

Tajikistan: Victim of Drug Trafficking

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Opium and its derivatives are the main drugs of concern in Central Asia. Despite all the international, regional and national regulatory and law enforcement efforts being made by the international community, increasingly large quantities of opium and its derivatives continue to be produced in Afghanistan. Well entrenched criminal organisations run the entire gamut of the drug trade from cultivation to refining and transportation and distribution to consumption centres across the world. The area under illicit opium cultivation in Afghanistan in 2008 was estimated to be 157,000 hectares. Cultivation on this scale involved a staggering 366,500 households and 2.4 million individuals. Additionally, a significant number of households and individuals are engaged in auxiliary activities connected with the refining of opium into morphine and heroin and transportation of the end products worldwide. According to the UN World Drug Report, opium production in Afghanistan in 2008 was estimated at 7,700 tons. While 40 percent of this was estimated to have been exported as opium, the balance 60 percent was reportedly converted into morphine and heroin within Afghanistan. The estimates of the quantity of morphine and heroin available for export pegged the figures at around 630 tons. Data provided by UNODC/INCB and the various governments in the region indicates that most of the opiates produced in Afghanistan find their way to destinations across the world through Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and to a smaller extent through Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

On 2nd September 2009, UNODC released its report on Afghan Opium Survey 2009. According to this report, opium cultivation in Afghanistan has fallen to 123,000 hectares, i.e., down by 22 percent and the total opium yield is estimated to be 6900 tons, i.e., down by 10 percent. However, given that the annual demand of

opium for meeting world heroin addiction is only 5000 tons, the marginal reduction in cultivation of opium will not help. While releasing the report the Executive Director UNODC, Mr. Costa stated:

"Stockpiles of illicit opium now probably exceed 10,000 tons - enough to satisfy two years of world (heroin) addiction, or three years of medical (morphine) prescription".

Opiates from Afghanistan will, therefore, continue to cause major drug related problems, not only in countries in Central and West Asia, but in all those parts of the world where markets for Afghan opiates exist. The Islamic Republic of Iran records the world's highest rate of abuse for opiates. In that country, the estimated prevalence of abuse of opiates is 2.8 per cent. In Pakistan, the estimated prevalence of such abuse among the general population is 0.7 per cent. Many Central Asian countries too have high levels of opiates abuse with heroin increasingly replacing cannabis and opium as the preferred drug of abuse. The spread of HIV/AIDS in the region adds yet another serious dimension to the problem. Consequently, there is an ever growing burden on the limited treatment and rehabilitation capabilities in the region.

Dr. J. Nazaraliev, the famous Kyrgyz drug treatment and rehabilitation specialist, who travelled widely across the globe before writing his book, 'Fatal Red Poppies', observes:

"For taking a small load of this cargo (opium/heroin) 30-40 kilometers to the next 'staging-post' on the way to Europe, a young man from Badakhshan can earn half the monthly salary of the local public prosecutor. Anyone who succeeds in getting as far as Murgab River (300 kilometers) or Osh in Kyrgyzstan (740 kilometers) past 16 check posts manned by border guards, police units, national security guards, Tadjik and Kyrgyz officials), can feed his family for several years to come on the strength of that one journey. I was told that one in every five men in the Badakhshan Mountains is involved in transporting narcotics one way or another."

In this scenario, The Republic of Tajikistan, which shares 1344 kilometers of its border with Afghanistan, cannot totally escape use of its territory for the trafficking of Afghan opiates to Central Asia, Russia, and Europe or to other global

drug markets. As long as illicit drug production continues in Afghanistan, countries in its vicinity will remain victims of this transit trade. When Tajikistan's State Drug Control Agency (DCA) celebrated its 10th anniversary earlier this year, President Imomali Rahmon, quite appropriately, praised the Agency for its success in combating drug trafficking. According to President Rahmon, over 62 tons of narcotic substances, including 29 tons of heroin, were seized throughout Tajikistan during the last nine years and the first four months of the current year, i.e., 2009.

Despite the various counter measures taken by the Tajik government and its Drug Control Agency, the perception persists in certain quarters that large quantities of Afghan drugs continue to be trafficked through Tajikistan to Russian, European and other markets. Russian drug law enforcement officials have been reported to complain that Tajikistan is not doing enough to prevent drug trafficking through its territory. These complaints seem to ignore the reality that no country, including those with far greater resources than Tajikistan has succeeded in totally eradicating the drug problem from its soil. Success in preventing trafficking in drugs or any other cross border crime is contingent on a number of factors, such as the level of training, equipment, manpower and other resources.

