

# Afghan Opium Wave Ready To Drown the Region

by Ramtanu Maitra

The Afghan opium harvest this spring is now getting converted into heroin and has begun to move to Europe via Central Asia and Russia. This year's harvest, close to 3,500 metric tons, will not only serve the masses, but may help feed many war parties now in action in the region.

The massive opium and heroin outflow from Afghanistan has rattled Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asia in particular. The British press, led by the *Guardian*, has pointed out that 90% of the heroin consumed in Britain is of Afghan origin. Fears have been expressed in Pakistan as well, where millions of addicts are eagerly waiting for the drug carriers to arrive.

In the midst of all this, one could not help but acknowledge the bitter irony. The largely successful operation against the Taliban and al-Qaeda has not resulted in the reduction of opium production. In October 2001, when the United States landed its troops in Afghanistan to oust the Taliban from power in Kabul, one of the stated objectives of Washington was to curb, if not eliminate, the Afghan drug. At a recent Pentagon press briefing, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, when asked by an Army newsman why the opposite had happened, threw up his hands saying, "You ask what we're going to do, and the answer is, I don't really know. My impression is that in a very real sense it's a demand problem; it's a problem that there are a lot of people who want it, a lot of people with money who will pay for it, a lot of people who will steal from others to pay for it." In essence, then, what the Defense Secretary is saying is almost verbatim what a concerned citizen gets from a street cop. That nothing more will be done to stop the Afghan opium plague, coming from the U.S. Defense Secretary, makes the situation doubly scary.

## Russian Concerns

On Aug. 27, Russia's drug control chief Viktor Cherkesov told reporters in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, after meeting with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmanov, that in light of the massive amount of narcotics flowing northward from Afghanistan, his government would soon open a permanent office in Tajikistan that would "allow the maximum use" of both nations' resources. World leaders and international organizations have to make "a political decision" to put joint pressure on Afghanistan to reduce production of drugs. The remarks came a day after Cherkesov's deputy Aleksandr Mikhailov said that a rising tide of heroin from Afghanistan has swept through Russia, with drug traders quickly spreading their operations across the country's 11 time zones and distributing



*Opium production has swelled again to huge levels in Afghanistan, despite edicts from the Karzai government and the presence of nearly 15,000 American and other NATO troops. U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said nothing could be done; the Russian government is protesting.*

drugs among young children. “A heroin attack from the South has become the most acute problem for us,” Mikhailov told reporters in Moscow.

Russian officials reported in August the nation’s largest-ever drug bust—420 kilograms of heroin found in a truck stopped just outside Moscow—and Mikhailov said that the bust had a street value of more than \$22 million. During the first half of this year, Russian border guards alone have confiscated 2.9 metric tons of drugs, half of it heroin, Mikhailov said. The amount of drugs seized accounts for roughly 10% of the actual flow, he pointed out.

Russia is now a major victim of the Afghan narco wave. Russia has between 3-4 million drug users out of a population of about 145.5 million, and the consumption of heroin has jumped by 23 times between 1998 and 2002, Mikhailov said. He pointed out that about 70% of heroin in Russia originated in Afghanistan, which accounts for about three-quarters of the world’s opium, the raw material for producing heroin. While Moscow, St. Petersburg, Russia’s Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, and Yekaterinburg have remained the main drug hubs, many smaller cities have also developed a drug habit, Mikhailov said.

### **Drug Explosion in Central Asia**

A recent report of the UN International Narcotics Control Board said that in Central Asia, drug abuse has risen most sharply in Tajikistan, with an estimated 720 addicts per 100,000 people. But the rate remains highest in Kyrgyzstan, with 1,644 addicts per 100,000 residents, which is about 1.65%.

The report went on to say that the ready availability of opiate drugs in Central Asia makes them increasingly the

drugs of choice, replacing marijuana. The rise in intravenous drug use has led to an increase in HIV-AIDS infections. As many as 80% of people with HIV in parts of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, contracted the disease through drug injections, according to the report. According to the UN report, Turkmenistan has not reported any seizures of opiate drugs or chemicals since 2000, even though significant quantities had been found before.

Despite the ostensible lack of cooperation by the Turkmen government with the UN Narcotics Control Board in providing necessary data, it is widely acknowledged that the drug addiction problem is a serious one in Turkmenistan. Although one cannot extrapolate numbers, in 1989 the UN report showed Turkmenistan having 124 addicts per 100,000 when Russia had about 30 addicts per 100,000. According to the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP), Turkmenistan has about 13,000 heroin users and this number is growing. The Turkmen Health Ministry reported on 4,087 officially registered drug users in 1996, with 5,809 in 1997, and almost 8,000 in 1998. Today the Mary province alone has nearly 3,000 registered drug users. These are the official statistics. The actual number of drug users is unknown.

The 860 kilometer Turkmen-Afghan border has always been peaceful and quiet. The Turkmenistan government in Ashgabat explained that this phenomenon results from its good neighborly relationships with every Afghan government. Drug barons, however, use this quiet border for drug trafficking. In the words of Chary Atayev, an officer at the Turkmen office of the UNODCCP, “Turkmenistan is used for drug transit from Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.” According to at least one report, 80 tons of drugs go through Turkmenistan (partially remaining there) to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan,

Russia, and so on.

