRIN the Kandahar eradication scheme would prove very problematic as growers felt they were being unfairly victimised. "It was decided to eradicate eight percent in Nangarhar, while it was 20 to 25 percent in Helmand and 50 percent [to be eradicated] in Kandahar."

Although the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is not actively involved in eradication, it has been called on to play a monitoring role. Provincial authorities said they had asked the UN and other agencies based in Kandahar to go to the fields slated for destruction to act as impartial observers. "The UNODC will follow it independently; meanwhile I have requested other agencies to oversee our programme," Pashtun said. "Also there is a satellite surveillance and I depend on that also.

The UN said it supports Kabul's drive to reduce the influence of the opium economy in Afghanistan. "We support it as part of the government's efforts to eliminate the drug problem in the country," Manoel de Almieda e Silva, a spokesperson of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) told IRIN, noting however, eradication was only part of the solution. "You also have to boost the economy to create jobs and opportunities for those currently make a living out of planting poppy," he said.

The US-backed Afghan government vowed to take drastic action against the opium trade at a key donor's conference held in Berlin at the beginning of April where at least \$ 8 billion was pledged for reconstruction. London and Washington are the most important contributors to the drugs war: most of the heroin ends up on their streets.

3. Eradication Efforts in Afghanistan

AFGHANISTAN: On the Iranian border with new anti-trafficking police



Patrolling the long desolate border with Afghanistan is a lonely business
Credit: IRIN

Sweating beneath the furnace-like sun on the narrow veranda of a newly established border control post, Haji Shir, an anti-drug trafficking officer,

stared out into the rolling nothingness of desert that is Islam Qalah in western Herat province, 1,300 km from the capital Kabul.

Shir is the commander of a poorly paid and ill-equipped 50-strong team policing the border with Iran. The squad is trying to counter the heavily armed drug mafia that operates with ease along the 940-km border running heroin through Iran and on to Europe and Russia. According to estimates by Iranian drug authorities, about 50 percent of the total opiate production of Afghanistan transits through Iran.

"We are the only tools at this post. There are not enough arms, no communication, no transport and, worst of all, sometimes no water to drink," the commander told IRIN at the isolated Tulai Mishri border control post.

Tulai Mishri is one of the 10 new border control posts funded by Tehran - a bilateral initiative brokered by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). It's the first scheme of its kind to use Afghans as border guards along this rugged wasteland that is perfect for illegal trafficking. Until just recently only Iranians have been patrolling the porous mountain passes between the two countries.

Equipped with rusty AK-47 assault rifles and based in a building that is not even connected by road to the other nine border posts, the odds are still very much on the side of the traffickers who have the latest GPS positioning systems, hi-tech communications gear, plenty of modern firepower and endless bundles of US dollars to buy off anyone left alive.

The Afghan Interior Ministry, supported by Germany, the lead nation in Afghan police training, along with the UK - which leads the Afghan counter narcotics efforts - is in the process of training a 12,000 strong border force by 2005. While a 500-strong newly trained customs police is operating in Kabul international airport, authorities in the ministry said intensive efforts were under way to train thousands of new officers to counter drug trafficking and border infiltration over the next two years.

But the rudimentary facilities at Tulai Mishri - one of very few border posts designed to apprehend heroin traffickers - indicate how much still needs to be done to stem the flow of drugs from Afghanistan. "I think this is the worst life and the hardest job with mountains and harsh desert which are extremely difficult to control," one of Shir's men commented, after asking for cigarettes and food.

Conditions are better on the Iranian side of the border. "Let's look just a hundred metres beyond this zero point, they [Iranian border police] have everything they need, even an asphalt road to each post, but here it is like a prison without a jailer," the commander, who said they had not been paid their \$30 monthly salary for several months, complained.

Shir and his men are more concerned with protecting themselves from the trafficking gangs than with taking them on. "They have strong vehicles, Russian motorbikes and are heavily armed," Shir said, adding that their post was attacked by a group of smugglers at the end of April.

While there are currently only three official crossing points along the seemingly endless Iranian border, Kabul has identified locations for 25 border control posts. Mir Azam, director of border control posts in Islam Qala, told IRIN the proposed posts would be located in the Afghan provinces of Herat, Farah and Nimruz, but would have little impact on the booming

heroin trade. "These 25 posts will just mean traffickers will revert to the remaining thousands of kilometres of open, unpoliced border," he said.

But the new posts, and teams like those led by Shir, are a start. "The issue of trafficking needs to be addressed separately from the issue of production," Mohammad Amirkhizi, head of UNODC in Afghanistan, told IRIN. He called for more international funding for law enforcement initiatives.

"Unfortunately nobody here is prosecuted for drug trafficking," the UNODC representative said.

4. Opium Addiction

Addiction: Drug abuse in Kabul city and beyond



Heroin addict shooting up
Credit: UNODC

Afghanistan is trying to pick up the pieces after more than two decades of violent and socially destabilising civil war. Already one of the poorest countries in the world, the years of war have compounded the challenges facing

modernisation of a primarily agrarian society with feudalistic and traditionalist social relations.

The civil war caused extreme hardship for millions of Afghans who also suffered the highest population displacement of a country in recent years. With traditional coping mechanisms damaged and many families losing the male breadwinner, levels of destitution have risen, compounded by the return of millions of refugees from Iran and Pakistan. The post-conflict reconstruction period has yet to offer tangible opportunities for most Afghans who struggle to survive.

However, outside the towns, amidst the struggling reconstruction and recovery efforts, the opium economy is booming. Afghanistan is by far the world's leading supplier of opiates, with more than 1.7 million farmers estimated to be involved in opium production. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the years of war and social disintegration have left the population "extremely vulnerable to a range of mental health problems, particularly chronic depression, anxiety, insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder. In such a context the availability of cheap opium, heroin and other pharmaceuticals is causing a rapid rise in drug dependency in Afghanistan as well as neighboring countries".

In its Community Drug Profile report of July 2003, the UNODC goes on to say: "Kabul has a serious

drug problem with tens of thousands of drug users requiring assistance with the social, financial and health-related problems resulting from their drug use that effects not only themselves, but their families and the community they live in".

Kabul city had 1, 781,000 inhabitants, according to the 1999-2000 census, although this has increased significantly since the fall of the Taliban and as Kabul has become a relative hub of fast economic growth in a chronically poor country. The influx of refugees from Iran and Pakistan has also added to this recent increase. In early 2003 the UNODC estimated, using a methodology of key informants, that the lowest estimate of drug users in the city was approximately 63,000. The same study showed that hashish was the top drug used, with opium, heroin, pharmaceuticals and alcohol following.

The head of the Counter-Narcotics Directorate in Kabul, Mirwais Yasini, told IRIN that the number of opium addicts in Kabul alone was more than 30,000. A senior representative of Nejat, the non-governmental organisation running rehabilitation centres and community outreach facilities in the city, suggested there were between 30-60,000 addicts, but cautioned against trying to define the problem with data that was not reliable in a society where few will admit to using drugs, which are considered unclean and are forbidden by Islam.

In Kabul, where the medical services are primitive, massively overstretched and entirely unprepared for dealing with addicts, the Nejat centre offers a unique, residential treatment programme. Despite being funded by various international donors, the centre told IRIN it has only 10 beds for residential addicts on its rehabilitation programmes. The provision for rehabilitation of opium addicts is almost negligible in Kabul as well as in other cities. In Herat city, a local drug-related prison houses those addicted and convicted of trafficking crimes as well as addicts

seeking assistance. Conditions are austere and there is no separation between those who voluntarily seek help and those serving part of their drug-related prison sentence in detoxification.

Two addicts 'chasing the dragon' in Kabul
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

The problem of addiction exists in all layers of society. Both men and women are affected. Local residents and returning refugees from Iran and Pakistan use opium mainly to alleviate medical conditions such as tuberculosis, colds and asthma. It is also reported that young children receive opium as a painkiller. Some addicts recognise they are addicted and seek assistance; many others are thrown out by their families or communities, who regard drug addicts as morally degenerate.

A range of patterns of opium use is discussed in the UNODC survey. It says users often carry on using opium because they have developed an addiction, and the withdrawal pains are too challenging to endure. These withdrawal pains include insomnia, tuberculosis and heavy coughs. The opium user is often forced to bring an end to its use when resources are not enough to cover an addiction. With opium being more expensive in comparison to hashish and pharmaceutical drugs, it is not uncommon for the opium user to replace opium with more available and less expensive alternatives.

There are various ways to consume opium. In Kabul, the most common technique is to smoke it through a cigarette, a water pipe, or through a 'shekhi shang'. The latter method involves using a heated metal blade covered with opium. The resulting fumes are then inhaled through a tube. However, many users consume opium orally, or use it to make tea.

According to the report, it is difficult to estimate the quantity of the opium intake, as the users themselves measure it in terms of beans and peas. With a predicted average of two to three doses per day, at a cost of between Afg 20-50 (US \$0.40-\$0.60), opium users regularly have financial difficulties. Many resort to stealing and begging from family members and at bazaars. Withdrawal pains often prevent addicts from working, and thus unable to earn money. Often, drug addicts cause tensions, disagreements and fights within their family and the community they live in. In the family, a subject of crucial concern is often the household economy - money spent on drugs can drain already small purses.

One addict recounts in the report: "I spend my son's salary on opium so it affects our economy, and always my daughter-in-law fights with my son because of my opium use". Shunned by their neighborhoods, the opium users sense they are unwanted and have low levels of confidence.

As the use of intoxicants is forbidden ('haram') under statutory law, there is a risk of arrest and conviction.

"Sufficient treatment and rehabilitation instead of custody is necessary in order to find a way out of the cruel cycle of drug addiction," advises the UNODC study.

With rising production, trafficking and spillovers into local markets, neighbouring countries to Afghanistan are exposed to the spread of drug abuse. Iran is the country most at risk, with between 800,000 - 1.2 million abusers, followed by Pakistan with at least 700,000 addicts and Central Asian countries with more than 300,000 opium users. Central Asia now stands out as the region with the highest global rise in opiate use in recent years. Large harvests of poppy in Afghanistan, which are expected in 2004, are most likely to lead to a drop in opium prices and an increase in opium abuse in these countries.

Hand in hand with the proliferation of the use of opiates goes the threat of HIV/AIDS. The rapid rise of HIV/AIDS cases has been accelerated by the tendency of the users to inject their drug via shared needles. Forty of



Two addicts 'chasing the dragon' in Kabul
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

every 100,000 inhabitants in countries neighbouring Afghanistan have HIV/AIDS, with Iran and Pakistan the most affected. The recent explosion of cases in Central Asian countries has been reported by the UNODC to be in direct proportion to the rise in opiates taken through intravenous methods.

According to one UNODC report: "The drug-related problems experienced by many drug users are compounded by the general lack of accurate, practical and realistic information about drugs". The lack of awareness, openness and information concerning drugs in Afghanistan add to the severe predicament of drug users, as they often underestimate the character and the consequences of the drugs they use.

With opium production rising, and without the restrictions implemented by the Taliban on individual use, the number of addicts in Afghanistan is bound to rise. In neighbouring countries through which opium travels en route to world markets, the rise in addiction, with the accompanying rise in cases of HIV/AIDS, is reaching alarming levels. While donors and government departments wrestle with the issues of eradicating the opium economy, people working with addicts hope that provision for those affected is not overlooked and can be significantly increased.

4. Opium Addiction

Afghanistan: Women and addiction



Two addicts 'chasing the dragon' in Kabul
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

Rahema's tale is a sobering one. The 35-year-old mother of seven is one of Afghanistan's growing number of female opium addicts. Brought

from remote northeastern Badakshan province to the Afghan capital's only drug rehabilitation centre, she knows this is her last chance for help.

"I made a crucial decision to quit this addiction. My future and that of my children depends on it," she told IRIN. But after so many years of addiction to the powerful drug, doctors wonder how much they can help - not just Rahema, but other women like her.

"We don't have the resources to deal with this," Dr Nagibullah Bigzad, an Afghan clinical psychiatrist at the poorly-equipped unit, told IRIN in Kabul. Speaking from his office at the 15-bed facility, the young doctor said women were an increasingly vulnerable group to opium. "Opium usage remains a big problem in the region," Bigzad said. While most women use it for medicinal purposes given the lack of doctors or health services in Badakshan, many still rely on it as an escape from the horrors of war or poverty, he maintained. "Women simply go to the market and buy it there."

But for David Macdonald, a drug demand reduction specialist for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the Pakistani capital Islamabad, the problem of female opium addiction extends far beyond Badakshan. "There are thousands of women suffering from opium addiction throughout Afghanistan, as well as amongst the large refugee population in Pakistan and Iran," Macdonald told IRIN. "All indicators suggest this problem is increasing," he warned.

