

Helmand's Opium Habit Here to Stay

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

The government makes a strong start to its annual eradication effort in Helmand, but farmers predict the enthusiasm will be short-lived.

One of the first signs of spring in Helmand, along with the cheerful chirping of the swallows and the first tender green shoots poking up through the mud, is the start of the anti-poppy campaign.

This year, just like last year and the year before, the government is making all the right noises. This time it is serious, this time there will be no corruption, this time it really will destroy the poppy fields without mercy.

But almost before the words had dissipated in the still-frozen air, Helmand's farmers were trying to make deals with local law enforcement officials. The message these farmers are sending out to reporters was that it is business as usual in the world's opium production centre. This year's crop is safe.

The 2008 eradication campaign began at the end of January, with tractors rolling onto farms in the village of Bolan village, just two kilometres from the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah.

This is rich poppy-growing country – oddly enough, since most of the land in Bolan belongs to the government. Farmers have moved in here and appropriated plots of land on which they carefully tend their illegal crop.

The governor of Helmand, Assadullah Wafa, oversaw the proceedings, his face impassive, his signature karakul cap protecting his white head against the cold.

"I will not tolerate the reputation that Helmand has been given by the international community," he said. "I am very pleased that we are taking practical steps to cut down on poppy. Last year there was fraud during the campaign, with government officials and police taking bribes. But this year we will get rid of this black mark against our name. These poppy farms will be eliminated."

Wafa may be fighting a losing battle. Helmand is the undisputed leader in opium production, supplying almost half of the world's raw material for heroin.

In 2007, more than 102,000 hectares were planted with poppy and according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, which released its latest survey last week, the situation is roughly the same this year.

Much of this land lies within Taliban-controlled areas, where government forces cannot patrol, let alone embark on eradication.

Wafa, who has been outspoken in his criticism of the foreign presence and its failings, placed the blame for the campaign's limited reach squarely on the NATO forces, which he accused of not being supportive of his eradication efforts.

"I told them I was ready to carry out the [eradication] campaign in Taleban-controlled areas, if they would conduct military operations there. But they said that they wouldn't assist us if we conducted the campaign there. They haven't permitted us to do eradication in Musa Qala, Baghni or Baghran."

Wafa went on to suggest that such obstructions were the reason why many people in Helmand say the eradication campaign is selective and unfair. "I understand people who say that the poppy is not eliminated fairly," he said. "Why should poppy be eradicated in some areas and not in others?"

Helmand's British-led Provincial Reconstruction Team, one of the joint civilian and military forces designed to bring security and development to rural Afghanistan, released a statement to put the record straight about who is responsible for what.

It said, "The poppy eradication is government-of-Afghanistan-led. There are two programmes for poppy eradication - governor-led eradication [which is] the responsibility of the governor of Helmand, and government-led eradication... co-ordinated by Kabul. The Afghan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics targets certain areas so that eradication does not hit the poor unfairly but also includes those richer opium growers with political connections."

According to Wafa, the Afghan interior ministry had pledged to secure troops from the national army to help with the eradication campaign, while additional police should be arriving from Kabul within weeks.

NATO's International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, will also provide assistance, although no foreign troops will actually be involved in eradication, according to British sources.

"The ISAF forces are trying to win the hearts and minds of the population through development projects organised by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams - usually rebuilding productive assets," said a report released last week by the World Bank and the UK's Department for International Development.

"They certainly do not want to associate themselves with eradication of the poppy crop, which can have negative repercussions."

Wafa complained that so far, the provincial government had found itself on its own.

"We called on the international community to assist us, but it did not do so," he said. "So we had to begin the campaign ourselves, with our very modest resources. It is our religious obligation. I told the international community that if they wanted Helmand cleared of poppy, they should give us three million dollars. But they gave us only 20,000 dollars. That's nothing. But even if we have to spend our own salaries, we will continue this campaign."

Such resolve will be no comfort to those farmers whose fields were being ploughed under in Bolan.

One of them, Sakhidad, his face black with anger, watched as the tractors destroyed his crop.

“This tractor is poking a hole in my heart,” the elderly man told IWPR. “This action by the government is completely illegitimate. I swear I have nothing else - my family depends on this farm.”

Faqir Askar, the local police chief, was unmoved. He himself was astride one of the tractors, in a friendly competition with other drivers to see who could complete their work the fastest. Thick smoke poured out of exhaust pipes as the machines moved up and down the rows of young growth.

“I know people cultivate poppy because they are poor,” said Askar. “But why do they keep on with it? The government has repeatedly told them to stop growing poppy, but still they plant it. I am very pleased to be destroying their farms.”

The crowd watching the display was bitter. Most voiced the opinion that within a few days, things would get back to normal - farmers in other parts of Helmand would scrape together their money, hand a wad of cash to the local constabulary, and their fields would be left untouched. The only ones paying a high price by losing their crops were an unlucky few in Bolan, selected as the showcase.

“We weren’t even given a chance to get rid of them [officials] by bribing them,” moaned Anwar Aka, a landowner in Bolan. “Last year, too, police and government officials came and destroyed our farms, but poppy farms in other districts remained intact. Most people saved their farms by bribing police.”

Ahmad Jan, a young man shivering in the cold, was watching the destruction of his plantation.

