

Causes and Effects of Production and Trafficking of Illicit Drugs in Afghanistan

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Historical Background

For a meaningful discussion on the causes and effects of production and trafficking of illicit narcotic drugs in Afghanistan, it is important to look into the historical background as well as more recent developments that have pushed the country into its present state. Historically, natural disasters, political and economic setbacks and in recent times the man-made disasters caused by religious fundamentalism, insurgency, extremism and terrorism have played havoc with this country as well as its people.

Years of insecurity, widespread and protracted droughts, indebtedness, and lack of opportunities for education, health, nutrition, etc. have resulted in the prevailing multi-dimensional poverty. 75 per cent of Afghan population lives in rural and the rest of it in urban areas. According to International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) reports, poverty in Afghanistan is widespread throughout rural and urban areas. The Government of Afghanistan estimates that 42 per cent of the country's total population lives below the national poverty line. Another 20 per cent of the people live just above that line and are highly vulnerable to the risk of falling into poverty. Afghan households tend to be large. They include numerous children and several generations that share the same dwelling. Agriculture is traditionally the major activity, but the sector has suffered from nearly 30 years of conflict, low investments and natural disasters. According to the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) the main challenges to the agriculture sector are:

- Insufficient availability of and accessibility to improved certified seeds;
- Insufficient availability of and accessibility to quality fertilizer;
- Low knowledge and skills base among producers, service providers and consumers;
- Delayed rehabilitation and construction of irrigation systems; and
- Insufficient availability of financial services/credit for farmers.

Due to such formidable challenges and also for the reason that the average size of landholdings is small, agriculture is rarely the main or only source of income for the rural Afghan population. About two thirds of rural households own some livestock, and farmers also sell their labour to generate an additional income. Thirty eight per cent of rural households face food shortages. Agriculture is the most important sector in terms of employment, with the formal agricultural sector contributing about 36 per cent to GDP.

REASONS FOR AFGHANISTAN'S PRESENT STATE

1. *Historical:*
 - *Natural disasters*
 - *Political and*
 - *Economic setbacks*
2. *More Recent:*
 - *Religious fundamentalism*
 - *Insurgency*
 - *Extremism and Terrorism*

When we intend to deal with such a complex problem, we have to take into account an extra ordinarily high percentage of Afghan population that is not only poor, but have near zero opportunities to support themselves. Their immediate basic need is to earn their livelihood. In absence of any income-generating opportunities, acceptance of whatever may come their way seems to be the easier option for them.

No other crops yield as much income and profits as narcotic crops do. That, perhaps, is one of the main reasons why opium poppy cultivation started and continues in Afghanistan. According to the recently released report on Afghanistan Opium Survey for 2011, the estimated potential opium production for 2011 is 5,800 metric tons. This estimate is 61 per cent higher than the opium produced in the country during the previous year. In 2011, opium prices reached high levels as a result of the unusually low opium production in 2010, when major cultivation areas were affected by a plant disease. Results from the 2009 opium survey indicated that the low opium price level in that year discouraged farmers from planting opium. However, since then, opium prices have tripled. The high sale price of opium as well as low wheat prices encouraged famers to resume opium cultivation. Lucrative opium prices in 2010 are reported to be one of the main reasons behind resurgence of poppy cultivation in parts of Afghanistan.

A higher margin of profit is also a reason why cannabis production in Afghanistan has also increased rapidly. In its report released in the year 2009, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime claims that the world's biggest producer of opium is also now a major producer of cannabis. UNODC'S Afghanistan Cannabis Survey, 2010 points towards an increase in area under cannabis cultivation in the country. Cultivation has been reported in 19 provinces compared to 17 in the report released in 2009. 47000 households were found engaged in cannabis cultivation, which marks an increase of 18 per cent over 40000 households reported to be so engaged in the earlier report. Yet another significant development highlighted by the UNODC in its 2010 report is that there was an increase of 150 per cent in income per hectare of cannabis over 2009. Compare this to income earned out of opium per hectare. The corresponding increase out of one hectare of opium cultivation was only 45 per cent. Amazingly, Afghan cannabis production seems to be overtaking Moroccan produce. Another noteworthy fact reported is an astonishingly high yield per hectare of Afghan cannabis. In Afghanistan, 145 kilograms of cannabis resin (hashish) is believed to be obtained from just one hectare of cannabis cultivation. In Morocco, another major cannabis producing country, per hectare

produce of cannabis resin is reported to be only around 40 kilograms. Cannabis cultivation is on the rise in Afghanistan because, unlike opium crop, cannabis crop rarely attracts the attention of law enforcement and security forces, which do undertake token opium poppy eradication programmes from time to time.

