

# Get Rid of Opium, Or Perish

by Ramtanu Maitra

U.S. President Barack Obama is in the process of formulating a policy, implementation of which would apparently lead to the end of militancy in Afghanistan and peace in the region, we have been told. From the noises made by the media, and the talking heads of Washington, a number of old formulations, put in a new bottle, are about to be peddled as solutions. However, the new President must recognize that the only way Afghanistan can be stabilized, thus bringing peace to the region, is by ridding it of the menace of opium once and for all. As long as policymakers ignore this reality, the security environment in and around Afghanistan will continue to deteriorate, leading to a regional blow-up.

What is to be understood at the outset, is that the vast amount of opium produced annually in Afghanistan, and converted into lethal heroin, is not only funding the terrorists who are killing U.S. and other troops there, but is also financing operations aimed at breaking Pakistan apart, and causing violence and chaos within India and further West.

## Rise of Opium-Funded Terrorists

In the north of Afghanistan, the Central Asian states, which were part of the erstwhile Soviet Union until 1991, have been devastated by drug-money-financed terrorist movements, acting in the garb of the orthodox Wahhabi Islamic tenet. Located south and west of Afghanistan, Iran has been inundated by opium and heroin, which are destroying a generation of Iranians.

This region has been systematically handed over to the terrorists since the United States and its allies launched the “War on Terror,” ostensibly to eliminate violence and terrorism in Afghanistan. In 2001, the year U.S. invaded Afghanistan to oust the Taliban, which harbored the infamous enemy of the United States, al-Qaeda, Afghanistan produced less than 100 tons of opium. This occurred under the reign of an orthodox Islamic group, the Taliban, four years after that Islamic

militia took power in Afghanistan with the help of the Pakistani military. Since the U.S. took over Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, when NATO and a few non-NATO nations joined to fight America’s war, opium production took off vertically (see graphs in lead article, this section). It is surreal to hear experts on Afghanistan expressing their surprise to find that the Taliban, which was routed in 2001, has made a comeback. What has made this possible, is opium. It’s been happening right in front of their eyes.

In 2007, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan’s opium production was 8,240 tons—U.S. official agencies report an equivalent amount of 8,000 tons—which is about twice as much as the Taliban ever produced during its five-year reign, and at least eight times the quantity Afghanistan ever produced before the Soviet Army invaded in 1979. This year, the production has been “reduced” through a “successful campaign,” to 7,700 tons. This amount of opium, converted into heroin, generates about \$4 billion to those Afghans who control the business, while the street value in Europe of that heroin is some \$132 billion, more than 30 times as much (**Table 1**).

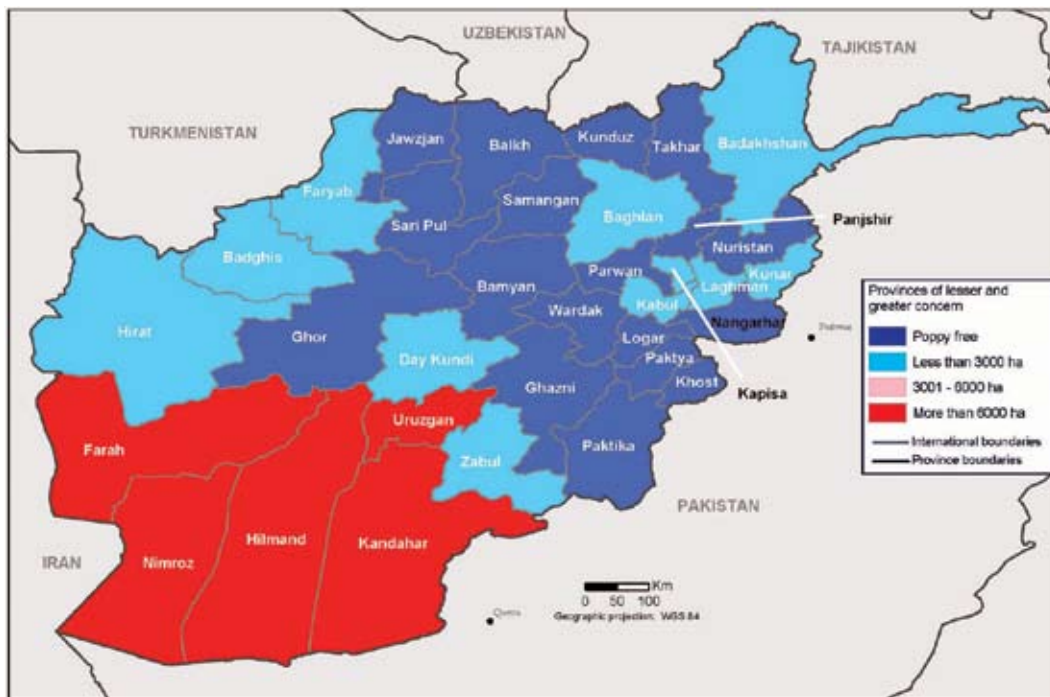
Even a fraction of that \$4 billion in cash generated annually can recruit, train, arm, and maintain thousands of mercenaries, or jihadis, who then can be deployed in the region to develop “hot spots,” encircling the foreign invaders, and multiplying the crisis. And, this is exactly what has happened, but Washington, advised by its pundits and experts, chose to ignore all that.

