U.S.-Iran Parley at The Hague: A Watershed?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Even if the March 31 non-event of the U.S.-Iran meeting at The Hague is summarily forgotten, the informal talks between U.S. envoy to Afghanistan-Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Akhundzadeh, could surely be turned into a breakthrough, by bringing Iran into the effort to solve the despicable mess created by the previous U.S. Administration. While Tehran is keeping a lid on the meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the talks between Holbrooke and Akhundzadeh were promising, if not "substantive." "They agreed to stay in touch," Clinton said, at the close of a one-day conference on Afghan security and development, which was designed partly to invite Iran to help United States untangle the Afghan mess, which had been vastly exacerbated by the explosion of the opium trade on the watch of the Bush-Cheney Administration.

At the meeting, Akhundzadeh said his country is ready to work with the international community in the fight against drugs being exported from Afghanistan, and with Afghan reconstruction efforts. Expressing Iran's willingness to cooperate in the fight against drug trafficking and in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, he also made it clear, in remarks the previous day, that the Obama Administration had made a serious mistake by committing more troops to Afghanistan.

A Ray of Hope

On March 30, at The Hague, Akhundzadeh said, "Since the inception of the current government in Afghanistan, Iran has always believed that Afghanistan's foundation is based on localization of the affairs of that country. The presence of foreign troops cannot bring peace and stability for Afghanistan. It encourages radicalism.

"This policy that others [i.e., the West] decide for the Afghan nation and for the Afghan officials does not work out any more.... The military expenses need to be redirected to the training of the Afghan police and army, and 'Afghanization' should lead the government's building process," he added.

On the American side, Holbrooke argued that it made sense for Iran to be included at an international conference involving Afghanistan's neighbors. "How can you talk about Afghanistan and exclude one of the countries that [is] a ... neighboring state?" he said. Holbrooke's strong endorsement of Iran's participation is important, since he is on record as being keen to stop the opium explosion in Afghanistan, and Iran is perhaps the greatest victim of this scourge.

On Oct. 17, 2008, in a keynote speech at "Afghanistan Today: Drugs, Detention and Counterinsurgency," a day-long conference hosted by the New York University School of Law Center on Law and Security, and co-sponsored by the New America Foundation, former UN Ambassador Holbrooke had condemned the U.S.-led drug eradication program, which he called "the single worst American foreign-assistance program I have seen." "This is not only a waste of money, but it actually helps the enemy," he argued. "It's a recruiting tool for the Taliban. What they're really doing is helping one drug guy against another in a local competition for market share. Drug eradication will succeed only if drug lords, rather than small farmers, are targeted—and only if Afghanistan's economy is re-hauled with irrigation projects, new roads, and the distribution of seeds and fertilizer," he said.

The development of U.S.-Iran talks will be watched carefully, and with great hope, across the world, particularly in Beijing, New Delhi, and Moscow. Another positive outcome of the meeting could have been the effect it had on the reportedly cordial meeting of President Barack Obama with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in London on March 31.

The two leaders, attending the G20 summit vowed in a joint statement, to "move further along the path of reducing and limiting strategic offensive arms." They also agreed to seal a deal on a new nuclear disarmament scheme, that would attempt to "mutually enhance the security" of both states. Obama said that the current nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was obsolete, and that a revised version to replace it next year would establish that non-nuclear states could not enrich uranium, as Iran is doing now, based upon the present NPT regulations.

The positive developments between Obama and Medvedev may reflect Russian approval of Washington's new approach towards Tehran. In a March 31 interview with *Time* magazine, Russia's Ambassador to NATO,

FIGURE 1
Southwest Asia Heroin Flows

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Dmitri Rogozin, said: "All the issues of Iran will be decided on what we have more of in our talks—the hope for peace or the 'hope' of threats." Rogozin told *Time* that Russia could hold back on delivering the enhanced air defenses if Obama signals a change in Iran policy. "The best thing that Washington can offer [Russia] is realigning its own attitude with Iran," said Rogozin.

Not everyone was happy, though. From Tel Aviv, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in order to activate the powerful Israeli lobby in the United States, raised his Nazi-like voice, threatening attack on Iran. In an interview with the U.S.-based monthly *The Atlantic*, Netanyahu "set" the guidelines for the U.S. President, saying, "The Obama presidency has two great missions: fixing the economy, and preventing Iran from gaining nuclear weapons."

In Tehran, What Gives?