Although there is no accurate data on female addiction levels, Macdonald said the numbers are serious enough to warrant an urgent demand for treatment and rehabilitation. In Badakshan alone, Bigzad estimated that up to 60,000 women were addicted, while another report said between 20 and 30 percent of the local population along the eastern border of Badakshan and Tajikistan were addicted.

Still another conducted by two different health centres for women and children in the southern province of Kandahar suggested that over 20 percent of older women used opium, particularly for respiratory problems. The disparity alone

demonstrates a stronger need for quantifiable data.

Opium enjoys a long history in Afghanistan. First introduced by Alexander the Great over 2,000 years ago, its traditional usage among minority groups such as Tajik Ismailis and Turkmens included a wide range of social reasons, from sexual stamina to physical strength, as well as a medicine for over 50 diseases.

In many remote rural areas where there were no health clinics, pharmacies or medical facilities, it is still the only available drug when someone falls ill and is claimed to be particularly useful for pain relief, respiratory problems and the treatment of diarrhoea, the report explained.

In Badakshan today, other opium products apart from the resin were still commonly used, for example poppy seed oil for cooking and the dried stalks of opium poppy plants as fuel for cooking fires or as animal fodder (konjara), it added.

In 1994, the Wak Foundation for Afghanistan (WFA) published a report entitled 'National Drug Addicts Survey in Afghanistan: Opium in the Hindu Kush', stating that in northeastern Nuristan, small amounts of opium were being given to young children for cough relief. The report warned that children of opium addicted mothers could become addicted through breast milk, adding that this could lead to further problems.

For example, if an addicted mother was unable to find opium for her use when her child could not sleep or began to cry, such a mother might attempt to calm her child by either rubbing a small amount of opium on her lips and then putting her lips over the lips of her child - or by inserting a grain-size piece of opium into the child's anus, the report said.

Although Rahema maintains none of her six children suffer from addiction, she recalled how if her children were ill, she would blow opium into their open mouths. "It was effective and helped the children sleep," she claimed.

But with social displacement, increased impoverishment, reduced cultural constraints and social sanctions, as well as endemic stress and depression, more customary usage of opium inevitably leads to abuse. "With extreme human deprivation and suffering, the increased availability of opium and heroin, along with a wide range of cheap and easily available pharmaceuticals, abuse has increased," Macdonald said.

"War and social disruption has devastated traditional coping mechanisms and has left the population, both inside and outside the country, extremely

vulnerable to a range of mental health problems, particularly chronic depression, anxiety, insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder," he explained.

Additionally, the use of opium, along with other illicit substances, has been seen by an increasing number of Afghan women as a short-term palliative for their suffering. However, in the long term it results in a wide range of social, economic, legal and health-related problems for the individuals, families and communities concerned, he warned. In short, such abuse poses a distinct barrier to human and socio-economic development.

Asked what needs to be done, he maintained education was key. "Women need to be warned of the dangers involved before they start, especially with regard to conception, pregnancy and other health care issues," he explained. As for those who were already addicted, he emphasised a need for a user-friendly detoxification and treatment service with a comprehensive aftercare and rehabilitation programme (including vocational training and

income generating activities). "Home-based is what works best in a cultural context where it is difficult for many women to leave home and enter an in-patient treatment programme," he noted.

But for Dr Bigzad back in Kabul, the needs are even more rudimentary. "Look at this place. We don't have enough medicine or food for the patients or medical staff on duty. The place has no heating and we don't even have enough glass for the windows," he exclaimed. Like many of the staff members at Afghanistan's only drug rehabilitation centre, salaries are minimal and often months late. In short, the resources to challenge the problem of female opium addiction simply aren't there.

Meanwhile, sitting on the soiled sheets of her bed, Rahema is joined by her oldest son who has come to support her. "My problem has become my family's problem. I can only hope to rid myself of this," she exclaimed. Her battle, however, has just begun.

4. Opium Addiction

Afghanistan: Day in the life of an addict



Kabul has an estimated 30,000 opium addicts
Credit: IRIN/Chris Horwood

It's dawn in Chendawul's twisting tiny streets, southeast of the capital Kabul. In the isolated ruins of an old building,

Suhail, a 28-year-old drug addict, sits on piles of rubbish surrounded by hundreds of flies.

He is preparing to smoke his first 10-gram heroin dose of the day. "This is my palace. No disturbance from the police or passers by," says Suhail. He heats the heroin powder on the foil of a cigarette pack and sucks its smoke through a plastic pen tube. "There are many ways of smoking it," says Suhail with closed eyes and shivering smiling lips.

Suhail recalls his former days when he was a high school student and poppy grower in the eastern city of Jalalabad, one of the leading poppy growing provinces of conflict-ravaged Afghanistan. "I used to harvest poppy fields. I started to eat opium just for fun which later turned to disaster," says the homeless Suhail, who fled home when his family discovered his addiction three years ago.

Suhail gets out of his "palace" after an hour of being "high", and looks for menial jobs to fund his next supply. "I have to work for two days to support my

daily habit," he says. It costs Suhail 250 afghanis (US \$5) to buy his daily supply of heroin powder. "I often steal or beg for money if there is no work," he says.

For drugs addicts like Suhail, who live in the world's leading opium producer country, finding the drug is not a problem. "It's abundant, you can get it as easy as buying Coca-Cola," he claims. "The drug dealers are known to addicts and to the police as well. We are however treated as criminals while they are regarded as respected members of this community."

Drug addiction in conservative Afghan society is more than just an illegal act. Suhail says he is judged guilty of offending against law and order, culture and religion. "There's nowhere to take refuge. The people hate us, the police hate us and hospitals hate us," says the young peasant.

"Just recently, the police caught me red-handed while buying heroin from a local drug dealer. The drug dealer was released on the spot and I was detained for several days," he maintained. "I had to do hard manual work and clean all the toilets of the police station for three days before I was released."

But still Suhail prefers detention in a police station to spending nights on the streets of Kabul. "At least there is a bed to sleep on," he says. "I often sleep in mosques or cafés but sometimes they kick me out when they realise that I am an addict."

Intravenous consumption of heroin is directly

Afghan opium feeds a major market demand of western countries. The country produced 3,600 tonnes of opium in 2003. This is projected to increase considerably in 2004, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Consequently, recent studies indicate that drug abuse is now turning into a serious problem for the Central Asian nation. Latest UNODC reports indicate that the capital Kabul alone has around 60,000 drug addicts.

According to the UN agency, the main drugs used in Afghanistan are hashish, opium, heroin and a wide range of pharmaceutical painkillers and tranquilisers. Other drugs including alcohol, volatile glues and solvents are also on the list of top illicit drugs.

While drug abuse is rising alarmingly, there are very few rehabilitation and detoxification centres in the country. Suhail says he was forcibly taken by local police to a government rehabilitation 20-bed hospital but he managed to escape. "It was like prison. They stopped me from smoking it, which is impossible to do at once."



Intravenous consumption of heroin is directly causing massive rises in HIV/AIDS. Credit: UNODC

The destitute drug-victim has no hope of once again being a respectable member of his community. "I think I'm on a one-way street," he says.

4. Opium in the region

Central Asia: Regional impact of the Afghan heroin trade

The five former Soviet republics that lie north of Afghanistan are experiencing growing destabilisation as result of a vast increase in heroin trafficking from their southern neighbour, various experts say.

"The vulnerable political fabric in the capitals and at local level is being eroded as drug money fuels corruption and lawlessness," regional analyst Sergei Andreyev of the London-based Institute of Ismaili Studies told IRIN. Addiction rates are rocketing. The transmission of HIV/AIDS through intravenous drug use is on the rise and steadily making the transition into the general population. And the weakening of political and legal institutions by drug trafficking is an additional obstacle to vital economic and political reforms in the region, he explained.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, all five Central Asian countries have been plagued by an increase in drug trafficking. Illicit production and the consumption of unprocessed drugs (raw opium, cannabis) have long been a part of everyday life for centuries in the region, since conditions are very favourable for the cultivation of the opium poppy and cannabis. However, the past decade has seen the commercialisation and mass proliferation of drug trafficking, as well as money laundering and the corruption that facilitates it. Drug trafficking has become a political issue that threatens tenuous inter-state relations. Russia and Uzbekistan justify their involvement in Tajik affairs by the necessity to confront drug-related crime there and to prevent the spread of drugs beyond Tajikistan's borders.

There is a strong link between the drug business, arms purchases for conflicts and the activities of terrorists and Islamic fundamentalist groups in the region, according to journalist and author Ahmed Rashid,

who has written a number of best-selling books on Afghanistan and Central Asia.

"Although Central Asia has made some advances in regional cooperation to tackle the drugs menace, it suffers from a lack of resources and skilled personnel to staff its narcotics bureaus and customs services," he told IRIN from the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore. Ahmed added that international donors have tended to view the regional drugs problem as almost entirely a policing issue with little consideration of broader development and security angles.

Given the region's proximity to the Golden Crescent of Afghanistan and Pakistan and the closure of the traditional route via the Balkans to Western markets, Central Asia has become the main transit point for heroin bound for markets in Russia and Europe. Regional and national drug-enforcement bodies maintain the growing number of heroin seizures, particularly in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, indicate that there are now opium refineries operating both in opium-growing regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan and in growing numbers, along the Central Asian transit route.

Drug-related problems are similar for all Central Asian states, with Tajikistan suffering most because of its proximity to Afghanistan and a weak government, instability and poverty.

KYRGYZSTAN. Kyrgyzstan's location makes it geographically convenient as a transit point for smuggling Afghan and Pakistani opiates northward. Officials report that there are many trafficking groups operating in Kyrgyzstan, all based in the southern city of Osh, which repackages Afghan opiates and smuggle them north using a variety of methods. New luxury cars on the dusty streets and a sharp rise in property prices in Osh are evidence of drug

money, local drug enforcement officials say. Recently, police have noticed an increasing trend in the use of individual carriers who cross the mountains with drugs in their belongings, as well as a rising number of low-income women who carry drugs to earn money for survival. The price of opium in Kyrgyzstan has increased significantly during the last few years. Constant arrests of government officials involved in drug trafficking continue to support evidence of narcotics-related corruption.

TAJIKISTAN. Illegal drugs, almost entirely from Afghanistan, flow principally along two routes: through the mountainous Gorno-Badakhshan region in eastern Tajikistan, then north through the city of Osh in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and onto Tashkent and beyond, or into southern Tajikistan and from there to the capital Dushanbe, from which they move by rail, truck or air to Tashkent and beyond. The latter route has become more important due to the negative attitude of the Ismaili people of Gorno-Badakhshan to drug trafficking caused by an edict from their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, condemning drugs and the relative success of the Aga Khan Foundation in revitalising the Badakhshani economy. Many rogue warlords in southern Tajikistan are believed to be involved in drug trafficking. Tajikistan's economy and banking structures are not conducive to money laundering: the country is isolated, the banking system is undeveloped and the economy lacks extensive international links. However, corruption is widespread in Tajikistan, and plays a significant role in facilitating the illegal drugs trade. The former head of Tajikistan's anti-narcotics agency, Lt. Gen. Gafor Mirzoyev, was arrested in August after police allegedly found him in possession of more than 3,000 weapons, including a Stinger anti-aircraft missile.

UZBEKISTAN. Uzbekistan is part of an attractive and increasingly important shipment route for opium and cannabis products moving from southwest Asia toward Russia and Europe. Uzbekistan has laws against corruption, but none specifically targeting

drug-related corruption. Law enforcement officials' low salaries, which are often received several months late, make them susceptible to bribery and other forms of corruption. Uzbekistan sits astride several routes through which southwest Asian opium and cannabis reach Russia and Western Europe. Currently, the key route from Afghanistan is via the Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, through Osh in Kyrgyzstan, and on into eastern Uzbekistan's Andizhan region. A secondary route from Afghanistan, but one of growing significance, is through Turkmenistan, with the drugs generally entering Uzbekistan through the lightly guarded Bukhara region. The direct route across the Afghan-Uzbek border through the city of Termez has become less appealing to traffickers now. Tashkent's concern about instability in Afghanistan has led to a tightening of security along that border, effectively closing it.

TURKMENISTAN. Turkmenistan is used by drug traffickers as a conduit to smuggle illicit drugs to the West, and precursor and essential chemicals to producers in southwest Asia. Currently, the greatest challenge is from international drug smugglers seeking to move opium and/or heroin from Afghanistan to western markets and precursor chemicals to the east. The growing number of casinos and foreign-run luxury hotels raises questions about Turkmenistan's vulnerability to money-laundering activities associated with the narcotics trade, although no official cases have been reported. Seizure patterns indicate that drugs, mainly from Afghanistan, transit through Turkmenistan en route to markets in Russia, Turkey and western Europe.

