

Anti-Drug Expert Arlacchi in Kabul

World Support Can Make Permanent Afghanistan's Success in Eliminating Opium Production

by Marcia Merry Baker

Nov. 17—Pino Arlacchi, former Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (1997–2002) visited Kabul the second week of November, where he praised the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) for its success in nearly eradicating opium poppy cultivation this crop year 2022–23. He called for support from the international community for Afghan farmers, so that Afghanistan is able “to consolidate this exceptional result,” and make its success permanent. In April 2022, the IEA government had issued a ban on opium cultivation, transport, and use. When the planting season came around in October/November 2022, the ban was honored.

Arlacchi gave a ringing speech to the Nov. 8 plenary on the closing day of a three-day conference on economic development sponsored by the Ibn Sina Research and Development Center. The conference, attended by 600 people, was titled, “Operation Ibn Sina: Toward an Economic Miracle in Afghanistan.”

The full text by Arlacchi, prepared in advance for the conference, is provided below, with his permission.

From the podium, however, Arlacchi spoke extemporaneously, with translation by the Conference Moderator, Fatah Raufi, a co-founder and co-leader of the Ibn Sina R & D Center.

Arlacchi's presentation was greeted with applause from the audience, which included officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, and from many other ministries, as well as persons from a



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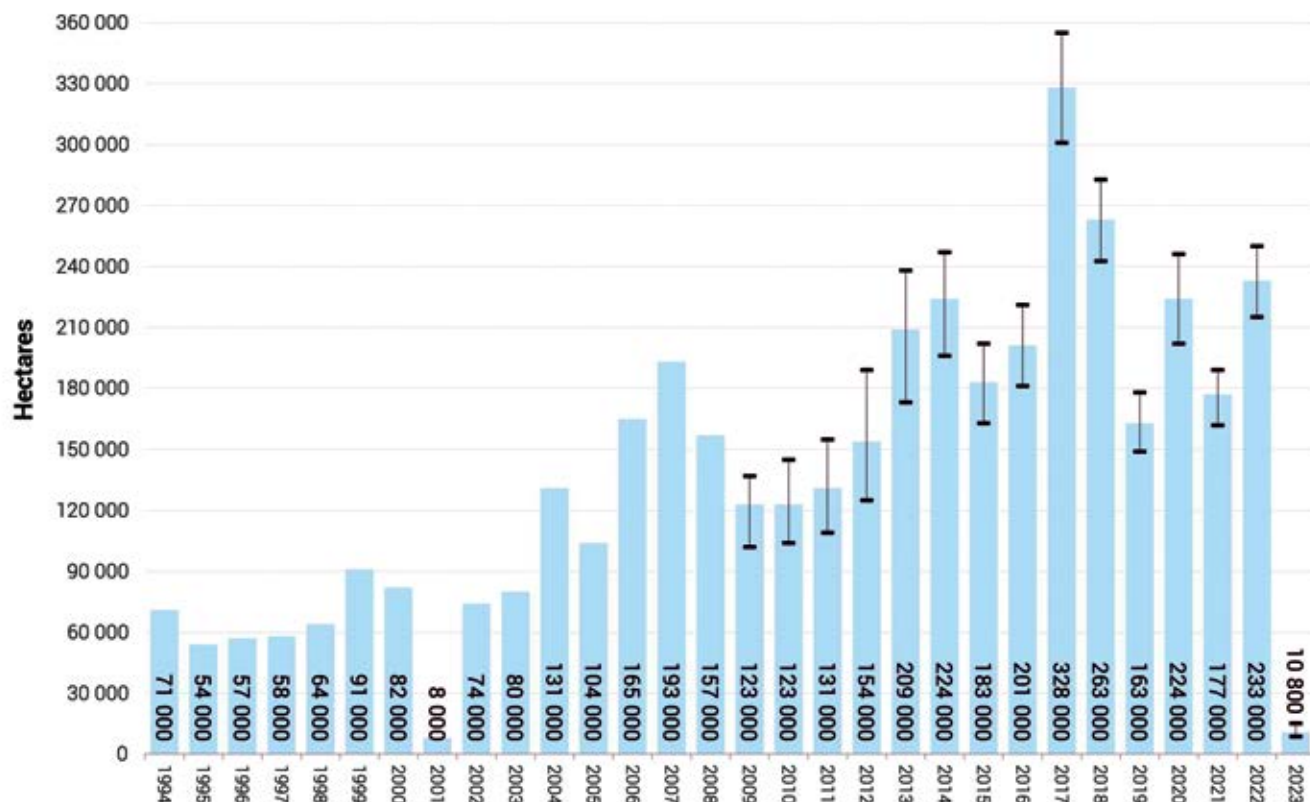
Pino Arlacchi, speaking to the conference, “Operation Ibn Sina: Toward an Economic Miracle in Afghanistan,” at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, Nov. 8, 2023. With him is Fatah Raufi, the conference moderator, who translated.

