

## **Afghanistan: *Gallopig opium production and insurgency. .. The only solution***

1. The problem in Afghanistan is narcotics. That it supports the Taleban insurgency is no longer a secret. Even to the Americans. US Army Genl Dan K McNeil and ISAF Commander in early 2007 admitted "I don't believe that we can deal with the insurgency in a complete fashion without taking on the issue of poppy." The latest UN Rapid Survey for 2007 has projected 8200 tons of opium, an increase of 34% over the previous year. This means that in 2008 the rebels will cause more mayhem. During the days of the much maligned Najibullah Government of the 80s the average area under opium cultivation was around 10,000 hectares annually, but when its fall became imminent it shot up to 25,000 in 1987 and 32,000 in 1988, after which it continued leaping. There is such a glut that opium prices have started to fall. The whole sale retail price of opium after has fallen from \$ 94 per kg in 2006 to \$ 86 per kg in 2007. The farmer gets about \$ 35 per kg as he has to pay protection money to the Taleban and hush money to Anti Narcotics officers. Not very encouraging for a billion dollars spent annually. The narcotics trade is about 53% of Afghanistan's GDP of \$ 7.5 billion.
2. Illicit opium cultivation increased when the Americans encouraged the Mujahideen in the late 80s and the Taleban in the 90s to fight against the Najibullah Government. It bankrolled that war. These links, still alive, have made it impossible for the Karzai Government to even reduce opium production.
3. This intimacy has ensured the appointment of many ex-Mujahideen and ex-Taleban as officials in the Karzai government despite 9/11. Without American patronage this could never have happened. And it is not that the Americans are innocent of the current reality. In Dec 2005 from the house of the then Governor of Helmand, Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, an ex-Taleb, 9 tons of opium were seized. As he was too precious for the American and British Military Intelligence and diplomats to be punished he was installed as an MP in the Afghan National Assembly. With such splendid collaboration with narcotic traffickers there can be no reduction in the opium production in Afghanistan. Collusion and corruption are the reasons for Karzai Government's failure in curbing opium cultivation.
4. There are other such shocking instances. In 2001 the West and the UN certified that the Taleban had kept their promise of preventing opium cultivation. They claimed only 185 tons had been produced. In 2000 and 2001 the Indian Government had monitored by satellite some poppy growing areas of Southern Afghanistan, and they learnt that it was drought that had reduced the opium as well as other crops, and not Taleban's restraint. Pictures #1 and

# 2 show the Achin area in Nangarhar in 2000 and 2001. These pictures do not show much difference in opium cultivation, but an obliging team from 8 nations and the UN that was escorted there by Pakistani officials and Taleban soldiers in March 2001 to a nearby area said that there was no opium crop. In some areas of Nangarhar where there was little shortage of water opium production was almost normal. The West and its embedded correspondents were so eager to be deceived that they praised and are still praising the Taleban for their imagined abstinence in 2001. This refusal to cut off ties with these bigoted unruly hordes is what is maintaining them.

5. For the past three years reports have been increasing about US troops facilitating narcotics trafficking to Europe and Russia. They reportedly ferry it to their air bases in Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Germany. This development was inevitable as opium cultivation has somehow led an improbably charmed life. Recently, Mr. Z. Kabulov, the Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan, publicly voiced his country's concern about this trafficking.
6. Annually one *billion* dollars are spent against narcotics trafficking in Afghanistan, and yet opium fields keep increasing. With that amount the entire opium crop could be bought easily. Iran which spends less than 1/6<sup>th</sup> this amount is thrice as successful in seizing drugs. They also loose at least 300 soldiers every year. Addiction in Iran to Afghan heroin is increasing since the country has become the most important transit route for heroin to Central Asia, Europe and Russia. In 2007 Iran seized 231,352 kgs of Afghan opium compared to Afghanistan's 90,990 kgs. Afghanistan seized 9079 kgs of heroin while Pakistan seized 24,341 kgs, Iran 12,493 kgs and China 9085 kgs. Thus, Afghanistan which produces 93% of world's opium and heroin seizes only 27% of opium and 10% of heroin.
7. In 2007 about 193,000 hectares of opium were cultivated from 21 provinces instead of 165,000 from 28 the year before. Not only is opium cultivation concentrating in fewer provinces but the yield is also getting higher. From 37 kgs in 2006 to 42.5 kgs per hectare in 2007. The production in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar continues to leap frighteningly every year. It more than makes up for the loss of opium from the so called opium free provinces. Now, Nimroz, the province in the SW that was only famous for producing heroin has produced 372 tons of opium in 2007 an increase of 301 tons over 2006!
8. There is a new Golden Triangle emerging. It covers contiguous territories of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Within this region 70% of the global total quantity of illicit opium is produced, 90% of the global heroin production and all most all of it is trafficked from here.
9. Afghanistan has a 920 kms long border with Iran. Most of it is easy to cross deserts. The Iranians have set up 70 forts on their side of the border and have also constructed 28 forts on the Afghan side. Despite these forts, latest

wireless communication systems, arms, and smartest SUVs available anything can go across or be brought in. The trickle down effect from this Iran corridor has caused a phenomenal rise in addiction. More than 2 million in Iran, and the number keeps increasing.