KAZAKHSTAN. The most popular means for transporting drugs through Kazakhstan is on north-bound trains from Kazakhstan to Moscow, using adolescents and the elderly to smuggle the goods in their baggage or on their persons. Money laundering is easily accomplished in Kazakhstan due to a lack of banking regulations and infrastructure, Andreyev pointed out, underlining that this often goes hand-in-hand with drug trafficking.

4. Opium in the region

TAJIKISTAN: Stemming the heroin tide

Peering through his binoculars, a young soldier, barely 20 years old, scans the



Russian frontier border guard much of the Tajik border for the moment
Credit: Tajik Drug Control Agency

horizon outside the border town of Moskva, in southeastern Tajikistan's Khatlon province.

One of thousands of Russian border guards

along the 1,200 km frontier between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, he is the first line of defence along one of the most important transit routes for Afghan heroin today.

Russia has maintained border guards along the Tajik-Afghan frontier since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, preceding a formal agreement with the Tajik government to do so in 1993.

Historically described as the soft underbelly of a vast Russian empire, the rugged, mountainous, often porous frontier has long been viewed as too much of a

possible security risk by Moscow for the impoverished, ill resourced nation - still reeling from the effects of five years of civil war - to safeguard on its own.

But in a move which is already raising eyebrows in the West, Tajikistan is moving towards replacing all Russian border guards with conscripts from its own national army, a move which could further exacerbate the flow of drugs - particularly heroin - passing through the former Soviet republic.

That development - and the impact the drug trade is having on Central Asia's poorest nation - is now being debated.

"It's in everyone's interest - Tajikistan's, the region's, Russia's, western Europe's, the whole international community's - to make sure that the massive amount of narcotics flowing out of Afghanistan does not destabilise this country," US Ambassador to Tajikistan, Richard E Hoagland, told IRIN in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe.

THE FACTS

According to Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency (DCA), the country accounts for more than 90 percent of Afghan drugs seized in Central Asia today, a fact confirmed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).



Intravenous consumption of heroin is directly causing massive rises in HIV/AIDS. Credit: UNODC

"Tajikistan is the main transit country for drugs in Central Asia," Major Avaz Yuldashov of the DCA told IRIN in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe. After Pakistan and Iran, the mountainous state ranked third in drug seizures in 2003,

capturing 9.6 mt of drugs, including 6 mt of heroin.

And while experts remain reluctant to guess the amount of opium passing through the country's borders, estimates based on seizures are startling.

"In 2003, 2,371 kg of opium were seized in Tajikistan," James Callahan, UNODC regional representative for Central Asia, told IRIN from the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. "Even if we assume that seizures are about 10 percent - which is high enough - it would give the figure of about 23,000 kg as a possible amount of opium passing through the country."

Similar extrapolations regarding heroin are even more revealing. Given the 5,600 kg of heroin seized in 2003, assuming a real figure of some 50,000 kg and a street value of US \$9,000 per kg in Tajikistan, its street value in Dushanbe would be about \$450 million, Callahan calculated, noting that that figure would rise to between \$1.5 and 1.8 billion in Moscow, and exceed \$3 billion in some EU countries.

INSIDE AFGHANISTAN

The problem begins just south of the border in Afghanistan, where despite international efforts, poppy cultivation continues largely unabated. While there are no reliable figures, preliminary assessments and satellite photos suggest a bumper crop for 2004.

"Given the data I have seen so far, any increase between 30 and 80 percent would not surprise me," Thomas Pietschmann, research officer for the UNODC in Vienna told IRIN, suggesting that 2004's could be the largest harvest yet, putting a heavier burden on neighbouring countries to fight drug trafficking, including Tajikistan.

And while some eradication had taken place, it seemed to have started too late, according to the drug expert.



Patrolling the 1,200 km border with Afghanistan has proven a challenge
Credit: Tajik Drug Control Agency

That fact could well prove a major challenge for Tajikistan's DCA - largely out resourced and outgunned by the powerful Afghan drug lords to the south - despite international donor assistance.

"Following the demise of the Taliban, everyone in the international community expected a decline in poppy cultivation, but that has not been the case," Yuldashov said.

There had been an eight to nine-fold increase in Afghan heroin production, he claimed, noting that even the area of raw opium cultivation had grown exponentially - from 10,000 hectares during the time of the Taliban to at least 82,000 now.

From 2002 to 2003, areas under cultivation increased by a minimum of 30 percent, the Tajik DCA official said. "Comparing 2002 to 2003, cultivation areas near the Tajik-Afghan border had increased by 50 percent," he warned, adding that cultivation and lab production of heroin in Afghanistan was now out of control.

THE ROUTE THROUGH TAJIKISTAN

His assessment may be correct. Over a six-year period from 1998 to 2003, 30 mt of drugs and narcotics were seized in Tajikistan - including 16 mt of heroin, DCA figures suggest.

Smugglers - determined to bring drugs through whatever the cost - are increasingly employing more sophisticated techniques. While conventional methods of stashing drugs in the false bottoms of cars and trucks crossing the border continue, donkey carts and camels are also being used. An increasing number of women and children are being used as couriers, which provides the smugglers with a cheap means of moving their goods. Some of the couriers swallow the

contraband to discharge later. Some mothers hide it on their children. Others in their clothes and on their person.

Along border areas where the Pyandz river is shallow, such "mules" have been known to wade across with the contraband on their heads, often hiding the drugs in the thick reeds and marshes prevalent in the area.

In a brazen challenge to the authorities, over the past three years heroin has begun arriving on the streets of Dushanbe in neatly packed one-kg packages - complete with the name of the producer in Afghanistan stamped on the front. A map of Afghanistan on the front with an arrow pointing to Tajikistan leaves little doubt as to the route the "product" is expected to take.

"It is regarded as a challenge," Yuldashov bristled. "It's proof that production and manufacturing of heroin [in Afghanistan] is out of control."

Given that, the withdrawal of several thousand Russian border guards in the region could have serious implications. Though there have been some cases reported of Russian troops being involved in trafficking activities, according to Pietschmann they are very much the exception.

"In contrast, areas controlled by the Tajik army are generally seen as weak spots," the UNODC official warned during a recent visit to the region. He said he had been told that a number of Afghan warlords involved in opiate trafficking in the northern provinces had "good relations" with Tajik border posts.

After passing the border in the hands of Tajik drug smugglers, the heroin leaves the country by way of criminal syndicates and gangs for the larger cities and towns of Russia and the European Union. "They go to Russia via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, or via Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, or via Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan," Pietschmann explained. "Much of the trafficking takes place by rail. There is also a significant involvement of women as drug couriers," he added.

"The area of highest seizures is between the Uzbek/Afghan border and the beginning of the Pamir mountain range," Callahan added. "There is some indication that Afghanistan's heroin may be reaching western China through Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan, but this has not been verified."

SOCIAL IMPACT

The social impact drug trafficking is having on the landlocked nation of 7 million people remains largely unreported. Although largely a transit country, some of the drugs remain in Tajikistan, fuelling increasing levels of crime, corruption, drug addiction and HIV/AIDS.

"Drug addiction is on the rise," Azamdjon Mirzoev, director of Tajikistan's Republic Centre for AIDS Prevention and Control, told IRIN in Dushanbe, describing intravenous drug usage as the main mode of HIV transmission.

Although estimates vary, health experts believe there are between 30,000 and 50,000 intravenous drug users in Tajikistan alone.

Since 1991, 228 cases of HIV/AIDS have officially been registered: a significant number of them were recorded in the first four months of this year, Mirzoev observed.

But despite the flow of so much high-priced heroin through the country, there are no residual benefits for most Tajiks, 83 percent of whom live below the national poverty line, with a full 17 percent of the population considered destitute, according to the World Bank.

"There is no real monetary benefit for the average Tajik in having all these drugs, while there are any number of social problems," one Western diplomat in the Tajik capital told IRIN. But for a small number of people in Tajikistan, drug trafficking has proved profitable - not in the macro sense, she stressed, noting that no hospitals, schools or roads were being built to benefit the Tajik people.

"A few people are building mansions and driving Mercedes, and have tremendous Swiss bank accounts. But the money is not staying in the country and helping the people. It's not taxed. There's absolutely no benefit for the Tajik people," the diplomat maintained.

Local residents interviewed by IRIN agreed. One university student pointed to a late model luxury car - largely uncommon on the streets of Dushanbe - describing it as just another example of how a small number of individuals were profiting from the trade and of the government's seeming inability to deal with it. "It's obvious what they are doing," the student said. "We call them 'drug mobiles'. What else can they be?"

CORRUPTION

But reducing the influence of wealthy traffickers in a country where corruption is endemic won't be easy. In Tajikistan, where doctors earn as little as \$5 or \$6 a month, it's not difficult to understand why. Much of the corruption is need-based, from the police right up to officials in the government. Without it, survival in the region's poorest nation is nearly impossible.



Heroin packages seized by Tajik drug control authorities show a map of Afghanistan and an arrow pointing to Tajikistan
Credit: IRIN/David Swanson

"I'm not saying that every person in Tajikistan is corrupt. I'm not saying that the entire government is corrupt, but you have to understand that civil servants don't make very much and they are frequently expected 'to purchase' their jobs," another Western diplomat told IRIN, requiring them to go into debt to get the job. "The expectation is that they will take



Suspicious wealth on the streets of Dushanbe
Credit: IRIN/David Swanson

bribes to pay this debt back - and continue to take bribes to make the job profitable."

That reality presents a major challenge for those wishing to mitigate the billion-dollar drug trade through the country,

given the level of poverty. And while those contracted to work as Russian border guards - generally Tajik nationals - earn just \$12 to \$15 a month, Tajik conscripts earn less than a dollar.

"Suppose you're a Tajik border guard and a drug smuggler wants to come through. These guys are much better equipped, better armed and very serious. 'I'll give you \$5 to go smoke a cigarette or I'll shoot you,' they say, leaving you with little to no choice," the diplomat said, asking: "What do you do?"

THE WAY FORWARD

That's precisely the question being asked by international drug experts now. "Tajikistan has to develop capacities needed for full sustainability in drug control areas which will take time and serious efforts at political, legislative and technical levels," UNODC's Callahan said, adding that Dushanbe needed to develop an efficient system of border control, which was a problem of vital importance, possibly with wider regional implications.

One way forward is a further strengthening of the DCA. Since its establishment in 1999, the UN-organised office has taken the lead role in the fight against drugs.

So successful have their efforts been, there is growing concern that traffickers may be diverting their operations through neighbouring Turkmenistan, which shares a 744-km border with Afghanistan, instead. Although good news for Tajikistan, such a development could be disastrous for reclusive Turkmenistan - a country the International Narcotics Board (INCB) maintains has failed to do enough to stem the tide of drugs in the region.

Over the past five years, the DCA has received some \$9 million in international assistance in its war against drug trafficking, primarily from Washington, but also from Norway, Canada, France, Japan, Germany and Italy, according to Yuldashov.

"The street value of opium seized in Tajikistan was approximately \$1.5 billion. You can compare the input and the output," the DCA official said proudly.

That pride is being shared by donors and UNODC officials alike. "The establishment of the Drug Control Agency in Tajikistan is a milestone in the history of drug control in the region," Antonio Maria Costa, UNODC's executive director, said during a May visit to Dushanbe.

"Over the past five years, Tajikistan has become one of the leading countries in the world in opiates interceptions," the top UNODC official explained, adding the impressive results achieved in the country provided a model to be replicated in neighbouring countries as well.

"The DCA has established a reputation - I would say a world-class reputation - of an honest organisation that is playing an important role," US Ambassador Hoagland echoed in a testament to Washington's continued financial support for the DCA's activities.

But with the withdrawal of Russian border troops appearing increasingly imminent, it's clear that more needs to be done. "There are concerns right now being voiced internationally because the Russian border force may withdraw from the border within the next year or so. That would raise questions of whether the Tajik border guard is prepared to assume those responsibilities. I think they will be, but it's going to take a fair amount of international assistance and cooperation - including cooperation from Russia - to achieve this goal," the ambassador warned.

The UNODC's Callahan agrees. "Politically the [Tajik] government is willing and prepared for the task of protection of the country's borders, but it faces enormous difficulties and needs considerable international support."

In response to a request from the Tajik government, the United States and the European Union sent a joint assessment team to visit the country in June to examine the border situation and determine what assistance might be needed to improve border security, but maintain the issue is a bilateral one between Tajikistan and Russia.

Others, however, feel it goes beyond that.

5. Opium in the region

IRAN: Failure to confront Afghan heroin leads to growing domestic drug problem

Patrolling the long, desolate Iran-Afghanistan border is a lonely business.
Credit: IRIN

Iran's border with Afghanistan is mountainous and rugged - a dry barren land that stretches as far as the eye can see.