wide spectrum of the nation, plus friends and experts from abroad, including Schiller Institute participants, and guests from Germany, France, the United States, China and Australia.

It so happened that on Nov. 5, on the eve of the conference, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime issued a [press release](#) reporting that the 2023 opium crop in Afghanistan was down 95% from 2022, as reported in the August 2023 UNODC [Research Brief](#), “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023.” The area of cultivation of poppy dropped from 223,000 to 10,800 hectares. This received worldwide media coverage, which shames the stance of the United States, the UK and other major Western countries which continue to refuse to send in support to Afghan farmers, cavilling that the IEA government has poor human rights practices.

Arlacchi cut through that by pointing to the im-

Area Under Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan, 1994-2023



Source: UNODC

morality of the West tolerating its high addiction rates. He warned that the Afghan elimination of opium poppy cultivation cannot be expected to continue successfully past about two growing seasons, unless farmers get support.

Arlacchi, Professor of Sociology at University of Sassari, Italy, his home country, has an outstanding career in working to shut down dope production and use. In 1999, he went to Afghanistan to work with the new Taliban government to help eradicate poppy growing at that time, a program which succeeded dramatically as of 2001. Then, after the U.S./NATO invasion in Autumn that year, poppy cultivation soon came back, as the occupation leadership fostered its return. Within two years, Afghanistan opium production was bigger than it was before 2001.

In 2010, Arlacchi again went to Afghanistan, as a Member of the European Parliament from Italy. To his Kabul conference audience, he spoke very personally of his experiences. *EIR* has transcribed these excerpts:

I came as a friend in 2010 to aid in opium poppy

eradication, but the NATO occupation conditions made it impossible.

I came here first in 1999 because I knew that there was a new government in Afghanistan—the Taliban government. It took over and it was amenable for the elimination of opium poppy cultivation. So I came here, and I started with the first generation of Taliban. The Prime Minister was an important member of the government. I met with him, and we agreed that the international community—the United Nations—could help in a plan to eliminate opium poppy.

First of all, we agreed that the first edict would be to get rid of opium cultivation. The first edict, in 1999, stated that, in five years, the government would eliminate all opium gradually, 20% a year, and that I would provide all the funds—the money that was necessary to change the cultivation.

At that time, for my program here in Afghanistan, I had a big office—with more than 100 people, doing a survey every year of opium

poppy cultivation. So we knew very well, how the situation was at that time.

I had a personal meeting in Kandahar with the Governor of Kandahar and your Prime Minister. And the Governor and the Prime Minister asked me, “Why do you want to wait five years? We can do it in *one year*, if you provide us enough resources to sustain the farmers, to give resources to the farmers.” So I started to gather the resources, with the members of the program. The attitude was quite favorable. There was a very large support internationally, particularly in Europe, because Afghan heroin goes first to Europe.

And, as a big surprise, in the Summer of the year 2001, there was a total elimination of opium cultivation all over Afghanistan, except for some parts, controlled by the NATO alliance. I congratulated the government for the big success, and I was collecting resources to continue the program, but in October, Americans invaded Afghanistan. One of the first things they did was to make agreements with the warlords ... [that their opium involvement would be overlooked, in exchange for their collaboration against the Taliban].