10. The most sensitive province within this border area is Nimroz. That is where India is building a more than 300 kms long road from Zaranj to Delaram, where most of this province's opium is being cultivated now. The eastern line (Map # 1) of this Golden Triangle starts from Herat and joins Zhob in Pakistan's NWFP. The western and 600 kms long southern lines are formed by the almost straight lines of the Afghanistan-Iran and Afghanistan-Pakistan borders.
11. Nimroz is Baluch area, as are the adjacent lands in Pakistan to the South and Iran to the West. This region is a series of deserts. Baluch run massive and numerous refining facilities openly flourish in Baramcha and Rudbar in SW Nimroz and close to Helmand. There is no law here. Though completely Baluch it has the protection of the Taleban, and except for a few silly superficial shows of force (like ISAF helicopters or buzzing vehicles around Baramcha) this town is largely left undisturbed in its work of producing high quality heroin. A Counter Narcotics Police Major Najibullah Nashri told me in Zaranj that Baramcha has such big traffickers that they buy 5-6000 kgs of opium at a time. From here escorted convoys of 5-6 SUVs carrying heroin or opium armed with machine guns find their way to either Iran or Pakistan. Col. Ahmed Khan, the Dy. Chief of Police of Nimroz mentioned that the big traders of Baramcha are Barahavi Baluch. One of the dozen largest traffickers is Juma Khan. He is a Baluch, and all his trafficking is done under the cover of a construction company called Rudbar, tauntingly named after a place called Rudbar near Baramcha. His huge high walled house in Zaranj is opposite the by comparison modest Governor's office. This Governor, Ghulam Dastgir Azad, has his own militia that protects drug convoys too. At Kerta Post near the Iran border I was in a Border Police Convoy in Sept 2006 when it was fired upon by some of his militia. He charges India's Border Roads Organisation for more than 1000 soldiers but provides only 360. His fondness for money has made him tolerant of narcotics smuggling. In November 2007 in a counter attack on him by Taleban supported traffickers one of his sons was killed. It is impossible with the prevailing corruption to do anything to dry the flood of opium, which is the only profitable industry and it employs 14% of the population.
12. The only narcotics pictures from Afghanistan the world sees are of opium poppy blooming or of opium fields. A few will be of the drugs market in Jalalabad. There is much more to trafficking than that. Opium has to be refined into heroin and then there is the dusty business of transporting it.

13. At Kurki, in North Nimroz's Khash desert, I was surprised to see giant oil tankers drive in from Iran to fill up smaller tankers and thousands of lined up oil drums with petrol, diesel and kerosene. This was being done under the noses of gun toting Customs and Border Police officials, who were watching the operations from the roof tops of their posts. No one was interfering. As they were all profiting from it. In Herat to the north, border smuggling is not so open but is just as audacious. In post after lonely sand swept post I heard, from the soldiers no less, the familiar refrain of drugs being moved in cavalcades protected by anti tank rockets and heavy machine guns. Destitute Afghans too are trafficked in these convoys to Iran. In return come in precursor chemicals, arms, cars and POL.
14. I had lunch with some wealthy villagers of Khamona, a border village, from where several large seizures of opium and heroin have been made. They scornfully said that most of these seizures are actually tributes to the troops to show that they are doing their job. The main job of these forces is to make money. No matter how. All along this border I saw nothing to justify any hope. The soldiers and some of the strutting officers are illiterate. They have bribed to be recruited. Their low salary of \$60/- is insufficient in a land where an egg costs 10 cents. Optimism is only for official reports so that more money can be wasted next year. The soldiers accuse their senior officers of being so wealthy that they own palaces in Kabul's most expensive suburbs.
15. Smuggling on such a scale could not have been operated so confidently and openly without corruption. In Sherpur and Wazir Akbar Khan suburbs of Kabul numerous impossibly gaudy and extravagant million dollar mansions can be seen. A few such houses can also be seen in Herat, Kandahar, Lashkar Gah in Helmand, and Zaranj in Nimroz. The most popular joke in Afghanistan is this one: President Karzai was asked "When will corruption reduce in Afghanistan." Karzai replies: "How much will you give me to do that?" His own brother Ahmed Wali Karzai is reported to be the biggest benefactor and protector of all drug cartels. His tribe – Popalzai- are an opium growing tribe from South Kandahar. Hamid Karzai, once an ex-Taleb himself, has to, thus, tolerate such disgusting display of wealth in a country where most of his 28 million people earn less than \$40/- a month. He was known as the Gucci Guerrilla in pre 9/11 Islamabad, and he maintains this reputation.
16. Enforcement, Eradication, Training, Righteous Intentions, Contractors and a one billion dollar annual budget have failed. Might has not been right for the past 6 years. It is time to give other voices a chance.
17. Licence part of the opium poppy cultivation. This is what the Senlis Council's Poppy for Medicine (P4M) plan proposes. The Senlis Council is an international security and development think tank based in London but with offices in the most prolific and dangerous of Afghanistan's opium growing regions- Kandahar and Helmand. After three years of research they found that