The only signs of life are the

silhouettes of soldiers that dot the landscape, perched high on the mountain peaks. Machine guns slung across their shoulders, they are a chilling reminder of the danger edging westward towards them from across the border.

More than 3,600 Iranians have been killed in gun battles with smugglers in the last 25 years and every year thousands of kilograms of heroin, opium and hashish stream through these porous mountain passes.

Iran is the westernmost point of what is fast becoming the new golden triangle, with Afghanistan and Pakistan pumping the world's heroin through its highways towards the west. Most heroin sold in Europe comes from poppies in Afghanistan, and the shortest route is through Iran.

Last year, 124,670 kg of drugs were seized by the Iranian authorities. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that this is only 15 per cent of the total amount pouring across the border.

ANTI-NARCOTICS TRAINING

In a police anti-narcotics training academy in Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan, millions of dollars worth of drugs are proudly displayed on long tables - proof of the latest drugs hauls. Beside this, exhibited in neat rows, is equipment seized from smugglers - night-vision goggles, satellite phones, Kalashnikov assault rifles, bullet-proof vests - testaments to the sophistication of the traffickers. Some of the officers here have even seen smugglers with rocket launchers and US-sourced Stinger missiles.

"This really is a war," Antonio Maria Costa, head of UNODC, told IRIN during a recent visit to Iran.

In the academy, two drugs officers stand to attention, each with a colossal German Shepherd sniffer dog sitting obediently by his side. Although the dogs were donated and trained by France, international aid is limited. Britain has supplied bullet-proof vests, but

even then the British parliament had to pass a special law to allow them to be exported.

Keeping the smugglers out of Iran is an expensive business and the Iranian government is finding it hard to bear the financial burden. At a press conference with Antonio Maria Costa, the governor of Sistan-Baluchistan requested more help from Europe.

"We need help from the international community to help us fight drugs. We're doing your job here in Sistan-Baluchistan. What I'd really like to emphasise is that the drugs are being trafficked from Iran to Europe," he said.

"This is the responsibility of the whole international community - countries should cooperate to tackle this menace. European countries are investing, but the Iranian government believes this assistance is not sufficient and the West should invest more. A more balanced cooperation mechanism is needed," Mehrdad Rezaeian, UNODC national technical officer, told IRIN.

With outdated equipment and scarce resources, the Iranians are fighting a losing battle - the smugglers are using ever more cunning and sophisticated methods. In a bid to reduce the deluge of drugs transiting through Iran, authorities have dug deep trenches stretching for kilometres so as to slow down the smugglers. But the traffickers have simply reverted to old technology, four-by-fours cannot traverse the ditches, so they have switched to camels - an ancient, tried and tested method of smuggling, used along these routes for centuries. Each camel train of 40 animals can carry up to seven mt of drugs and there are even stories of caravans of camels that know the route so well they smuggle the drugs without a guide.

TRAFFICKING - THE EXPERIENCE OF ONE CITY

In the hot, bustling eastern border city of Zahedan, evidence of the drugs trade is all-pervasive. Horrific photos of "martyrs" - the soldiers and officers killed by the traffickers - are displayed in local police stations. Fifty percent of arrests here are on drugs charges. Sometimes the violence on the border spills into the dusty streets of the city, with kidnappings and executions.

"A few years ago there were a series of kidnappings in Kerman, Zahedan and Khorassan. These activities were mainly instigated after the government intensified border control with new army units, so this network began to harass government with kidnappings," Rezaeian said.

"A colleague of mine was assassinated a few months ago in a revenge killing for the death of a smuggler - there was a bomb under his car," a police chief told IRIN, holding up gruesome photos of the charred remains of his friend.

Even a local taxi driver has had a brush with the smugglers. "They're everywhere. Lots of people I know have had run-ins with them," Hamid Gorbani told IRIN. "A few years ago five men in uniform stopped my car. When they came close, I realised the uniforms didn't look quite right. I asked them 'who are you?' and they then put a gun to my head and ordered me out of my car. They were coming from the road to Pakistan," he said.

In the desolate border town of Mir Javeh, locals wearing brightly coloured Baluchi clothes squat on their doorsteps in the scorching heat. Mir Javeh exemplifies why this province scores the lowest for Iran in the UN human development index and the highest in the human poverty index. There has been a drought for years, and the only jobs on offer are to be human mules to the smugglers. It is mostly the individual couriers who get caught.

Every year, police arrest thousands of first-time "mules" hiding drugs in the soles of their shoes, in toothpaste tubes, cassettes and in their stomachs. They risk the death penalty if they are caught carrying more than 30 grammes of heroin or five kilos of opium. Three years ago, five smugglers, including a woman, were hanged from a crane in Tehran.

GROWING NUMBER OF DOMESTIC DRUG USERS

The Iranian authorities say the drugs barons are from powerful Baluchi families who have been smuggling across the region for centuries. Baluchistan is a vast area, stretching into three countries and many smugglers have triple nationality, which allows them to slip easily through borders. This, coupled with strong tribal loyalties and huge profits, makes it easy for the large clans to operate.

The incessant flow of heroin through the country has meant that Iran's own drug problem is now rocketing. The demand for drugs within the country is at an all-time high, ensuring a thriving market. But drug abuse figures are often misleading and conflicting.

"In order to know how much drugs are distributed and consumed in Iran we have to know the number of drug users - but there is a big difference between official figures and unofficial figures," Mehrdad Rezaeian said. "The government says that there are two million drug users in Iran of which 1.2 million are regular users and 800,000 are recreational drug users, but unofficial figures by experts are quoted as up to 5-6 million - 10 percent of the population," he said.

Deaths among drug users have increased dramatically - in 2001 there were 2,345 recorded cases - a year-on-year rise of 70 percent. The increase has largely

been attributed to the 2000 ban on opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. As opium supplies dried up, users turned to poor-quality heroin - with purity levels of only 2 to 5 percent.

"Heroin use began to soar when the Taliban banned poppy cultivation. People couldn't get hold of good opium so they resorted to taking heroin," Emran Razzaghi, assistant professor of psychiatry at Tehran University, told IRIN. Rezaeian estimates that Iranians could consume up to 1,000 mt of drugs a year.

Government officials are starting to speak out about the drugs issue. Recently, Mohammad Fallah, secretary-general of the Drug Control Headquarters, the government's main anti-drugs organisation, said that there were no reliable statistics on drug abuse in Iran. While not very encouraging, this was at least an official acknowledgement of a growing problem in this conservative country.

LINK BETWEEN DRUG ABUSE AND HIV/AIDS

Opium - which costs as little as two dollars a gramme in Iran - is the main drug abused, followed by heroin and most recently hashish, which is particularly popular among the young. Opium and heroin are mostly smoked but this habit is progressively being replaced by injecting, which is considered to be responsible for some 70 percent of all HIV/AIDS cases recorded in the country.

To celebrate his third anniversary of being clean, Mohammad is attending an HIV/AIDS benefit concert in downtown Tehran. It is hard to reconcile his tanned and healthy appearance with the fact that he was a heroin addict for over 10 years and is HIV positive. "I contracted the virus in prison, using shared needles. In prison it was pretty bad - nearly everyone I knew was injecting heroin," Mohammed told IRIN.

There are 6,000 registered HIV cases in Iran, but some non-governmental organisations estimate the real figure is more like 300,000. Out of Iran's prison population of about 170,000, nearly half are held on drugs-related charges. The prison service is suffering from what is fast becoming an epidemic - the UN reports that HIV prevalence among injecting drug users in 10 Iranian prisons has reached 63 percent and it has been estimated that Iran could be home to as many as 200,000 injecting drug users, most of them men.

OFFICIAL RESPONSE

The Iranian government is showing signs of tackling the problem - there are now 100 out-patient treatment centres in Iran and a growing number of NGOs offer drug treatment. Along the lengthy border, the government is in the process of establishing 25 new patrol stations. It is also setting up a new scheme to train Afghan soldiers to patrol the border - the first of its kind.

UNODC head, Antonio Maria Costa, says that the drugs problem in Iran will only be solved when there is stability in the surrounding countries. "We want to address and solve the problem of terrorism in Afghanistan and terrorism is linked to drugs," he said. With the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, this could take a while.

There are signs that some of the anti-drugs smuggling initiatives are taking effect. "The drug traffickers are now using new routes, although Iran is the shortest land route from Afghanistan to Western Europe. Border control has made it more difficult, so they [the smugglers] are using more routes through the four CIS [Commonwealth of Independent states] countries. This shows that the Iranian route is not as easy as it used to be," Rezaeian said.

But Rezaeian believes that if Iran really wants to tackle the drugs problem it must start with new legislation. "If the Iranian government wants to be more effective it has to introduce money laundering into legislation - by this kind of legislation the government will be able to take the proceeds of drug trafficking out of traffickers' hands," he said.

"Iran does not currently have legislation to find suspicious dirty money - this is one of the priorities we have set for ourselves." After much lobbying, there is now a bill on money laundering, and UNODC is waiting expectantly for its ratification.

5. Opium in the region

UZBEKISTAN: Crime and addiction rising on opium front line

Since the overthrow of the Taliban - who banned poppy cultivation in Afghanistan - at the end of 2001, the level of heroin transiting through southern Uzbekistan has been increasing as Afghan opium output has reached new highs. The increase is leading to new security and health problems in the unstable former Soviet republic.

In Surkhandarya province, bordering Afghanistan, heroin seizures and drug-related crimes have been rising steadily over the past two years. Last year, the provincial anti-narcotics authorities arrested more than 650 people in connection with drug trafficking, up from 500 just 12 months ago. According to a representative of the Interior Ministry, Rustam Togaev, a big heroin haul of 92 kg was found in the frontier zone of Sarias district in February.

"There are more crimes connected with drugs in Denus, Sarias and Uzun districts. They also take place in the [border] city of Termez," Ismatullo Choriev, the secretary of the provincial commission on drug control, said. "More drug crimes are observed in Termez, and they are increasing," he stated.

"When the Taliban was in power in Afghanistan, we used to seize several kilograms of heroin per week," Shavkat Esanov of the Baisun Interior Ministry department said. "We expected a decrease of drug trafficking after American troops were brought into Afghanistan, but we witness the opposite. In March for example, a large batch of heroin - 37 kg - was discovered at the 'Chak-chak' post."

According to the official, the preferred route for traffickers is into Tajikistan and through Uzbekistan en route to western markets. The heroin enters Tajikistan in the hands of well-organised teams of couriers who

wade across the Amudarya and Pyanj rivers, usually at night, backed up by accomplices armed with satellite phones, off-road vehicles, wads of bribe money and plenty of heavy weapons.

"Borders [throughout the region] are not guarded well," Kamol Dusmetov, head of the Uzbek National Centre for Drug Control, said. "In many places, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, borders are virtually open. You jump across a ditch and you're in another country."

Local Uzbek officials were reluctant to admit there was significant heroin trafficking direct from Afghanistan. "We observe the flow of narcotics only from Tajikistan," said Rustam Togaev, head of the counter-narcotics unit at the Surkhandarya provincial interior department. "Every person who wants to get a little bit rich is involved in that."

The official line from Tashkent is that illicit drug trafficking via Uzbekistan's southern border posts is now impossible because earlier this year border guards and customs staff were given special equipment, including X-ray devices for checking passenger baggage and cargo flows at border control points. Local officials went further. "Effective policing means that illicit drug trafficking across the 130-km Uzbek-Afghan border is now virtually impossible," Shavkat Esanov, a senior law-enforcement official in one of Surkhandarya's districts, told IRIN, without going into details.

"The project, with a total budget of more than US \$2 million, is aimed at improving customs and border control at the Khayraton border crossing point on the Uzbek-Afghan border along with enhancing the capacity of Uzbekistan's law-enforcement bodies in their fight against illicit drugs," the state Uza news agency reported in late March, adding that the main

donors for the project were the UK, Norway, USA and Finland.

In common with other countries in the region, poverty is at the root of the Uzbek heroin transit trade. "Mostly unemployed citizens are engaged in illegal drug trafficking," Ismatullo Choriev, of the drug control body, said. "In order to provide social security to people, new jobs must be generated. Conditions must be created so that they can purchase plots of land to earn their living".

Despite a lack of official figures, local health practitioners say the level of drug abuse in Uzbek provinces bordering Afghanistan is on the increase. "In 2003, the number of registered drugs addicts was up to 2,300," Oibek Turdiev, a doctor from the drug rehabilitation clinic in Termez, a border town in Surkhandarya province, told IRIN. The reason is the vastly increased flow of opium and heroin into southern Uzbekistan from neighbouring Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

According to the doctor, at present there are at least 2,000 addicts registered in the province, of whom 87 are women, nearly double what it was just three years ago. But as addiction remains a social taboo and drug abusers are reluctant to register, official figures are misleading. "To come to the real number, this figure

must be multiplied by six or seven," the doctor said. "This is how we can get an approximate number of the addicts".

