

Afghanistan: Heroin Trade Dilemma

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If the new Afghan government bows to international pressure to ban poppy cultivation the economic consequences could be catastrophic.

The Taleban may be beaten, al-Qaeda may be crippled but the drug trade goes on flourishing in Afghanistan.

The trouble is that exporting poppies for heroin production is about the only way the war-ravaged country can earn hard currency.

Drought has compounded the problem. One Afghan farmer recently commented, "We don't have much water and with narcotics you only have to water the crop twice a year. With cereals you have to water nine times a year."

During his surprise visit to the country on January 7, British prime minister Tony Blair remarked, "Afghanistan has been a failed state for too long and the whole world has paid the price in ... the export of drugs."

Afghanistan is estimated to provide three quarters of the world's opium used in heroin manufacture. Heroin from Afghan poppies is exported through the Central Asian republics and Iran onto the streets of Asian and European cities.

While the "war against terrorism" raged, Iran continued its own war on drugs to stop heroin coming across the Afghan border.

Although Afghanistan's opium industry is centuries-old, it started really booming in the 1990s. Anarchy, drought and civil war combined to double the cultivation of poppies over which warring local factions competed for revenue.

The Taleban also exploited the drugs trade and came under severe international pressure to stop it. The sanctions imposed by the United Nations in January 2001, for the movement's sheltering of Osama bin Laden, also imposed restrictions on the sale of the chemical precursors necessary to refine opium poppies into heroin.

It is estimated that the Taleban took a 10 - 20 per cent levy on "farm gate" prices for the poppies. This may have generated some 40-45 million US dollars a year for the regime. However in 1999, it sought to placate international opinion by promising to outlaw opium cultivation and heroin production.

The ban did have some effect. Total production of opium poppies in Taleban-controlled areas dropped to 204 tons in 2000 compared with 3,611 tons in 1999. This caused serious financial problems for farmers.

However, the Taleban lifted its ban and went back to chasing drug revenues once the United States and United Kingdom began Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7.

The Northern Alliance also dealt in drugs. The fact that manufactured heroin was seized in Tajikistan indicated there were laboratories in Northern Alliance areas able to process the poppies.

This now leaves the interim administration with some difficult choices. The UN estimates that opium poppies may have been hidden away from the Taliban during the ban and stockpiled for when prohibition ended. This could keep opium poppy and heroin prices artificially high. Local warlords still eager for drug revenues will inevitably control many of these stocks.

The interim administration thus faces international pressure to suppress the trade at a time when it relies on drug-dealing warlords for support and legitimacy. The new leaders in Kabul are reluctant to alienate these warlords because they command powerful armed factions which could disrupt Afghanistan's delicate political settlement.

In addition, it is estimated that up to 50 per cent of Afghanistan's population rely in some way on the drugs trade for a living. In some cases, Afghan women who were widowed by war and banned by the Taliban from working were often pressed into service as drug couriers. The recent disappearance of the Taliban has, in some areas, led to a resurgence of poppy seed planting.

Afghanistan also has its own problem with heroin addiction although no official figures exist. Heroin offers a brief respite from the miseries of hardship and most of the addicts are thought to be young men needed to help in the reconstruction process.

The head of the new administration, Hamid Karzai, refrains from public comment as he contemplates the drugs dilemma. The heroin economy is so entrenched that an outright ban without a replacement crop or alternative income could be catastrophic. But letting the trade continue unchecked could anger the international community on which Afghanistan depends for funds to achieve reconstruction.

While heroin claims victims in Central Asia and Europe, it will, in the short term at least, still earn precious revenues for Afghanistan.

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