It is evident from going through observations and various reports, that the Turkmen officials are keen to project low trafficking activities along the Afghan-Turkmenistan borders. According to official Turkmen statistics, last year the Turkmen customs seized 2,900 kilograms (over 3 tons) of opium and 220 kilograms of heroin. In comparison, in 1997 the Turkmen customs and Russian border guards seized more than 40 tons of drugs, including 2 tons of heroin, 1.5 tons of opium and 38 tons of hashish (a concentrated form of marijuana). Turkmen officials point out that present trend indicates that the border guards are catching less.

The decreasing "catch" of drugs on the Turkmen border, however, does not mean a decrease in drug transit. Observers agree that the withdrawal of Russian border troops from Turkmenistan (at Ashgabat's initiative) late in 1999 has made the southern Turkmen border transparent. The Turkmen authorities have proved not very efficient in controlling the Turkmen-Afghan border. It is no secret that local customs lack equipment to check people and vehicles that cross the borderline.

In addition to the Central Asian nations, another neighbor of Afghanistan, Pakistan, is awaiting the bumper opium harvest with a great deal of trepidation. Pakistan is not only a key route for the international narcotics smuggling from Afghanistan, but is also a big market, with its estimated 4 million drug addicts. Pakistan is also an opium poppy producer, despite a strong crackdown on farmers in the country's lawless tribal region neighboring Afghanistan.

In 2001, Pakistan managed to wipe out poppy cultivation, but high market prices of drugs attracted many farmers to resume production of the banned crop, said Thomas Zeindil, Pakistan's chief of the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP). "Afghanistan has a bumper poppy crop this year," said Brig. Liaquat Toor of the Army-led Anti-Narcotics Force of Pakistan. "This is going to affect Pakistan."

## Central Asian Plan

Neither the United Nations nor the Central Asian countries are ignoring this menace now. Struggle against drug aggression was at the top of the agenda of the Dushanbe summit of the Central Asian heads of state last October. At the time, there was some hope among the Central Asian governments that the anti-terrorist activities in Afghanistan, and the stated objective of the United States to curb opium production, would result in providing relief to the Central Asian countries.

Almaz Garifulin, head of the Department for Controlling Drugs under the Kyrgyz government, told Russia's RIA Novosti exclusively, that presently the situation around illegal drug turnover in Central Asian republics "has somewhat stabilized." Nonetheless, Kyrgyz experts at the time had forecast that the number of attempts to illegally transit drugs via Central Asian republics' territory is likely to skyrocket, for according to international experts' data, 3,500-5,000 tons of

opium and heroin are still stored on Afghan territory, "the yield" of the present year not considered.

Specialists say 1 kilo of heroin in Kyrgyzstan costs about \$7-8,000, whereas in Russia and West Europe the prices for it are a dozen times higher, which allows low-income strata of the population to get involved in drug trade. All these data, in Garifulin's words, indicated grounds for saying that Central Asian republics are on the whole exposed to narco-aggression on the part of international criminal organizations that earmark the laundered money from illegal drug trade to finance terrorism and religious extremism.

At the summit, the Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced Kazakhstan's initiative to create an "international anti-drug center," and asked the region's states to become its co-founders. President Nazarbayev pointed out at the summit that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan need to focus their cooperation on three priority aspects: strengthening national borders, counteracting international terrorism, and fighting against drug dealing.

Subsequently, in June this year, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched five new major drug-control projects worth more than \$17 million to combat the illegal drug trade in Central Asia. The UNODC press release cited the need for stronger, concerted, and coordinated action to deal with both opium poppy production in Afghanistan and the trafficking of heroin in the countries surrounding Afghanistan. According to the UNODC, the new projects will focus on improved law enforcement measures, better border controls, and cooperation among Afghan and Central Asian enforcement agencies.

But despite these measures taken by the Central Asian nations, it is widely acknowledged that unless Afghanistan's opium production is curbed, the situation will get worse. What worries the neighbors most, is that the Afghan farmers are producing a bumper crop of poppies this year, despite a ban imposed by President Hamid Karzai's government, and just three years after the Taliban clamped down on cultivation. It is also evident that although United States and NATO troops are inside Afghanistan, the entire spectrum of drug activities, ranging from production to trafficking, is moving along smoothly.

Massive poppy cultivation could not happen without the knowledge of powerful warlords who still control most of Afghanistan with their loyal militias. It is widely known that the warlords, commanders, and corrupt officials buy opium from the farmers and provide safe passage to drug barons, who smuggle out either raw opium or refined heroin processed in makeshift factories.

Since a kilo of heroin in Afghanistan is worth from \$5-20,000, according to one estimate, but in the international black market the price soars to \$70-300,000, it is unlikely that less than drastic measures could stop this lucrative business from flourishing. Listening to the U.S. Defense Secretary, it seems that no one is really interested any longer to make that effort to take on this menace.