"When I was getting used to heroin, it was because of despair. I suffered a lot. Sometimes there was no meat at home, and sometimes there was not even any flour. When I started using drugs, I had a feeling that there were no problems at all. So, I thought of only buying heroin instead of flour or meat," Hasan Akhmedov, a heroin addict from Zarabag village, about 50 km from the Afghan border, told IRIN.

But poverty and cheap, easily available heroin make kicking the drug very hard. "At least 400 addicts are treated annually in our hospital but only about 10 to 12 percent of them quit this harmful habit," Juma Eshbaev, the head physician at the Surkhandarya provincial drugs clinic, said.

"The causes of drug problems in the region are social and economic problems," Choriev told IRIN in Termez. "We are addressing the issue with the aim of providing people with jobs. We found out that in year 2003 there were a lot of crimes committed by unemployed people," he added. "People are not paid and this is a soaring problem all over the republic."

5. Opium in the region

TURKMENISTAN: Heroin use poses a growing challenge

Murat, not his real name, is steadily working the phone in search of something. At first glance, it is unclear why he appears so worried, but after listening to him speak on the phone, it is clear he is after his next hit of heroin.

The unemployed 34-year-old, a resident of the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat, does not consider himself an addict, given the stigma attached to it. He maintains he can quit any time, whenever he wants. At present, the financial burden of supporting his two children lies with his spouse, who teaches and does extra work to provide for the family - and her husband's heroin habit.

Some observers told IRIN that Murat's case highlights a growing issue which Turkmen officials are reluctant to acknowledge, as officially there are no problems in the reclusive Central Asian state.

Information or statistics on the number of drug addicts, seizures and other issues related to drugs are not available in secretive Turkmenistan. Since 2000, Ashgabat has failed to report any drug seizures to international organisations. Even specialised agencies of the United Nations, like the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) cannot access this

'sensitive' data.

Turkmen authorities "believe there are no seizures because there is no trafficking," Antonio Maria Costa, head of the UNODC, said during a recent tour of Central Asia. "I would like to be reassured that's the case," he added.

Any estimate of drug trafficking or addiction is simply a guess as long as the government does not publish statistics. This is partly because of officials' fear of releasing any news that might displease President Saparmurat Niyazov. Ruling the former Soviet republic since 1985 with an iron fist, Niyazov regularly fires ministers and bureaucrats in what analysts say encourages a climate of fear and reduces opposition to his autocratic rule.

According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the number of registered drug users monitored by the Turkmen health ministry grew from 5,953 (or 125 per 100,000 of population) in 1997, to 13,000 (or 242 per 100,000) in 2000, the latest data available. About 20 percent of drug users injected drugs intravenously and there was evidence that unsafe injecting practices were widespread.

However, some experts estimated that the ratio of injecting drug users to all drug users in the energy-

rich country could be as much as 30 percent.

"In general, within the Central Asian region the rate of [drug] addiction is about one percent of the population and I wouldn't have any reason to think that it's much different for Turkmenistan," James Callahan, the head of UNODC's Central Asia regional office, told IRIN from the Uzbek capital, Tashkent.

If that were the case, the estimated number of drug addicts would be some 64,000 - or one percent of the official figure for the population of Turkmenistan - 6.4 million. Whatever the real number, heroin is easily available in Ashgabat. One just needs to drive to Hitrovka, an unremarkable residential district of the city, where one injecting dose costs around US \$1.25, and smoking prices vary between some \$0.60 and one dollar, depending on the quality of the drug.

Kurban, a 46-year-old taxi driver in Ashgabat, told IRIN he once gave a lift to a doctor, whose son was pale and seemed sick. They asked him to drive to Hitrovka, where they stopped in front of a small house and kept him waiting for 10 minutes. "When the woman and her son got into my car I thought that he was ill, but when the mother said 'Hitrovka' and after looking closely it was obvious that he was having withdrawal symptoms, leg tremors etc," he said.

The situation in rural areas seems to be no different, according to some local observers who say that in some cases young people even offer each other heroin at weddings instead of vodka, a traditional spirit at festivities.

A retired teacher from one of the Akhal province villages gave the example of his neighbour, a young man who used to be well off before becoming addicted to drugs. "After he started doing heroin he lost everything. His family was ruined, his young wife couldn't stand his drug parties any more and divorced him taking their three children with her. Now he is selling his house piece-by-piece to buy the drug," he said.

The elderly man aired his quite radical approach to fighting the problem. "They [drug addicts] are not human any more, they are not able to quit drugs. They are of no use to society and themselves. Therefore, they all need to be shot dead, this is the only solution," he said quite categorically, recalling the methods of the Stalinist era in the former Soviet Union.

Drugs trafficked from neighbouring Afghanistan, the world's top opium producer, are the root cause of the problem, observers say. Others add that socio-economic problems, including unemployment - especially among young people - and huge changes in values along with limited prospects for the future, are contributory factors. Official indifference and alleged complicity in the drugs trade also fuel the problem.

Turkmenistan shares some 700 km of poorly-policed border with Afghanistan, but nobody knows the

amount of drugs trafficked through the ex-Soviet republic. "They [Turkmen authorities] haven't been providing statistics, seizure information to us or to anyone for that matter. So, it's difficult to know," Callahan of UNODC said.

But some observers say that there is significant drug trafficking going through Turkmenistan from the Afghan border and then to the Caspian Sea, and further to Russia and Western Europe.

As for the amount of drugs being trafficking via Turkmenistan, there are no estimates available as there is no public data on seizures. "We have no seizure information from Turkmenistan and seizures are relatively low in the other Central Asian states except for Tajikistan, which has far higher rate of seizures than any of the others. We have nothing upon which to base a judgement," Callahan explained.

"They [Turkmen authorities] have open borders with Afghanistan, but even the UN doesn't know what they're doing about drug trafficking," Kamol Dusmetov, the head of the Uzbek National Centre for Drug Control, said earlier this year.

In March, Turkmenistan's lack of cooperation with the international community in its fight against illicit drugs drew sharp criticism from the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), an independent UN body monitoring global drug proliferation.

The INCB expressed concern that Ashgabat had failed to participate in several regional and sub-regional drug-control activities or was not actively participating in cooperative arrangements which it had formally signed up to.

However, there seems to be a glimmer of hope that things may change as Ashgabat begins to feel the consequences of the drugs trade more fully. "The Turkmen government has become much more cooperative in the last months with regard to our projects and programmes. I do have hope that we will be able to begin to get more information on this issue from them in the near future," Callahan said.

Meanwhile, the UNODC's national project on border control with the Turkmen government is in its early days. "The situation looks quite good in terms of cooperation. I think we will be able to learn a lot more about what's going on and also to help the government there to deal with it [drug trafficking]," he noted.

But some observers speculate that Tajikistan's success in counter-narcotics efforts and higher rates of seizures of drugs coming from Afghanistan, coupled with a short border with Uzbekistan, also pretty tightly controlled, could lead drug traffickers to turn to the Turkmen-Afghan border, the Afghan side of which is not controlled at all. Should that happen, the Turkmen border could be very vulnerable.

6. Interviews

Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime



Mr Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director UN Office of Drugs and Crime. Credit: IRIN/David Gough

As the impact of the illicit and fast-expanding opium economy is felt in Afghanistan and the neighbouring region, Antonio Maria Costa,

executive director of the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime explained to IRIN the severity of the problem. Costa highlighted many of the threats posed by the opium economy and emphasised that despite any short-term benefits for individual farmers, opium is a curse and “the flower of death”.

QUESTION: How serious is the drugs problem in Afghanistan?

ANSWER: Extremely serious, and I salute the determination of President Karzai and his honesty when he called it a national security problem. I believe that is the right way of putting it. It is indeed a threat that can undo many of the accomplishments of the recent past. The constitution and the process towards elections and everything else, if indeed the problem is not brought under control both in terms of the criminal activities in the economy but also the funding of terrorism by the resources generated by narcotic trafficking, could undermine the stability of the country.

Q: What about the impact regionally and globally?

A: The impact is particularly severe in neighbouring countries. Iran has 3.5 million drug addicts - the highest rate in the world, and a high percentage of these drug addicts are affected by HIV. The addiction rate in Central Asia is about one percent. We are approaching numbers which are starting to be not only significant, although they are small countries, but very dangerous in terms of public health. In Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan up to 90 percent of these addicts are HIV-positive, and 90 percent of new HIV cases [globally] are coming from that area. Pakistan has a serious drugs problem. So, infection as a consequence, a direct health consequence of the opium economy in Afghanistan is severe, felt in the neighbourhood and beyond. Heroin consumption in [Western] Europe is declining significantly. That's declining very fast. They have today one third of what they had four or five years ago in Western Europe, but the consumption is increasing in Eastern

Europe and Russia and China. So much that the new markets are compensating for the lower markets in Western Europe. As a consequence the demand on Afghan opium keeps cruising at around 4000 mt [per annum].

Q: Is eradication working?

A: We ran as usual in the fall a survey of farmers' intentions regarding the crops of this year. We visited over 1000 villages. We asked specific questions whether eradication was a determining factor. The answer was no. There is a reason and our experts pondered extensively on what was going on, and the answer is that eradication has to be credible and therefore has to reach a threshold of credibility. Last year and the year before three to four percent, possibly five percent, of the land cultivated with opium was eradicated. This is equivalent of having a three to four percent chance of being caught robbing a bank! Would you rob a bank? Perhaps not you, but many people would - it has to be credible - so we need a much bigger surface eradicated.

Q: Is there a problem of corruption damaging the effectiveness of the eradication mechanisms in place?

A: Certainly the corruption in this country, as much as in other countries, is a major lubricant for drug traffickers. It has a demand and a supply. Traffickers offer bribes to obtain certain advantages - perhaps access to ports, or airports or some routes. In other cases looking at the demand side, corrupted officials ask for bribes to arrange whatever is needed by the traffickers. It is a major problem and indeed counter-narcotics cannot be successful if only fought by counter-narcotics. We need a much broader array of instruments and weapons - in a democratic and civilian sense. DDR [Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration] is a key element. Unless we disarm these people who have been fighting for 20 years and engaged in violence, they are going to be recruited by the army of traffickers.

Q: How long will it take?

A: Well, I have no reason to believe it will take less time than countries in similar circumstances. In Thailand it's taken two generations - 24 or 25 years. In Pakistan and Turkey it has taken a generation. Pakistan was under military rule at the time so it was quite a bit more forceful. What counts is not so much how long it takes but whether we can see changes. To see a slowing down of the severity of the problem.

Q: Are you satisfied that there are sufficient resources in Afghanistan to tackle the problem?

A: I think resources is not the main problem. Commitment? At all levels by all parties? Whether they are government institutions, Asian partners or the international community: it requires everyone's commitment.

Q: The overriding context of Afghanistan is poverty. Isn't opium a blessing to millions of farmers?

A: It is a curse. It is a beautiful flower - the flower of death. For the addicts at the extreme end of the drug chain and for the farmers. To live in illegality anywhere in the world is not the right way of addressing the reconstruction needs of Afghanistan.

Q: In what way is the opium trade an obstacle to democracy and good governance in Afghanistan?

A: It is a major obstacle. Because it corrupts officials, it demonstrates that the government is inefficient. It prevents our efforts to construct good government and governance. It is a very major threat. Perhaps the major threat.

Q: So ultimately, what is the solution?

A: The responsibilities and institutions are at the moment very fragmented. We need a centre of gravity which does not exist. We have the foundations, the 10-years' strategy, the drugs law, the counter-narcotics directory - but we need a centre of gravity- with gravitas and the ability to be respected by bilateral donors, international institutions and the government. We need to create a coalition of honest people. There are plenty of honest people. I don't like the references that everyone in Afghanistan is corrupt. We do need to counter them, including some of the military commanders.

Q: What message do you have for the international community?

A: The international community has demonstrated that Afghanistan is a geopolitical crossroads of great interest, with potential lethal consequences. I think the international community needs to appreciate this will remain a geopolitical crossroads: a crossroads of trafficking, a crossroads of violence and a crossroads of profiteering which has to be eradicated. I'm not talking about eradication of poppy but removing a cancer from this land that would otherwise threaten the future.

6. Interviews**Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime**

Mr Mirwais Yasin. Head of Counter Narcotics Directorate. Credit: IRIN/David Gough

With the production of opium reaching record levels in Afghanistan, the role of the CND is increasingly important as efforts

to control the drug are implemented. Mr Yasin discussed with IRIN some of the difficulties the eradication efforts face in Afghanistan, and highlighted the links between intravenous drug use and the spread of AIDS, which he described as being, "...like a fireball in the jungle."