In March this year, Victor Ivanov, head of Russia's Drug Control Agency, is reported to have alleged that 60 percent of Russian heroin arrives via Tajikistan. While it is not possible to comment on the veracity of this assessment, it does suggest at least by implication that Tajikistan is not doing enough to counter the flow of drugs across its territory. This comment seems to miss the point that the problem is not one of intent or commitment but of capabilities. Capacities across Central Asia and This includes Tajikistan fall far short of the optimal required to effectively counter international drug cartels. In recent years, on an average, between eight to nine hundred illicit laboratories producing heroin were detected annually in different parts of Asia. It can be safely assumed that a larger number went undetected. The fact that these clandestine operations continue on such a vast

scale reinforces the importance of building stronger and more effective coordination mechanisms among drug law enforcement agencies in the region together with the enhancement of their enforcement capabilities.

There are no simple solutions for the opiate problem in this part of the world. Incentivising such a large population to switch over to legitimate crops and occupations is not going to be easy in the absence of viable and sustainable alternatives. Any counter drug strategy for the region must take note of all ramifications of the problem in devising an effective strategy and response. It is perhaps the absence of such a comprehensive strategy that has so far frustrated all initiatives to eradicate the opium poppy from Afghanistan.

Drug law enforcement agencies and officials all over the world indeed deserve to be praised whenever large seizures of drugs are made by them. At the same time, they must remember that much larger amounts of drugs still continue to reach markets where they are traded and consumed and generate huge margins of profits. It is no secret that a significant percentage of these profits fund the purchase of arms, ammunition, explosives and other military hardware to run criminal/terrorist organisations. The security related implications of the drug trade consequently also need to be kept in mind in planning and implementing counter measures against drugs.

The fact that Tajik Drug Control Agency functions directly under the President, underscores the seriousness with which the country views this problem. The President has time and again demonstrated his personal commitment to eliminating this scourge. President Rahmon accompanied the spiritual leader of Ismaily community the Aga Khan in visits to drug sensitive areas to persuade local communities to renounce alcohol and drugs and to have nothing to do with narcotics business. Such initiatives at these levels do impact positively on adherence and underline the role which religious leaders can play in spreading the message against drugs. The Aga Khan, during his visits to the mountains of Badakhshan

talked to his *murids*, some of whom were also involved in trafficking drugs between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. Some of these traffickers were inspired by the Aga Khan's message. There is the interesting but true story of how, after hearing the Aga Khan one Talibek Aembekov, son of Abdurakhman Aembekov, one of the most resourceful and notorious drug dealing family of Khorog in Badakhshan went down to river Pyandzh and threw away his drug paraphernalia to honour the wishes of his Imam. In a deeply religious community, initiatives of this nature are a vital factor in creating public awareness against drugs.

Mr. Nazarov, Director Drugs Control Agency of Tajikistan, concludes his paper titled "Control Measures in Tajikistan for Drug Trafficking" as follows:

"For further strengthening the potential of law enforcement bodies of Tajikistan in exercising control over illicit trafficking of drugs, psychotropic substances and precursors, the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, together with its counterparts, is engaged in solving the following problems:

- *Enactment of more stringent laws against criminal activities*
- *Courses and higher training for officers of law enforcement bodies and power structures to familiarize them with modern methods of fighting the crime*
- *Further development of analytical services and creation of Unified National Data Bank*
- *Phased setting up of a unified communication network between Tajikistan's law enforcement bodies and power structures*
- *Formation of a National Canine Centre along the lines of DVCA's Canine Service*
- *Establishment of a Centre for Higher Training for the Fight against Drugs under DCA*

The participation of representatives from India would be welcomed in fulfilling these tasks."

These observations sum up the ongoing programmes for strengthening Tajikistan's anti narcotics machinery. In May 2001, India and Tajikistan entered into a bilateral agreement to cooperate in matters relating to drug problem. The two countries agreed, inter alia, to cooperate in the field of training in drugs and precursors. If needed, India, within the auspices of this agreement, could offer to assist Tajikistan in developing a comprehensive anti drug legal framework.

Development of effective treatment and rehabilitation facilities is another important area in which both countries could benefit from each other's experience.

It is expected that India and Tajikistan will soon identify areas where mutual cooperation can be scaled up to improve their drug interdiction and demand reduction capabilities.

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