enforcement has failed, and eradication targets only the hapless few, instead they presented an alternative approach.

18. By this plan the village council, known as *shura*, will supervise cultivation. It will have the power to delicense and penalize any farmer within its fold if he diverts opium. This will eliminate the venal Government. Part of the profits will be shared amongst the village councils for development of their villages, and some sort of a tax kept for the Government. The State and Central Government will attend mainly to the security. Thus forming a Triad of sorts. The opium collected from a cluster of villages within a province will be converted into morphine and sold, allowing the farmers and their villages to profit from the gains of the final product. This will introduce technology and financial management amongst the village councils. Those farmers who do not give the minimum yield of opium fixed for their fields will not be allowed to grow opium next year. This aspect is borrowed from India's experience in licit cultivation of opium.
19. Every year the Minimum Qualifying Yield will be raised, and thus gradually more and more farmers will be phased out. But they will be provided with other employment or alternative crops like artemisia, zafran, apples and walnuts etc. The farmer is the "least corrupt" of the entire society in Afghanistan. It is deprivation that has forced him to cultivate opium to such an extent that now 14% of Afghanistan's population live on opium cultivation. With poverty and creditors banging at his door the farmer pays the Taleban for protecting his opium. Senlis found that most of the farmers want to be part of the legal economy. The biggest advantage of the P4M scheme is that the Taleban will in a decade or so be starved of most of the funds that are sustaining them. It may sound too simple and idealistic, but it is possible, despite the all pervading problems of corruption and terror. It will take time. Since 2002 more than \$5 bln have been utterly wasted on narcotics enforcement. In these 6 years opium production has increased by 230% from 74,000 hectares and 3400 tons to 193,000 hectares and 8200 tons.
20. All the opium produced is illegal and uncontrollable. Even at the shaky nascent stage, whatever legal opium is recovered will be more than the 180 tons of opium being seized annually.
21. The advantages of this practical plan is that the farmers will be happy, the entire opium produce will no longer go to illicit purposes, there will be more funds for development at the village level and every year there will be less farmers cultivating opium. Unfortunately, the Afghanistan government is against it because the billion dollar trafficking business is at risk. The US and British are against it as their highly paid consultants and contractors who are involved in eradication, enforcement and training will have to go. It will take many years for this project to stabilize, but in it is the only hope. Diversion will always be there. It can be upto 30% judging from India's experience. But it will be better than the present 100%.

22. The other motivation for this scheme comes from the fact that there is not enough cheap morphine –a derivative of opium- and the most efficacious pain killer, to go around. Just 8 countries of the world consume 80% of all morphine produced, whereas most of the 20 million cancer patients are in other countries. For most others it is too expensive. The Senlis Council has calculated that at least 140 tons of extra morphine is required to meet most of the current shortage. Ironically after the exit of Najibullah's Government morphine consumption is presently zero after the .026 mg per head consumption in 1988. These days there are thousands of war wounded too.
23. Three pilot projects should be set up to test the P4M scheme before it is adopted. They calculate that from 9.25 hectares a net profit of \$20,000/- can be made after selling morphine. The morphine can be sold at a rate of \$7.7/- per 10 mg in Brazil for instance, where US and UK firms sell it at about \$ 60/- per 10 mg. This is the most important reason for the severe opposition from these two countries only. It will hurt them in their bank accounts.
24. In India too the seizures of Afghan heroin in Punjab have increased by three times as much to about 500 kgs. The increasing opium production is a threat not only to heroin using countries like UK etc, but also pipeline countries like India. Along with the increasing amounts of Afghan heroin going through India the number of addicts in Punjab's sensitive border areas are increasing. And the biggest threat is from the huge amounts of money that is being generated by this galloping opium production. Insurgency these days is a trans-national operation. Obscure, bigoted and ultra religious extremism are uniting similar sick minds the world over. They are being financed from lucrative narcotic deals, and are now a thorn in the sides of Iran, Pakistan and India. Especially India. The never ending finances for some Indian terrorists emanate from this source.

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