QUESTION: How serious is the opium problem in Afghanistan.

ANSWER: Well, very serious. We can understand that we are, unfortunately, the number one producer of opium and we have our own addiction problems. It is undermining our good name in the international

community and it's a threat to national security so its very, very serious. It's the same as international terrorism for the whole world and particularly for Afghanistan, so it's one of the cross-cutting issues.

Q: How did Afghanistan come to develop such a huge poppy culture in recent years?

A: Because of the 30 years of chaos, conflicts, foreign aggression, internal military conflict between different parties in the 90s and after that with the Taliban and the terrorist activity that was being commanded from Afghanistan. So all those calamities led to the huge increase in opium production. We were left unattended. All these are factors that led to the increase of opium here.

Q: What are the challenges facing opium eradication in Afghanistan?

A: It is a multi-dimensional issue. We have to work on alternative livelihoods... Drug production, cultivation, use, trafficking are all illegal according to section 7 of the newly adopted Constitution. It is illegal and the farmer has to obey the law. On the other hand there is another picture: that farmers of Afghanistan were

subjected, almost, to 30 years of devastation so we have to get something. The international community has moral obligations and the Afghan government has a duty to deliver the minimum standard of living to its citizens so we have to have a strong law enforcement as well as alternative livelihoods. We have to have a very precise criminal justice and also we have to work on the demand side. All these things will lead to eradication of the drug menace. Otherwise, just one thing, working on one side will never be successful.

Q: In terms of the specifics, how is eradication taking place?

A: We have the central eradication force by the name of Central eradication Cell established in the Ministry of the Interior. We did eradication last year through governors and local commanders, but now we have an organised force and the ministry of the interior. That force is going into the field and we are physically destroying the fields in all provinces.

Q: By what means are you conducting eradication?

A: We are using the stick. We are cutting with the stick. Also in some areas we used to use the tractor ploughing the fields. We don't use any spray- we don't use any chemicals.

Q: Can the governors be relied upon to conduct eradication?

A: We have to follow them. But it will be very difficult to rely on them in other aspects of drugs.

Q: The Taliban were very successful in 2000 in eradicating opium. Is their way the way forward?

A: The Taliban had a completely different approach to the solution to the problem. They imposed severe punishment on citizens, which was repugnant to all human rights as well as to the laws of the land. But we have a human approach. We respect international laws- the human laws. We cannot break the law to achieve our objective so we have to be careful.

Q: Is the eradication strategy linked to issues of alternative livelihoods?

A: It is very difficult to link it properly because the standards of alternative livelihoods are different from place to place and time to time. What we are thinking is that we can give the farmers the minimum standard of living like irrigation, substitute crops, road construction for the reason that we have to create market accessibility. Otherwise it will be very difficult to tackle.

Q: In the short term opium is seen as a blessing for the farmer and eradication is destroying their survival mechanisms. Is there a tension here?

A: Its not as much tension as we thought because only 7 percent of our farmers depend on opium or poppy cultivation. Other than that the other farmers depend on legal crops so it is not the majority yet but as every day is passing there are alarming signs that more people may cultivate and there will be a time when Afghanistan will become like Colombia. They have a sustainable drug problem there. We don't want to see that. There are some worries, but we have to implement the laws and we have to do the job in order to secure humanity and regain our good name in the international community. In order to save our younger generation. In Afghanistan we have a very poor medical system. Almost none. We don't have control on syringes and [these] can be used by 10 addicts for weeks and then transmit all the transmittable diseases, HIV, Hepatitis B and C, TB and other diseases, and the amount of crime in society and it is just like a fireball in the jungle.

Q: The interior minister has claimed that senior government officials are involved in the drugs trade. How serious is this?

A: It's very, very serious. As long as you don't have a clean law enforcement capacity you can never expect to eradicate the drugs. Because if we have corrupt officials that means we have hurdles in the way of the job and we need to remove them quickly- and that is very serious. I completely agree with minister Jalalli [Minister of the Interior].

Q: How important is the international community in the fight against narcotics?

A: Well, this evil, this epidemic, is no less than terrorism. It goes side by side. The international community has to help us. This is not the work of a country or two or three countries. The whole international community has to come forward and help us in order to treat this problem, or illness or to eradicate these evils. So we are hoping they will help more.

6. Interviews

Local commander with links to southern poppy cultivation



Kandahar drug lord Mohamad Azim
Credit: IRIN

Arghandab, Mohammad Azim, a warlord based in the district of Arghandab, 20 km south of Kandahar city in the southern province of the same name, has spoken in an interview with IRIN of his personal involvement in poppy cultivation and warned that the poppy eradication campaign under way this year would lead to economic and social instability, and the rural population turning against Kabul's already weak authority.

Azim, who finances his private militia with proceeds from the poppy trade, was not prepared to take responsibility for the problems his opium causes in the West and blamed those who process and trade in the drug, rather than the farmers.

QUESTION: How much you are involved in the opium business in your region?

ANSWER: This is routine and common throughout the country. I cannot go into detail, but I live in this area and like any other villager I have to look for ways to sustain myself and my family. Right now, that is only possible through the poppy business. With regard to trafficking, no one will believe that commanders like me with less than 100 troops could have any trafficking ability. They [traffickers] are bigger than the government. Many of them themselves are high government people.

Q: Don't you accept that poppy cultivation and trafficking is illegal and harmful and should be stopped?

A: Yes, it is an illicit business but I would call on Karzai's government to stop hundreds of other illicit activities, which are more harmful to the Afghan people than poppies. We see authorities misusing their positions, we see millions of dollars being exploited in the name of Afghanistan's reconstruction and lots of other things, which should also be stopped.

Q: What is your view on the poppy eradication campaign currently under way in your area?

A: Well, it is the second time in the last three years that such a campaign has been undertaken in our

region. But it looks like it will be useless. How they can stop it by just eradicating it? If the government continues with eradication but offers no assistance to replace the opium trade, the consequences for the nation as a whole will be very negative - it will turn the people against the government.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: Well, if you take a person's bread he will never like you. This is a very sensitive time for the central government. This is not the time to make people resent you. So, people will not vote for Karzai when their only experience of central government is having their poppy fields destroyed with no compensation or assistance to find alternative incomes.

Q: But don't you feel partly responsible for the human misery and hundreds of thousands of addicts that result from the global opium trade?

A: Fortunately, we do not have a lot of addicts around here despite hundreds of years of poppy cultivation in this region. But yes, it is sad when a human being in any part of the globe falls victim to drugs.

I think those who have created these [heroin production] labs and who traffic drugs to consumers are responsible. Powerless people like farmers are always held responsible for those addicts and victims. But it is not us who takes the opium out of this country, and then further develop it into other types of illicit drugs.

I say, close the borders, I say don't use it, I say reduce the demand in foreign countries and make the people aware that this is harmful. Money can also be harmful, but it depends how you use it. Poppies can also be used positively for medical drugs. Perhaps the opium should be used for positive purposes.

Q: What will you do to earn a living and also support your soldiers when poppy cultivation is completely banned in the country?

A: Well, I don't think that this can be stopped in the near future. However, when the government is able to solve the poppy issue then, inshallah, we will have many more private business opportunities and also there will be no need for having soldiers as Afghanistan will be peaceful and secure.

Q: There are reports that local commanders like yourself force farmers to cultivate poppies at the expense of other crops. Is that true?

A: Nobody round here is forced to grow poppy. People do it to survive, that's a fact. The district administrator, security commanders, judges and even religious leaders are poppy growers or are fathers, sons or brothers of poppy dealers. If the government cannot force people to stop cultivation,

how can a small local commander force them to cultivate [something] if they don't wish to? Yes, some commanders support the crop, this is a common thing. If you cannot afford to buy a water pump, generator and other things for irrigating your poppy fields you will have to borrow money. And often commanders and people like them have money to loan these poor farmers.

6. Interviews

The governor of Nangarhar province on poppy cultivation



Nangarhar governor, Haji Din Mohammad
Credit: IRIN

While the central government has started its controversial poppy eradication campaign in parts of the country where cultivation is

rife, some provincial leaders believe the campaign could be counter-productive if alternative livelihoods are not provided for farmers.

Nangarhar is one of the main poppy growing provinces in the country. This eastern province was the first target of this year's eradication campaign. But officials say only eight percent of poppy fields in Nangarhar were destroyed, partly because farmers were angry at the lack of alternative livelihoods offered by Kabul. Haji Din Mohammad is governor of the Nangarhar province. In an interview with IRIN, he said eradication was actually stimulating production by driving up opium prices.

QUESTION: What do you see as the most effective way of addressing the poppy cultivation problem in your province?

ANSWER: My personal opinion is that there should be a precise survey done so we know how much poppy is being cultivated. There is an exaggeration of the problem. In Nangarhar there is not very much agricultural land. People do not have large amounts of farmland to cultivate wheat or any other crops to earn a living.

People in the province are largely illiterate and have no skills other than agriculture to help their vulnerable families and survive poverty and unemployment. Any eradication or prevention campaign must be fair. We need to consider all the aspects. Launching development projects, which could also create employment for hundreds of thousands of jobless people, is an essential component. Last year there

was a lot of poppy cultivation and prices came down tremendously. If it continues like this people may not cultivate it next year because prices are low. So demand reduction is key to the elimination of poppy cultivation.

Q: Do you think people will react negatively to the government's poppy eradication programme if alternative sustainable livelihoods are not provided?

A: Yes, this will be very hard for the government and unacceptable for most people. They will show resistance and react badly. People become jobless and have no other way of earning a living, so they will fight and resist any campaign. Also, eradication is keeping prices high and actually encouraging production. Let me explain. If it is announced that the government will destroy fields, the prices double, which encourages more poppy cultivation.

Q: As provincial leader, what ideas do you have for alternative local businesses if poppy is eradicated in your region?

A: Well, in some provinces people have started cultivating saffron, while here in Nangarhar other businesses like raising silkworms and initiatives to boost vocational and professional training will prove effective. We should compare the revenue of farmers from poppy, wheat, vegetables and then we should choose a crop or a business which could at least create or guarantee a sustainable living for farmers. We should also create other opportunities in rural areas such as livestock farming, chicken raising, gardening and other businesses.

But I should stress that agricultural development will really only have an impact if reconstruction, security, education and health improve.

Q: Did you inform people before you implemented the eradication drive and what was the response?

A: I invited elders and told them that at least eight

percent of their poppy fields must be eradicated this year. Eight percent out of the whole Nangarhar poppy harvest must be destroyed. It was difficult for them but they respected central government's order.

But I think that even if we increase pressure on farmers, they will continue to grow poppy as long as the external demand remains.

Q: What is your reaction to accusations from the interior minister that provincial and district authorities are involved in the opium business?

6. Interviews

AFGHANISTAN: Interview with female opium farmer

Poppy cultivation remains the leading high-income business in Afghanistan, partly because many poverty stricken farmers say it is the only means of survival open to them. In an interview with IRIN, Bibi Deendaray, a 55-year widow, cultivating opium in the Dand district of the southern city of Kandahar, said she supported her 20-member family through poppy cultivation. The woman, who farms under a hectare of land, said in the absence of any alternative livelihood, she was faced with no choice but to grow the illegal crop.

QUESTION: Why do you cultivate poppy, knowing that it is an illicit crop?

ANSWER: Well, this is a normal business here and I cultivate it to support my big family. In fact I should say it is not an illicit crop but rather a blessing which saves the lives of my children, grandchildren and two widowed daughters. In general, it is the only means of survival for thousands of women-headed households, women and children in our village whose men are either jobless or were killed during the war.

Q: Is it difficult for you as a woman to deal with poppy cultivation, harvesting and finally selling the production?

A: Yes, it is very difficult. Therefore, I share a portion of my land with a male farmer who then has to do the labouring work. However, I oversee the work on a daily basis. He cannot cheat me as I have been doing this business for the last 11 years.

Q: Aren't you afraid that you will be punished for cultivating an illegal crop?

A: Well, I know the government has announced the eradication of poppy fields but if they come to my land

A: I agree with the interior minister. But he should have mentioned the name of those provinces and authorities that are intensely involved. I do not agree that all governors are involved. But I think that from a district level the drugs network reaches many top people, even in ministries, because there is so much money at stake here and we, even high profile government officials, are very, very poor.

I will show them my barefoot orphan grandchildren and widowed daughters who have no one to support them and bring them food and medicine. Just today, the government eradication teams came to our village and they did not destroy my field when I told them I was a widow and had children. However they eradicated 50 percent of other people's poppy fields.