“Are we crazy or is it the government?” he asked. “We have told the government again and again that we’ve got nothing to eat, and we are so poor. If poppy is not allowed, what are we to do?”

“Two months ago my father was about to engage my sister to an older man who already has one wife. My sister was crying, but my father was forced to do it because we are poor. I told him, ‘No, wait a bit. We will get the poppy harvest and we will manage somehow.’ But now my father will have to let this man marry my sister.”

In Afghanistan, especially in Pashtun tribal areas like Helmand, men pay a hefty bride price to marry a girl. It is not uncommon for a man to give his daughter out of financial need or to settle a debt.

Ashraf, another resident of Bolan, is in a similar predicament.

“I have been a farmer since I was born,” he told IWPR. “Never has the government helped me. When funds are given in the name of alternative livelihoods, the government just embezzles the money. The farmers get nothing. I swear I will have to sell my young daughters.”

Along with eradication, the international community has promoted alternative livelihood schemes where farmers would be encouraged and subsidised to grow other crops like wheat or cotton.

However, Ghulam Nabi, the provincial director of agriculture, told IWPR that such schemes were not the answer.

“What can we give farmers that will make them more money than poppy?” he said. “We are not going to get them to stop poppy cultivation by giving them a sack of wheat. The only way of getting rid of poppy is to destroy their farms.”

Governor Wafa also pronounced himself a sceptic on the alternative livelihoods issue.

“There is no other way than the present campaign,” he told IWPR. “I oppose the alternative livelihood programmes the foreigners propose. What do they matter? Where are they? There are no signs of such a programme, there is just theft and looting. To tell you the truth, I have never even seen their office, nor has anyone told me about any such programme.”

The United States reportedly pours close to one billion dollars a year into a complex counternarcotics strategy aimed at revamping the country’s judicial system, as well as promoting alternative livelihood programmes.

In Helmand alone, the US invested over 100 million dollars last year to promote legal crops, while the UK contributed 20 million.

But nothing seems to be working. Between 2006 and 2007, Helmand’s poppy crop soared by close to 50 per cent, according to the UNODC.

One resident of Marja district was bitter about his experience with alternative livelihoods. He had eliminated his poppy fields and had turned to cotton, one of the crops being considered by the international community as a substitute for poppy. But the farmer, who would not give his name, said that he had learnt a bitter lesson from trusting official assurances.

“I have learned how government pledges go unfulfilled,” he spat. “The man who has pledged several times to buy our cotton for a high price is still sitting in the governor’s palace. He has never kept his promises. I bring cotton to sell, but all I get is problems. People tell me, ‘no, not today, come back tomorrow’. I have spent the whole price of my crop on transportation.”

Engineer Abdul Manan, head of the department of counter-narcotics for Helmand, told IWPR he was pleased with early progress in this year’s campaign.

“We have already eliminated 250 hectares of poppy, and, God willing, the process will continue,” he said.

Earlier, Manan had told IWPR that the eradication campaign would not force farmers into destitution.

“It’s still early - they can cultivate wheat or other crops,” he said. “We will carry out this campaign in all districts that are under government control.”

The law enforcement agencies have also pledged to get tough on poppy farmers. In addition to destroying farms, they are threatening prosecution for those who defy the law.

Police arrested 500 poppy farmers in December.

“We won’t let them go no matter how many there are,” said Mohammad Hussein Andiwal, Helmand’s police chief. “We have told them not to grow poppy, yet still they do it. We are going to punish them severely.”

But just days after the arrests, most of the farmers were back at work.

“I paid 1,000 afghani [20 US dollars] and they let me go,” said one landowner from Nawa district. “I will never stop growing poppy. The government has not fulfilled its pledges to me or to the rest of the people.”

The local population saw the wave of arrests as just another indication of the government’s fickle approach to counternarcotics.

Many, like Daad Muhammad, a resident of Hazarjuft village in Garmseer, complain that the government’s counter-narcotics effort is inconsistent, biased and corrupt.

“The government is not consistent in what it is doing,” Daad Muhammad told IWPR. “We see that some people collect money and bribe the authorities in one village, so the police then go and arrest people or eradicate crops in some destitute place where there’s no money to bribe them. That just further inflames people’s emotions. If the government would reconstruct our canals and streams, if they would provide us with seeds and fertilisers, we would never grow poppy again.”

Another farmer seemed happy enough to pay off officials and be left alone.

“We really don’t pay any attention to the government,” said this man who did not want to give his name. “We just pay 10,000 afghani [200 US dollars] and they leave our village alone. The government can’t imprison people - they can’t even feed those criminals they have caught. What would they do with these farmers?”

“The government is only serious for a few days. Then everything is alright and there’s nothing to worry about.”

A young civil servant delivered a damning verdict on the eradication effort, saying, “The government will achieve nothing with this campaign. It just makes people hate the authorities. Eradicating and prohibiting poppy cultivation is impossible in Helmand.”

The civil servant, who did not want to be named, said the problem of how to end opium production required an international solution and would take years.

“It isn’t going to help if they put me in jail today and you in jail tomorrow,” he said. “People in districts that are not under government control have to cooperate with the Taleban, even if they feel loyal to the government. Eradicating poppy will create a lot of problems - it will just drive people towards the Taleban, and result in the expansion of the conflict.”

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