Remember again, the dastardly Taliban, who were recognized by only three countries—Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates—had cut down

TABLE 1  
**Afghanistan Opiates:  
From the Farm to the Street**

	2006	2007
<b>Prices (\$/kg)</b>		
Opium, farmgate	140	122
Opium, export to neighbors	560	500
Heroin on street, Europe	140,000	140,000
<b>Value (billions \$)</b>		
Opium, farmgate	0.8	1.0
Opium, export to neighbors	3.2	4.0
Heroin on street, Europe	93	132

Sources: UNODC, ONDCP, EIR.



UNODC

*Five southern provinces—Helmand, Nimroz, Farah, Uruzgan, and Kandahar—produce 80% of Afghanistan's opium, and are patrolled by more than 8,300 British troops, who ensure that the drug lords remain in control of the poppy fields.*

Afghanistan's opium production in the year 2000, to 100 tons. The question that crops up in many people's minds is: Did we go to war against the Taliban to jack up opium production again, or to get rid of the terrorists? Seven years later, the answer to that question seems to be that we indeed hugely succeeded in jacking up opium production in Afghanistan, and, in the process, spawned thousands of terrorists, who are now armed better than ever before, and are operating in a much-wider circle.

What went wrong? Did our experts miss the boat, in the same way Sir Alan Greenspan "missed" his, while cooking up toxic assets in the financial market, and assuring us that the fundamentals of our economy were sound? Did we really want opium production to rise dramatically in order to finance the based-on-fraud financial "boom" during the Bush Administration days? It is evident from the unraveling of the Madoff fraud that a large sum of money was coming from "unaccounted" for sources, a.k.a. drug money.

Or, did we allow the opium explosion, and illegal cash generation to recruit, arm, train, and maintain terrorists, to destabilize a region where three large nations—Russia, China, and India—meet? Did the Bush Administration wittingly, or unwittingly, get sucked into the old colonial Great Game of remaining "powerful" through weakening of other nations? In fact, by

jacking up the opium production, nothing was achieved. It does not take an expert to fathom that if the opium production in Afghanistan is not shut down, it will not only engulf the region in flames, burning down many U.S. friends in the region, but it will eventually destroy the United States.

## Liars and Lies Behind Opium Explosion

One of the most difficult aspects of eradicating opium is to peel off the layers of lies presented as "realities" by the beneficiaries of opium production—and these are not the Taliban militia members. These are corrupt beneficiaries of the bribes to allow opium and heroin production to continue. These beneficiaries also are the offshore and other corrupt bankers who use the drug money, the only cash available in today's Alice-in-Wonderland financial market they have been allowed to create, to meet daily cash requirements. Both these groups obfuscate the drug issue to prevent opium eradication in Afghanistan.

**Lie #1:** NATO troops in Afghanistan, referred to as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), avoid any involvement in eradicating opium, because they claim the destruction of opium would alienate the population.