There is little doubt that Tehran likes what Holbrooke says. For the last eight years, the Iranian people have been ravaged by the West's policy, led by the Bush-Cheney-Blair cabal, with its neocon cheerleaders on the sidelines. The Afghan opium explosion affected no other nation as badly as Iran. Despite repeated appeals to the United Nations for help against the ravages of the drug traffickers, Iran's voice remained unheard in the West.

In 2003, when the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had begun to turn that country into an opium lab, the head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Antonio Maria Costa, in an interview with the Iranian news agency, IRIN, pointed out that he had visited rugged, porous mountain passes, where the Iranian commanders warned him that this was not a war they could fight on their own, and that increasingly sophisticated equipment was needed to keep up with the smugglers. Costa told IRIN that his "assessment is very positive, certainly in terms of the commitment on the part of the authorities to do the utmost, to reduce and control the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan. Obviously the country is facing a very serious situation of drug addiction. I have seen, by meeting with the authorities and visiting premises, including treatment facilities and so forth, that even in the area of prevention and treatment, the effort by the authorities is very significant. . . ."

He also said in clear terms, "obviously the country is, in a sense, under attack because of its geographical position, by trafficants from the east, from Afghanistan, trafficants of opium and heroin. There is a very significant amount of hashish also being trafficked partly from Afghanistan, but also from Africa. In the course of the morning, Minister Hashemi [the secretary-general of Iran's Drug Control Headquarters, Ali Hashemi] was manifesting concern about the amount of synthetic drugs which are coming from Europe, so whether you look at north or east or west or south, Iran is a crossroads of narcotic trafficking." (**Figure 1**)

Iran's Anti-Drug Efforts

It is relevant to note that Iran, upon which the scourge of drugs was unleashed by the Bush-Cheney-Blair troika, is a party to the Paris Pact mechanism initiated in May 2003 for countries affected by trafficking in Afghan opiates. In April 2004, Iran signed the Berlin Declaration on Counter-Narcotics, providing for increased cooperation among Afghanistan and its neighbors, and the establishment of a security belt around Afghanistan (the so-called "Six-plus-Two" group, comprising Afghanistan's six neighbors, as well as Russia and the U.S.). In particular, under the SAID Initiative

(Strengthening Afghanistan Iran Drug Control Border Cooperation), Iran proposed to train Afghan experts in countering drug trafficking, and co-finances the establishment of 25 new checkpoints along the border in Afghan provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimroz.

Moreover, Iran is a party to several narcotics control memoranda, signed under the auspices of the Regional Gulf Cooperation and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Iran is a signatory to the Protocol on Drug Matters with the ECO countries, which established a Drug Control and Coordination Unit (DCCU) as a part of the ECO Secretariat, based in Tehran. Since 2000, Iran has hosted annual Conferences of Drug Liaison Officers posted in Pakistan and Turkey.

In May 2007, the year Afghanistan produced more than 6,000 tons of opium, Presidential Advisor and head of Iran's Drugs Campaign Headquarters Esmaeel Ahmadi-Moqaddan called for cooperation among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to resolve the problem of drug trafficking in the region. Ahmadi-Moqaddam also said that others may think Iran has a police approach in this respect, but the country pursues its comprehensive plan to fight the problem.

The Permanent Representative of UNODC to Iran, Roberto Arbitrio, said, "I have witnessed extensive efforts by Iranians to fight drug trafficking and transition in borders."

In 2007, UNODC director Costa, pointing out that not all the opium and heroin smuggled across the Iranian border stays in Iran, had warned that Europe could be hit by a "heroin tsunami" if anti-drug aid is blocked. "We should definitely assist in this respect," he told the Associated Press, adding, "Iran is a front-line country."

The UNODC's man in Tehran, Arbitrio, told the AP that fighting the drug war should be seen as "a non-political area of mutual interest." "Cooperating with Iran in Afghanistan on this and other issues is not a favor we do for Iran—but something we need to do in our own interest," Barnett Rubin, who is now an advisor to Holbrooke, also told the AP.

Blackmail from Bush/Cheney/Blair

However, in June 2008, the West threatened to withdraw further anti-drug assistance unless Tehran complied with its demands that it halt uranium enrichment! The threat came in a package of incentives, presented June 14 by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the U.S., France, Britain, China, and Russia) and Germany, in a bid to get Tehran to change its nuclear policy. The package promised Iran "intensified cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking" from Afghanistan, but only if it first stops uranium enrichment. Tehran insists it has the right to use such technology and says its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes.

"Fighting drug trafficking should not be politicized," said Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam, the top anti-drug official in Iran. "When narcotics reach Europe, it is the people, not governments that suffer."