[When I came back in 2010,] what I found was a tragic situation. All the social indicators—poverty, illiteracy, hunger—had increased a lot. Kabul was in ruins. Kabul’s streets were filled with beggars, and it was impossible to circulate in Afghanistan. It was too dangerous....

I am here now, because the Taliban have issued the same decree, as was done 21 years ago. And they have again succeeded. The opium production is reduced over 90%. This is a huge result, not only for Afghanistan, but for the rest of the world, because almost 100% of the heroin that is used in Europe, comes from Afghanistan. In Europe there are more than one million addicts on heroin. And in the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, and in Afghanistan itself, now, there is also a big problem of addiction.

I understand that you are doing this elimination of opium, first of all, for yourself, for health, for your young people. But the rest of the world must be grateful to the Taliban for what they have done. I came here to talk to your government and to propose that my expertise be put at your disposal, in making a plan, a precise plan, a very good plan, a serious plan, to consolidate this successful result.... I am sure you can be successful in sustaining the opium ban if we develop a plan, and [present] it to a group of donor



Stephan Ossenkopp

Pino Arlacchi (center) in discussion with other conference participants.

countries that are friends of Afghanistan. A special conference for money, around \$100 million a year for five years. It [the sum] is not a big problem, for Arab countries, and for also potential friends like Russia and China.

Ultimately, in order to implement the plan, we need a special agency for this purpose. My offer, my proposal, is made in order to consolidate the success. It’s very important that you open up, and make known what you are doing, because you are doing very well. If the world can see how Kabul is doing now, they would change their mind. You have the information, right in front of you. [Translator: “Some of the world doesn’t want to know!”]

Also in the fight against terrorism, you have produced another exceptional result. When the Americans left, the idea in Europe and the United

States, was that the new government would become a terrorist government; that Afghanistan would be a platform for expanding terrorism all over the world. Exactly the opposite occurred! You did an intelligent action against ISIS, and this is recognized also outside of Afghanistan.

So if you put together this big success that you wrought against terrorism, and against narcotics, you can present the new Afghanistan to the world, in a very positive way. I am sure that there will be enough countries that will appreciate that very much, and a process of recognition will take place. You must be recognized. Not only because you are the legitimate government of Afghanistan, but because you are acting very positively and favorably for the international community.

I conclude by saying that if you want to take this route, you can be very successful and you will consolidate all of the goals of your country now. Thank you so much. Thank you. [Applause]

Following is the full text of Prof. Arlacchi's presentation, prepared in advance, for the Conference, "Operation Ibn Sina: Toward an Economic Miracle in Afghanistan," in Kabul, Nov. 6–8, 2023. It has been edited by EIR. An embedded link has been added.

Some Ideas About Elimination of Opium Poppy Production in Afghanistan

by Professor Pino Arlacchi

After the United States escape from Kabul, which occurred just over two years ago, in August 2021, on the heels of the withdrawal from Syria and Iraq, the world expected the Taliban to turn Afghanistan into the world hub of terrorism and illicit trafficking of all kinds, flooding neighboring countries and Western Europe with opiates, amphetamines, and with stranded warriors seeking new battlefields.

Well, precisely the opposite has happened. The Taliban embarked on a campaign to destroy ISIS and related groups, so effective that it has baffled Americans.

The *New York Times* (3/25/2023) noted that the Taliban had identified and eliminated, among other

things, the ISIS cell responsible for the August 2021 attack on the Kabul airport, which occurred during the chaotic U.S. troop evacuation that had cost the lives of 13 U.S. servicemen, plus the lives of dozens of Afghan collaborators of the occupation forces, who were also on the run.

The same newspaper published (Dec. 18, 2021) a series of secret documents in which the Pentagon unintentionally brings out one of the reasons for the deep anti-American odium that has accumulated in the Afghan population during 20 years of invasion: the massacre of thousands of unarmed civilians by drones programmed to bomb any kind of assemblage, and in particular festivals, markets, weddings, and even funerals.

The air war in Afghanistan, described by President Barack Obama as a masterpiece of precision aimed at sparing innocent lives, was actually a carnage that ended only with ignominious defeat.