AFGHAN CANNABIS

- *Rapid increase in cannabis cultivation*
- *47,000 Afghan households in 19 provinces cultivated cannabis in 2010*
- *40,000 households in 17 provinces in 2009*
- *145 Kg cannabis resin per ha in Afghanistan*
- *Only 40 Kg per ha produced in Morocco*
- *May overtake Moroccan cannabis*

According to Afghanistan Opium Survey, 2011, a mere 2316 hectares of opium cultivation was eradicated out of over 123,000 hectares of land under opium cultivation in 2010. Similarly, in 2011, only 3810 hectares opium cultivation has been eradicated out of over 131,000 hectares that was reported to be under opium cultivation. Of course, there are serious constraints, such as security of law enforcement personnel undertaking eradication programmes.

In such a scenario, how can one expect a large number of poverty stricken Afghans to abide by drug laws when earning their daily bread is the top most priority for them? Unscrupulous drug lords and drug traders are more than ready to exploit such a population by advancing money to those who are willing to cultivate illicit poppy; to those who are willing to work on opium and cannabis farms right from sowing to harvesting the illicit crops and also to those who are willing to act as couriers of these drugs.

No wonder, Afghanistan has earned the dubious distinction of being world's largest producer of opium and heroin. The problem of production and trafficking of illicit drugs in Afghanistan is endemic as well as chronic. Production of illicit opiates and trafficking thereof are effects as well as causes of age-old political instability in that country. Drug lords cannot operate with apparent impunity without a strong political patronage. In a poor and weak country like Afghanistan that lacks effective governmental controls coupled with widespread corruption, drug trade flourishes without let or hindrance. It benefits the drug lords to sustain instability and weakness of the State by financing terrorism, infighting and insurgency. They continue their nefarious activities unabatedly by intimidating or corrupting enforcement agencies and security forces. All the counter narcotics policies and efforts initiated by the international agencies and security forces have failed to bring about any reduction in production and trafficking of illicit drugs. Assuming that Afghan national law enforcement and international agencies, including NATO forces, have tried their best to deal with the drug problem, it is important to ascertain the reasons of failure.

The interface of militancy with illicit Afghan drug production and trade is well known. So are the threats such an unholy alliance poses to national, regional and even global security. It is common knowledge now that illicit drug money generated in Afghanistan has become the major source of funding for terrorist organisations operating in the region. UNODC reports reveal close relationship between the drug economy and insurgency. Since the late 1990s, Taliban continues to extract huge sums of money from Afghan opium farmers, ranging between 75 to 140 million US\$ a year. The cumulative revenue they earned from opium farming and transnational drug trade during 2005-2008 is a staggering 350-650 million US\$. The estimates will rise further if their incomes from other drug related activities such as import of precursor chemicals and heroin labs are also taken into account. The funds are subsequently used to finance jihadi networks entrenched in this part of the world. Involvement in terrorist activities of drug gangs headed by dreaded criminals like Indian fugitive Dawood Ibrahim Kaskar is also well known.

ILLICIT DRUGS AND TERRORISM

- *A major source of funding terror organisations*
- *75 -140 million USD collected from opium farmers annually*
- *Cumulative collection of 350-650 million USD from production and trade during 2005-2008*
- *Higher collections on a/c of precursors and clandestine drug labs*
- *Drug gangs directly involved in terror activities*

Opiates and the cannabis resin produced in Afghanistan reach far and wide through a variety of routes. Drug barons and their criminal organisations continue to run the entire gamut of drug trade activities from cultivation to refining and transportation/distribution to consumption centres across the world. Opiates are mostly smuggled through the porous borders Afghanistan has with its neighboring countries, namely, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. Traffickers take the highways and also secondary roads to transport contraband drugs to different destinations. There are 14 official and nearly 500 unofficial border crossings between Afghanistan and its neighbors.