But the threat to cut off anti-drug assistance to Iran suggests that the dope trade was a conscious policy of the Bush-Cheney-Blair cabal, with the purpose of bringing Iran to its knees through a thousand cuts, including the use of drugs. Delivering those thousand cuts depended on creating an opium explosion in Afghanistan under the watch of U.S. and European troops associated with the NATO.

There is no doubt that the opium explosion could have been averted, if that had been the intention. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)'s advocates in the U.S. Congress argue that the Pentagon could undermine the insurgency by combating the drugs that help finance it. But, military officials claimed they could not divert resources from the task of fighting the Taliban and its allies. And, the representative of the Bush-Cheney-Blair troika, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, was on record saying Afghanistan's flourishing opium trade is a law enforcement problem, not a military one. It would be "mission creep" if the 21,000 U.S. troops (in 2007) in Afghanistan were to turn their attention to combatting the opium traffic, Rumsfeld insisted.

While it is evident that the troika, as well as Israel and the Saudis, used the Afghan opium explosion in the post-invasion period to weaken Iran, the process also strengthened the Taliban, who, the American people were told in the Winter of 2001, were the "real target" of the U.S. invasion.

Yet, there were some, even within the Bush Administration, who fought against this policy, but they were pushed out. One such fighter was Assistant Secretary of State Robert B. Charles (2003-05), who served under Secretary of State Colin Powell. In testimony before a Congressional hearing, in April 2004, on "Afghanistan: Are British counter-narcotics efforts going wobbly?" Charles said: "In Afghanistan there are no more urgent and fundamental issues than the drug situation, which if left unchecked, will become a

cancer that spreads and undermines all we are otherwise achieving in the areas of democracy, stability, anti-terrorism and rule of law."

The "cancer" that Charles identified almost five years ago, has spread far and wide, converting hundreds of thousands in Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Europe from functioning human beings to dysfunctional drug addicts.

The U.S. plan to halt poppy production by spraying the crops from the air could have helped the rest of the world, and Iran in particular, had it been implemented, as part of a coherent strategic policy as suggested by Holbrooke in his October 2008 speech. But it was challenged by the British government, the World Bank, and Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The U.K. favors manual eradication, with offers to farmers of alternative livelihoods, over the U.S. strategy, as in Colombia, of spraying crops. The U.K. approach was labeled by U.S. officials as "naïve and insufficient." In his testimony before Congress, Charles accused Britain of squeamishness. British diplomats were reported to be furious.

Strong opposition to an effective anti-drug strategy came also from the London and New York bankers. And no wonder: In an interview with the Austrian weekly *Profil*, in January 2009, the UNODC head Costa said: "In many instances, drug money is currently the only liquid investment capital.... In the second half of 2008, liquidity was the banking system's main problem and hence liquid capital became an important factor." The UNODC had found evidence that "interbank loans were funded by money that originated from drug trade and other illegal activities," Costa was quoted as saying. There were "signs that some banks were rescued in that way."Israel-Palestine

Israel-Palestine

End British Mandate System of Injustice

by Michele Steinberg

April 1—On the eve of the inauguration of the Netanyahu war government in Israel, a couple of hundred people attended a conference on March 28-29 at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, titled, "One State for Palestine/Israel: A Country for All Its Citizens?" More than 30 speakers, including professors and scholars on Middle East studies from the most eminent universities in the U.S., Britain, Israel, and Canada, made presentations that, in total, represent a shocking notification to the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Their collective message, based on years of study and fighting for political and human rights, is that it is time to give up the pretense that Israel has any intention of creating a sovereign, independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, based on the borders prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War; on United Nations Resolution 242; on the Oslo Accords; or, on the so-called "Road Map," the stillborn baby of the George W. Bush Presidency that created the cover for mass violence against the Palestinian people.

This was not an academic exercise. Several of the Jewish speakers, in particular, warned that there will be more massive Israeli attacks, like that against Gaza, on the Palestinians—and soon. But while no conference on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis could have taken place without including discussion of Gaza and Operation Cast Lead, in which the Israeli Defense Forces killed an estimated 960 women, children, and elderly civilians, out of the about 1,400 dead, the conference was not a sudden reaction to the latest Gaza operation. Rather it was planned months in advance, a studied effort to present a solution with parameters that go outside the "politically correct" bowing down before the "two-state solution," that has been repeated so often that it has become meaningless.

The speakers provided a thought-provoking examination of the apartheid system in Israel—the country that is sustained in its present form *only* by massive