The Pax Taliban reduced terrorist domestic attacks by 75%—thus reducing the risk of terrorism for the West. This is good news for all of us, but it is carefully ignored by Western media.

Those media are also engaged in hiding or downplaying a parallel, even more sensational development that has taken place in Afghanistan: The new government in Kabul re-enacted, shortly after taking office, the ban on opium production and enforced it this year with minimal use of force. The result is an 80% collapse of drugs destined to supply the Western European market.

You read that right. It was European satellites that detected this past June that the “infamous” Taliban, instead of cartelizing the production of a substance that destroys the health of a million European consumers, and appropriating the profits from a skyrocketing opium price, banned it. The ban is based on the *Quran*'s directive prohibiting intoxicants. And it follows on a UN strategy dating back to the late 1990s that had already encouraged them, in 2001, to zero out poppy cultivation for the first time.

When the U.S. Army entered Kabul in October 2001, no opium poppies were being grown in Afghanistan. It would not have been particularly difficult for an occupying force with extensive resources to sustain the opium-free situation in the following years by implementing local development projects militarily protected against attacks by traffickers and warlords. But, we know that the George W. Bush Administration deliber-

ately decided not to do so, preferring to cooperate with the warlords with a view to combating terrorism, in exchange for renouncing any attempt to repeat the opium-free situation that existed in 2001.

The opium problem was not a priority for the military intervention in Afghanistan during all the U.S. occupation of the country. The “hidden pact” between the occupying authorities and the opium community was described as follows, in soft but clear diplomatic terminology, on page 1 of an Aug. 12, 2009 [report](#) by the Congressional Research Service, titled “Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy”:

Coalition forces pursuing regional security and counter-terrorism objectives may rely on the cooperation of security commanders, tribal leaders, and local officials who may be involved in the narcotics trade.

The *de facto* impunity enjoyed by growers and major traffickers triggered the resumption of large-scale illicit opium growing, which returned to pre-2001 levels in the space of two years and saw the appearance for the first time in Afghanistan of a trafficking cartel made up of six or seven leading warlords.

This cartel was able to generate a rise of farm-gate opium prices from USD 30 per kilogram in 1999–2000 to USD 400–500 per kilogram in 2004–2005. As a result, the number of people involved in the opium businesses rapidly grew to 3.5 million, with the share of Afghan GDP accounted for by drugs rising to 40–50%.

Farm-gate opium prices subsequently fell as a result of excess production, but this huge illicit sector had become an established part of the Afghan economy. The foolish decision to make a pact with the devil created fertile ground for instability, terrorism and insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

This situation now is over.

Proposal

Any plan to get rid of illicit opium growing must focus on growers’ livelihoods. The only strategy that has been successful wherever it has been employed



FAO/Farshad Usyan

An Afghan farmer in a wheat field in Nangarhar province at harvest time in 2021.

on a sufficient scale with the proper consistency and political will involves the development of alternatives to opium cultivation. No large-scale attempts have been made so far to implement this strategy in Afghanistan. Even though this may appear strange in a country that is the world’s leading opium producer, after 2001 no one has ever drawn up a *multi-annual national plan, with a dedicated budget and specific deadlines and benchmarks, for the elimination of the illicit crops.*

Between 2001 and 2009, the United States and the international community spent USD 1.61 billion on counter-narcotics measures without having any significant impact on production and trafficking. Afghanistan remains the source of over 90% of the world’s illicit opium. This expenditure has not produced results because no efforts have been made to phase out opium growing through alternative development.

A five-year plan to eliminate opium production, involving *the creation of a dedicated office with an appropriate budget and staff,* needs to be drawn up. The office should be put under the direct responsibility of the Afghan President; it should employ Afghan staff; it should be given technical assistance by donor countries; and should be headed up by a figure who has the trust of both the President and the international community.

On the basis of the successful attempts to phase out opium cultivation in Pakistan, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and other countries, the amount required to put an end to illicit production in Afghanistan through sustainable alternative production options may be put at €100 million per year.