Countries like Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia consume large quantities of opium and heroin produced in Afghanistan. Of late, there are reports of wide spread consumption of Afghan opiates in the Indian state of Punjab, particularly in areas bordering the International border between India and Pakistan. The rate at which the number of addicts is rising in most of these countries is rather alarming. It is natural for the governments of these consuming countries to blame the source country and to look up to the international agencies to stem inflow of drugs into their territories.

ALARMING RATES OF CONSUMPTION OF AFGHAN DRUGS IN:

- *Iran,*
- *Pakistan,*
- *Central Asian countries*
- *Russia*
- *India*

Last month, at the two day International conference convened in Dushanbe to discuss the issue of regional liaison and cross-border joint activities between border and customs agencies from Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, it was noted that narcotics smuggling cannot be stopped unless the Afghan border is secured. The conference further recommended that Afghanistan's rural areas need to develop economically, which meant promoting a new alternative crop to help generate revenue for the Afghan farmers. All this sounds rather too familiar, particularly to those who have kept themselves abreast with the subject. Political leaders all over the world, their advisors, security experts and those occupying high positions in international agencies also continue to recommend various solutions to Afghan problem. One such dignitary, while speaking about the Afghan drug problem, had once observed: *"Afghanistan's drug problem is even more complex than just the opium trade. Yet the remedy remains the same. By improving security and development in Afghanistan's drug-producing regions, we can knock out the world's biggest supplies of both hash and heroin."* The suggestion sounds too simplistic. It is also one that is being tried even till this day, but with hardly any results. One may argue that the measures taken to solve the Afghan drug problem have been successful in as much as the situation has at least been stable and not allowed to go from bad to worse.

While it may not be politically and diplomatically correct to say that the half hearted efforts so far put in have failed to produce the desired results, we should also not be shying away from trying new approaches. So long they address the real problem and are genuinely aimed at finding long lasting solution to the problem, they should be tried out. The problem is indeed complex and solutions would need long-term and bold approaches and initiatives. International community and the Government of Afghanistan will need to demonstrate serious long term commitment. Such a commitment is, however difficult to sustain as it is expensive to implement and requires a constant monitoring of new initiatives.

Poverty, being a real curse, can compel people to indulge in unethical, immoral, illegal or anti social activities just to keep them afloat. International community has to address the issue of providing basic needs to those who are impoverished, deprived and, therefore, easy to exploit. There is no instantaneous treatment and relief from a chronic disease. Real solution may lie in long term treatment, that is to say, an over all development of Afghanistan so as to enable it to attain at least the level of a middle income country. A population that, perhaps for generations, has learnt nothing other than cultivating opium poppy or processing the same into morphine/heroin or trafficking in these substances will take time and patience to learn new ways and techniques to earn their livelihood. Conditions have to be created to make alternatives more lucrative than producing illicit drugs and activities connected therewith. As of now, the drug barons are more than happy to advance money to farmers. They can also afford to provide poppy seeds and fertilizers and give 3 to 5 times more income than wheat crop. Furthermore, they collect the entire opium produce from the farm gate, unlike a licit crop such as wheat, barley, vegetables and fruits. For selling such licit agricultural produce, the farmer has to go through the hassles of transporting it to a competitive market and look for buyers who may offer the best price. Means of transportation in rural Afghanistan are not

only scarce, but are also expensive; roads are non-existent and the shelf life of fruits and vegetables is much shorter than opium. There are hardly any cold-storage facilities available to small farmers. The international community should, therefore, focus on making alternative crops economically viable and prioritizing security for farmers. Otherwise, there seems to be no possibility of their switching over to other crops. Developmental policies should also aim to improve poor farmers' access to markets. They may also benefit from vocational training and financial support to start other rural area based small-scale ventures for earning their livelihood. The big time opium cultivators may not bite the bait immediately. But, over a period of time when the government is able to provide them better security and facilities, they may also like to switch over to legitimate alternative sources of income.