Q: How has poppy affected your village's social life?

A: Poppy has very deep roots in all the affairs of life here. You have to deal with poppy, whether it is for wedding party expenses or a mourning ceremony. People even have to give a certain amount of poppy or a portion of a poppy field as a marriage dowry. The more poppy fields you have, the more status you have in the community. People respect you and they loan you as much money as you want.

Q: What is your annual revenue and what do you do with that money?

A: It varies. This year I expect to harvest over six kilos of opium poppy, which will be around \$3,000. I have to dig a deep well of my own and get a diesel water pump for next year's season, while I still have to take into consideration the requirements of my 20-member family's expenses for one year, which is more than my income from poppy.

Q: What will you cultivate as an alternative crop or alternative choice if the government completely bans poppy cultivation?

A: I don't think any plant can work as a suitable alternative to poppy. Due to drought, people cannot cultivate large portions of land with wheat or other crops to make a living. Poppy needs just a small piece of land with not too much water. And most of the people have very small pieces of land from which they can never earn a good income if anything else is cultivated except poppy.

I think men should be assisted to find jobs and other professions. But for rural women like me, we cannot run other businesses. I think that if we are provided with food and medicine and a regular assistance until our children grow up, that will work.

Q: Are you aware of the risks of poppy, which threatens millions of people in the world?

A: Yes, my brother-in-law become addicted in Peshawar and parted from his family and nice children. But I should say that poverty is a more serious threat to millions of already vulnerable people like us. If we have a good road, electricity, water and food then we would not cultivate poppy.

7. Chronology of opium through history

Early History.....

- c.5500 B.C.** Intact capsules of opium poppy were found in a religious artifact in a cave site in southern Spain. These have been dated to approximately 5500 B.C. and are the earliest signs that man used opium/poppy. New archeological evidence suggests the plant originated in northwest Africa, France and Spain.
- c.3400 B.C.** The opium poppy is cultivated in lower Mesopotamia. The Sumerians refer to it as 'Hul Gil', (the Joy plant). The Sumerians would soon pass on the plant and its euphoric effects to the Assyrians. The art of opium poppy-culling would continue from the Assyrians to the Babylonians who in turn would pass their knowledge onto the Egyptians.
- c.1300 B.C.** In the capital city of Thebes, Egyptians begin cultivation of 'opium thebaicum'. The opium trade flourishes during the reigns of Thutmose IV, Akhenaton and King Tutankhamen. The trade route includes the Phoenicians and Minoans who move and trade the lucrative commodity across the Mediterranean Sea into Greece, Carthage, and Europe.
- c.1100 B.C.** On the island of Cyprus, the "Peoples of the Sea" craft surgical-quality culling knives to harvest opium, which they cultivate, trade and smoke before the fall of Troy.
- c.460 B.C.** Hippocrates, "the father of medicine", dismisses the magical attributes of opium but acknowledges its usefulness as a narcotic and styptic in treating internal diseases, diseases of women and epidemics.
- 330 B.C.** Alexander the Great introduces opium to the people of India and Persia.

A.D. 400.....

- A.D. 400** 'Opium thebaicum', from the Egyptian fields at Thebes, is first introduced to China by Arab traders.
- 1200** Ancient Indian medical treatises the Shodal Gadanigrah and Sharangdhar Samahita describe the use of opium for diarrhoea and sexual debility. The Dhanvantri Nighantu also describes the medical properties of opium.
- 1300s** Opium disappears for 200 years from European historical record. Opium had become a taboo subject for those in circles of learning during the Holy Inquisition. In the eyes of the Inquisition, anything from the East was linked to the Devil.
- 1500** The Portuguese, while trading along the East China Sea, initiate the smoking of opium. The effects were instantaneous as they discovered, but it was a practice the Chinese considered barbaric and subversive.
- 1527** During the height of the Reformation, opium is reintroduced into European medical literature by Paracelsus as laudanum. These black pills, or "stones of immortality", were made of 'opium thebaicum', citrus juice and quintessence of gold, and prescribed as painkillers.
- 1600s** Residents of India and Persia begin eating and drinking opium mixtures for recreational use. Portuguese merchants carrying cargoes of Indian opium through Macao direct its trade flow into China.
- 1606** Ships chartered by Queen Elizabeth I are instructed to purchase the finest Indian opium and transport it back to England.
- 1620s-1670s** From 1637 onwards opium becomes the main commodity of British trade with China.
- 1680** English apothecary, Thomas Sydenham, introduces 'Sydenham's Laudanum', a compound of opium, sherry wine and herbs. His pills along with others of the time become popular remedies for numerous ailments.

- 1700**.....
- 1700** The Dutch export shipments of Indian opium to China and the islands of Southeast Asia; the Dutch introduce the practice of smoking opium in a tobacco pipe to the Chinese.
- 1729** Chinese emperor Yung Cheng issues an edict prohibiting the smoking of opium and its domestic sale, except under licence for use as medicine.
- 1750** The British East India Company assumes control of Bengal and Bihar, opium-growing districts of India. British shipping dominates the opium trade out of Calcutta to China.
- 1753** Linnaeus, the “father of botany”, first classifies the poppy, ‘*Papaver somniferum*’ (sleep-inducing), in his book *Genera Plantarum*.
- 1640-1773** In this period, opium enters a proto-modern phase in which its capacity for growth as a major commodity first becomes evident. Significantly, European and Indian merchants play a catalytic role in commercialising and expanding the India-China opium trade. It is during this era that opium’s extraordinary profitability becomes manifest. Through its peculiar properties, opium is the ideal trade good of the epoch. As an addictive drug, opium requires a daily dose, giving it the inelastic demand of a basic foodstuff. Long distance sea-trade in bulk foods is beyond the capacity of current maritime technology, but opium has the low weight and high mark-up of a luxury good like cloves or pepper. In the early modern era, opium combines the reliable demand of a basic food with the logistics of a luxury good. Compounding its profitability, the Chinese emperor reacts to the rise of mass addiction by banning opium and thus denying China the opportunity to produce opium locally to undercut the high price of Indian imports.
- 1773-1793** The British East India Company assumes monopoly over all the opium produced in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and establishes a monopoly on the opium trade. All poppy growers in India are forbidden to sell opium to competitor trading companies.
- 1796** The import of opium into China becomes a contraband trade. Silver is smuggled out to pay for smuggling opium in. But three years later China’s emperor, Kia King, bans opium completely, making trade and poppy cultivation illegal.
- 1800**.....
- 1800** The British Levant Company purchases nearly half of all of the opium coming out of Smyrna, Turkey, strictly for importation to Europe and the US.
- 1803** Friedrich Sertürner of Paderborn, Germany, discovers the active ingredient of opium by dissolving it in acid then neutralising it with ammonia. The result: alkaloids - ‘*Principium somniferum*’, or morphine. Physicians believe that opium has finally been perfected and tamed. Morphine is lauded as “God’s own medicine” for its reliability, long-lasting effects and safety.
- 1827** E. Merck & Company of Darmstadt, Germany, begins commercial manufacturing of morphine.
- 1830** The British dependence on opium for medicinal and recreational use reaches an all-time high as 22,000 lbs of opium is imported from India and Turkey. An estimated 3 million Chinese are addicts and fund the predominantly British-dominated opium trade.
- 18 March 1839** Lin Tse-Hsu, imperial Chinese commissioner in charge of suppressing the opium traffic, orders all foreign traders to surrender their opium. In response, the British send expeditionary warships to the coast of China, beginning The First Opium War.
- 1840** New Englanders bring 24,000 lbs of opium into the United States. This catches the attention of US customs which promptly puts a duty fee on the import.
- 1841** The Chinese are defeated by the British in the First Opium War. Along with paying a large indemnity, Hong Kong is ceded to the British.

- 1843** Dr. Alexander Wood of Edinburgh discovers a new technique of administering morphine - injection with a syringe. He finds the effects of morphine on his patients instantaneous and three times more potent.
- 1852** The British arrive in lower Burma, importing large quantities of opium from India and selling it through a government-controlled opium monopoly.
- 1856** The British and French renew their hostilities against China in the Second Opium War. In the aftermath of the struggle, China is forced to pay another indemnity. The importation of opium is legalised. Opium production increases along the highlands of Southeast Asia.
- 1858** Illicit imports of opium from India to China amount to a staggering 4,810 mt this year, which marks the end of the Second Opium War.
- 1874** English researcher C.R. Wright first synthesises heroin, or diacetylmorphine, by boiling morphine over a stove. In San Francisco, smoking opium in the city limits is banned and is confined to neighboring Chinatowns and their opium dens.
- 1878** Britain passes the Opium Act with hopes of reducing opium consumption. Under the new regulation, the selling of opium is restricted to registered Chinese opium smokers and Indian opium eaters while the Burmese are strictly prohibited from smoking opium.
- 1886** The British acquire Burma's northeast region, the Shan state. Production and smuggling of opium along the lower region of Burma thrives despite British efforts to maintain a strict monopoly on the opium trade.
- 1890** US Congress, in its earliest law-enforcement legislation on narcotics, imposes a tax on opium and morphine.
- 1895** Heinrich Dreser, working for The Bayer Company of Elberfeld, Germany, finds that diluting morphine with acetyls produces a drug without the common morphine side effects. Bayer begins production of diacetylmorphine and coins the name "heroin". Heroin would not be introduced commercially for another three years.
- 1900**.....
- 1902** In various medical journals, physicians discuss the side effects of using heroin as a morphine step-down cure. Several physicians would argue that their patients suffered from heroin withdrawal symptoms equal to morphine addiction.
- 1903** Heroin addiction rises to alarming rates.
- 1905** US Congress bans opium.
- 1906** By this time China has an estimated 13.5 million addicts consuming 39,000 mt of opium a year. 27 percent of adult males are addicted - such a level of mass addiction has never been equaled before or since. (The level of addiction is only reduced after the 1948 revolution.) Also in 1906 Chinese production of opium reached 35,000 mt, representing 85 percent of the world supply.
- 1907** This year the first systematic survey of opium indicates that world production stands at 41,624 mt- over 10 times the 1994 level of estimated illicit opium supply.
- 1909** The first federal drug prohibition passes in the US, outlawing the importation of opium. It is passed in preparation for the Shanghai Conference, at which the US presses for legislation aimed at suppressing the sale of opium to China.
- 1910** After 150 years of failed attempts to rid the country of opium, the Chinese are finally successful in convincing the British to dismantle the India-China opium trade.
- 1923** The US Treasury Department's Narcotics Division (the first federal drug agency) bans all legal narcotics sales. With the prohibition of legal venues to purchase heroin, addicts are forced to buy from illegal street dealers. In the wake of the first federal ban on opium, a thriving black market opens up in New York's Chinatown.