A lot of improvement is required in the fields of education, health, skill development, power supply, irrigation facilities, horticulture and livestock. International agencies like the World Bank, United Nations and others are already working in these areas. Since late 2001, Afghanistan has become a major site of concentration of international aid, security and military resources, totalling around 286.4 billion US\$, or 9,426 US\$ per Afghan citizen. Between 2002 and 2009, 26.7 billion US\$ in aid had been spent and by 2009, the country had become the leading global recipient of official development assistance (ODA), for the second consecutive year.

INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

- *Major beneficiary of International aid*
- *By 2009, became the leading global recipient of Official Development Assistance*
- *International aid, Security and Military expenditure of US\$ 286.4 billion between 2002-2009*
- *That is: US\$ 9476 per Afghan citizen*
- *Has this aid really improved the lot of a common Afghan citizen?*

While talking about finding solutions to effectively deal with the Afghan drug problem, a mention must be made of a project idea that may appear to some to be rather 'out-of-box'. This optimistic project, referred to as the 'Poppy for medicine' has been developed by independent organizations to deal with this problem through a practical approach. It is suggested that instead of using the conventional law enforcement methods like eradicating poppy fields and taking legal action against poor farmers, the Afghan government should license the poppy cultivation and buy the entire opium produced at the farm gate. The opium so produced and purchased by the government should be used to manufacture opiate based painkillers to bridge the vast gap between global demand and supply. These painkillers shall then become available and also affordable to patients in the third world countries. According to the World Health Organization estimates 30-86 million people suffer from moderate to severe pain due to cancer, HIV/AIDS, burns, wounds and other illnesses annually. Most of these people live in poor nations and do not have access to proper opiate anesthetics to control the pain because medicinal opiates are

either too expensive or not readily available. Afghanistan, where 90 per cent of illicit opium of the world is said to be produced could provide a solution to the problem of shortage of opiate anesthetics to a large number of those who truly need such preparations.

However, quite understandably, there is a strong opposition to the suggestion of legalizing opium cultivation. The opposition is based on the apprehension that such an experiment will not succeed in Afghanistan, where a weak or nonexistent bureaucracy may not be capable of regulating poppy cultivation through a license regime. There is also the fear that some of the opium produced in licensed fields will be clandestinely diverted and fall into the hands of drug traders. While the apprehensions may not be without reasons, the problem is not insurmountable and solutions can be found to reduce diversion and leakages to an acceptable level.

A similar experiment has already been successfully tried in Turkey, where, like in Afghanistan, illicit drug production and trade posed a serious threat to country's stability, both economic as well as political. All the initiatives taken to solve the problem of illicit opium cultivation and trafficking, including banning of opium cultivation and law enforcement measures, had earlier failed. The Turks, therefore, decided to go in for licensing poppy cultivation in 1974 with a view to producing morphine, codeine and other licit opiates for medicinal and scientific purposes. Of course in doing so, they were duly supported by the United States of America as also by the United Nations.

AFGHAN POPPY FOR MEDICINE?

- *“Poppy for Medicine” - village-based dev. projects*
- *License poppy cultivation*
- *Supervision by State under a clear cut policy*
- *Pay and collect entire opium yield at farm gate*
- *Produce opium based medicines domestically*
- *Exercise adequate controls to minimise leakage*
- *Undertake pilot projects*
- *Can boost employment and rural development*

As all the efforts so far made by the international community at a huge cost have failed to make any improvement in Afghan drug situation, there seems to be no harm in running a pilot project to give this idea a chance. A strong case does exist for the international community to try a Turkey-like experiment in Afghanistan to harness the impugned natural resource for the good of mankind. All that we need to do is to convert the illicit into licit, of course by taking all necessary measures to ensure success of the proposed experiment. The project idea, named, ‘Poppy for Medicine’ seems to be based on strong grounds and reasoning and is, therefore, worthy of being given a trial, of course with necessary safeguards.

On an optimistic note, it can be hoped that the ongoing and future developmental projects will not only develop Afghanistan's economy to place it among the category of

middle income countries, but will also help restoring peace, harmony and tranquility in the country in future.

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