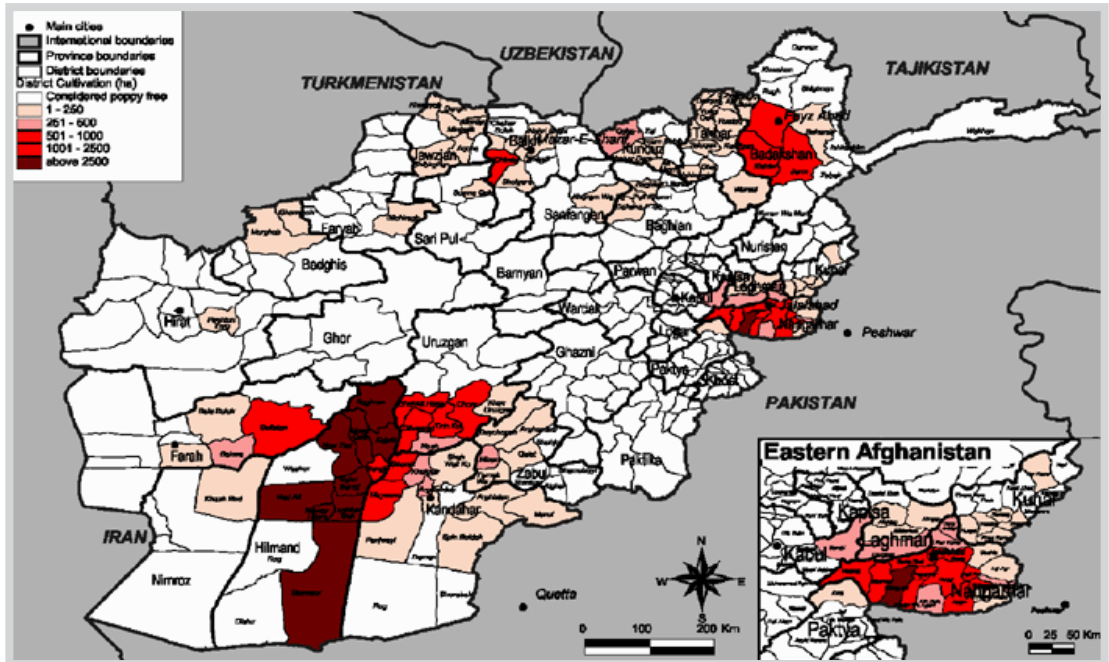
- 1924** Second Opium Conference: Afghanistan is represented although its production of opium is low, with cultivation only in Badakshan, Herat and Jalalabad provinces.
- 1930s** The majority of illegal heroin smuggled into the US comes from China and is refined in Shanghai and Tietsin.
- 1932** First year of recorded opium production levels for Afghanistan: 75 mt are produced. In 2004 the estimated level is 4,000 mt, representing a rise of over 5,330 percent.
- Early 1940s** During World War II, opium trade routes are blocked and the flow of opium from India and Persia is cut off. Fearful of losing their opium monopoly, the French encourage Hmong farmers to expand their opium production in the 'Golden Triangle' (Burma, Laos and Thailand).
- 1945-1947** Burma gains independence from Britain at the end of World War II. Opium cultivation and trade flourishes in the Shan states.
- 1948-1972** Corsican gangsters dominate the US heroin market through their connection with Mafia drug distributors. After refining the raw Turkish opium in Marseilles laboratories, the heroin is made easily available for purchase by junkies on New York City streets. In China after the 1948 revolution opium dealers are executed, crops destroyed and substituted and the 10 million addicts are given forced treatment. The revolution accounts for the collapse of the world's largest group of opium consumers, forcing a change in the trade profile globally. It also explains the ascendancy of the Golden Triangle in the 1950s as the major opium producer globally.
- 1950s** US efforts to contain the spread of communism in Asia involves forging alliances with tribes and warlords inhabiting the areas of the Golden Triangle, thus providing accessibility and protection along the southeast border of China. In the struggle against communism the US and France supply drug warlords and their armies with ammunition, arms and air transport. The result: an explosion in the availability and illegal flow of heroin into the US and into the hands of drug dealers and addicts.
- 1965-1970** US involvement in Vietnam is blamed for the surge in illegal heroin being smuggled into the States. To aid US allies, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sets up a charter airline, Air America, that is then implicated in the transport of raw opium from Burma and Laos. As well, some of the opium would be transported to Marseilles by Corsican gangsters to be refined into heroin and shipped to the US via the French connection. The number of heroin addicts in the US reaches an estimated 750,000.
- 1972** Heroin exportation from Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, controlled by Shan warlord Khun Sa, becomes a major source for raw opium in the profitable drugs trade.
- 1973** Solomon Snyder and Candace Pert discover opiate receptor in the brain. In this year research first reports that opiates work with specific receptor sites in the brain, replacing naturally produced opiate peptides in the brain.
- 1 July 1973** President Richard Nixon creates the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) under the Justice Department to consolidate virtually all federal powers of drug enforcement in a single agency. Studies at this time also reveal that 34 percent of US troops in Vietnam commonly used heroin during their tour of duty.
- Mid-1970s** Saigon falls. The heroin epidemic subsides. The search for a new source of raw opium yields Mexico's "Sierra Madre" (Mexican Mud). "Mexican Mud" would temporarily replace "China White" heroin until 1978.
- 1978** The US and Mexican governments find a means to eliminate the source of raw opium - by spraying poppy fields with Agent Orange. The eradication plan is termed a success as the amount of "Mexican Mud" in the US drug market declines. In response to the decrease in availability of "Mexican Mud", another source of heroin is found in the 'Golden Crescent' area - Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan - creating a dramatic upsurge in the production and trade of illegal heroin.

- 1979-80** Following the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops in 1979 the government begins to lose control of provinces. "Warlordism" flourishes and with it opium production as regional commanders search for ways to generate money to purchase weapons. At the same time harsh anti-drug campaigns in Iran, Pakistan and Turkey begin reducing their production levels, allowing Afghan dealers to increase their supply to the global market.
- 13 Sept 1984** US State Department officials conclude, after more than a decade of crop substitution programmes for Third World growers of marijuana, coca or opium poppies, that the tactic cannot work without eradication of the plants and criminal enforcement. Poor results are reported from eradication programmes in Burma and Pakistan, Mexico and Peru.
- 1988** Opium production in Burma increases under the rule of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the Burmese junta regime. The single largest heroin seizure is made in Bangkok. The US suspects that the 2,400-lb shipment of heroin, en route to New York City, originated from the Golden Triangle region, controlled by drug warlord, Khun Sa.
- 1990** A US Court indicts Khun Sa, leader of the Shan United Army and reputed drug warlord, on heroin trafficking charges. The US Attorney General's office charges Khun Sa with importing 3,500 lbs of heroin into New York City over the course of eighteen months, as well as holding him responsible for the source of the heroin seized in Bangkok.
- 1992** Colombia's drug lords are said to be introducing a high-grade form of heroin into the US.
- 1993** The Thai army with support from the DEA launches its operation to destroy thousands of acres of opium poppies from the fields of the Golden Triangle region.
- January 1994** Efforts to eradicate opium at its source remains unsuccessful. The Clinton Administration orders a shift in policy away from the anti-drug campaigns of previous administrations. Instead the focus includes "institution building", with the hope of "strengthening democratic governments abroad".
- 1995** The Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia is now the leader in opium production, yielding 2,500 mt annually. According to US drug experts, there are new drug trafficking routes from Myanmar (formerly Burma) through Laos, to southern China, Cambodia and Vietnam. At this stage the production levels from Afghanistan, just over 3,000 mt, represents 52 percent of the global production. This represents a dramatic rise from 1980, when the opium produced in Afghanistan represented only 19 percent of the global market.
- January 1996** Khun Sa, one of Shan state's most powerful drug warlords, "surrenders" to SLORC. The US is suspicious and fears that this agreement between the ruling junta regime and Khun Sa includes a deal allowing "the opium king" to retain control of his opium trade but in exchange end his 30-year-old revolutionary war against the government.
- November 1996** International drug trafficking organizations, including those in China, Colombia, Mexico and Nigeria are said to be "aggressively marketing heroin in the United States and Europe."
- 1999** Bumper opium crop of 4,600 mt in Afghanistan. The UN Drug Control Programme estimates around 79 percent of world heroin production is of Afghan origin. Production in the Golden Triangle is reduced.
- 2000**
- 2000** Taliban leader Mullah Omar bans poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in July of this year; the UN Drug Control Programme confirms opium production widely eradicated in Afghanistan, falling to only 6 percent of the previous year's levels with only 185 mt produced. No ban is decreed for opium trade.
- Autumn 2001** War in Afghanistan; heroin floods the Pakistan market. Taliban regime overthrown, allowing farmers again to plant opium as Kabul struggles to assert power in the regions. The Interim Government of Hamid Karzai is sworn in on 22 December.

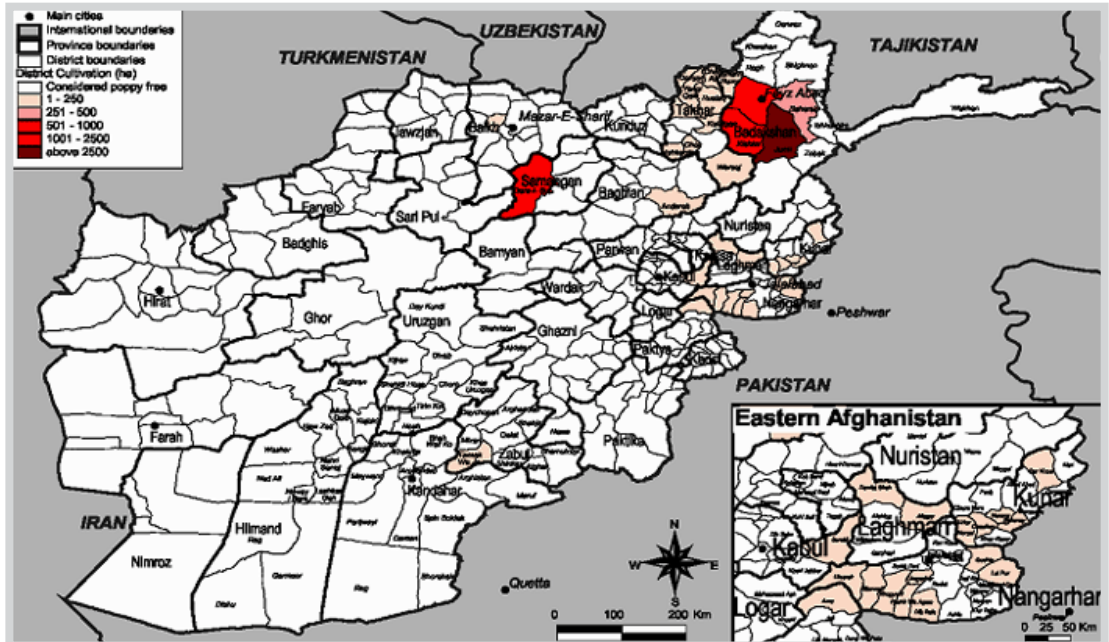
- April 2002** Interim Government in Afghanistan issues decree on eradication and offers compensation of initially US \$250 per 'jerib' (\$1,250 per hectare) which later increases to \$300 per 'jerib' (\$1,750 per hectare). This eradication effort produces few results and in many cases encourages farmer to increase production in hope of attaining more compensation in the following year.
- August 2002** The Afghan Transitional Authority issues a new ban on opium cultivation, processing and trafficking following an earlier decree in January 2002.
- October 2002** The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) announces Afghanistan has regained its position as the world's largest opium producer after the dramatic fall in production in 2000. In 2002 an estimated 3,400 mt of opium is produced, representing approximately 25 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and involving 1.7 million people in its cultivation and production.
- October 2003** US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the DEA launch special task force to curb surge in Net-based sales of narcotics from online pharmacies. Afghanistan's production level calculated at 3,600 mt for 2003 by UNODC survey teams, and is expected to rise to 4,000 mt in 2004. An estimated 3.5 million heroin and opium users in Iran alone as the neighbouring countries feel the impact of increased demand for consumption and act as transit routes for heroin to the West.

8. Maps

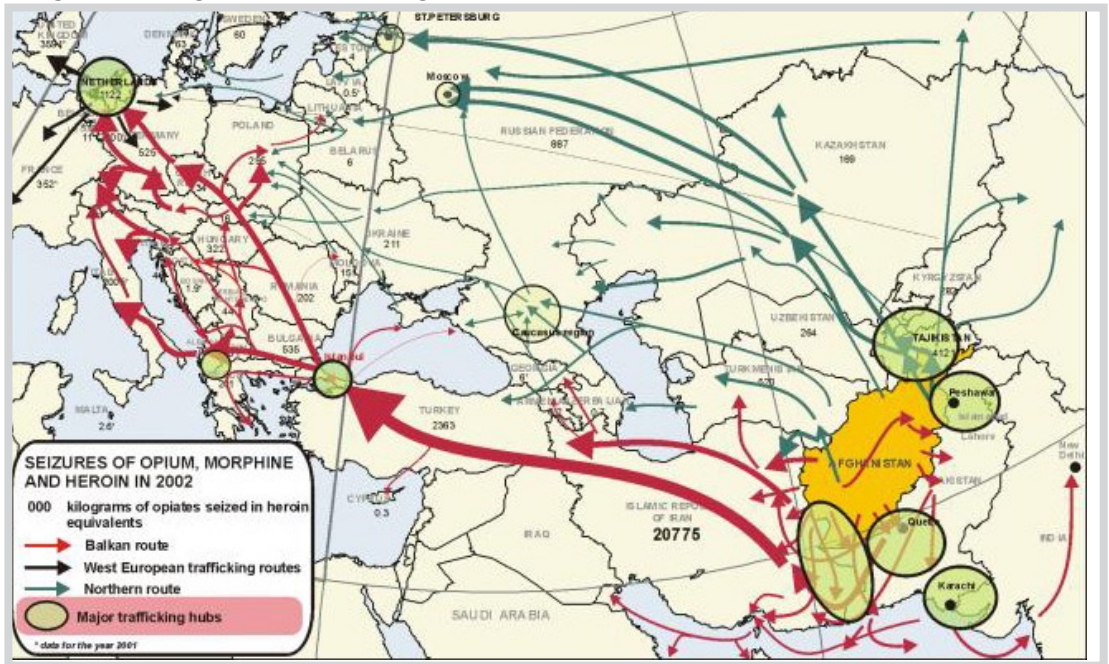
Afghanistan Opium Poppy cultivation in 2000



Afghanistan Opium Poppy cultivation in 2001



Drug trafficking routes out of Afghanistan



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