This lie can be exposed in no time by looking at the reality on the ground. In Afghanistan, 80% of the opium

is produced in five southern provinces: Helmand, Nimroz, Farah, Uruzgan, and Kandahar. These are all virtually under the control of the drug lords and their militias (conveniently labeled as Taliban to obfuscate reality). These provinces are manned by more than 8,300 British troops, in collaboration with a few thousand troops from Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands. These troops do not go out and fight the Taliban, and their losses are small. They have little contact with the population, and make sure that the drug lords and their militias remain in control of the opium program.

On March 3, 2008, in Vienna, Hakan Demirbukan, who ran the UNODC opium surveys in Afghanistan for several years, pointed out: "The vast majority of southern Afghanistan is closed to UN operations.... UN people are only in the city centers. They cannot go to the villages. It is very dangerous."

**Lie #2:** Afghan farmers prefer opium over other crops because it generates more money.

This lie is easy to propagate, since very few Westerners have any possibility of developing contact with Afghan farmers. The truth is, that where the opium production is rampant, the area is under the control of drug lords. The drug lords, with hundreds of militiamen, armed with AK-47s and other assault rifles, make sure that the farmer does not produce anything other than opium in his fields. Opium seed is distributed to the farmer's doorstep, and he is ordered to deliver so many kilograms of opium when it is harvested. The farmer is told how much he will be paid, and that if he does not deliver the said amount, his family will be wiped out. During the opium production, the drug lords place their militiamen armed with AK-47s at the corners of the farmer's field, so that no one can eradicate the poppy crops.

The fact remains, and it is not a difficult fact to assimilate, that farmers have been left at the mercy of the drug lords and their militias. There are numerous photographs showing armed-to-the-teeth NATO troops marching by huge poppy fields in full bloom, guarded by AK-47-carrying militiamen.

In an article for RFE/RL on Oct. 10, "Afghanistan: Poor Helmand Farmers Find Themselves in Eye of Drug Storm," Abubakar Siddique and Salih Muhammad Salih report that Haji Mahuddin Khan, a tribal leader in Helmand, told them that international drug rings are the main benefactors in the province, while poor peasants remain chained to poppy cultivation. "The farmers have never benefited from poppy cultivation," he said. "The profits are taken by those [gov-

ernment officials] who tell farmers to engage in cultivation but then threaten their crops with eradication. The international mafia is the main benefactor, while we are being held responsible for it and portrayed as criminals."

## How We Treat Our Friends (or Enemies?)

The opium explosion in Afghanistan, which has now been reluctantly acknowledged by the policymakers, has helped the Taliban to regroup, leaving many dead bodies among the foreign troops, far from the much-focussed-on battlefields of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These dead bodies, and those who have been made dysfunctional because of drug use, are strewn across Pakistan, India, Iran, the nations of Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia. Among these nations, are those the U.S. establishment considers to be good friends, some just friends, and Iran, as an exception, is the "enemy."

Now, let us look at what our seven-year "War on Terror" has achieved in the region. To begin with, it is now common knowledge that the entire western part of Pakistan, between the River Indus and the imaginary border known as the Durand Line, which theoretically separates Pakistan from Afghanistan, is in turmoil. The level of turmoil is such, that Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari had to issue a statement on Feb. 15, that Pakistan is at war with the Taliban. The fact remains that Islamabad's writ does not extend to the Swat Valley, or most of the tribal areas and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), west of Peshawar city. In other words, if business as usual continues, Pakistan will break apart.

It is to be recognized, even at this late stage, that much of the financing of the terrorists operating to break apart Pakistan (with the exception of the Wahhabis in control of the Swat Valley) comes from Saudi Arabia, drawing money from opium and heroin sales, and taxes imposed on farmers by the drug lords.

The effect on the people of the region has been documented by the UNODC, whose *World Drug Report* includes a section on the annual prevalence of abuse for opiates, cannabis, and other drugs, as a percentage of the population aged 15 to 64, for each country monitored. These rates reflect the percentage of people who used the drug in the 12-month period prior to the survey. Although these statistics undoubtedly understate the extent of drug consumption, they are nonetheless useful to consider.

In 2007, an estimated 434,000 Afghans used hashish; 130,000 used opium; and 41,000 used heroin, according to the UNODC. While the population of Afghanistan is officially listed as 31.8 million, the UNODC figures are based on a figure of 23.8 million.

A flood of Afghan heroin has swept through the Islamic countries of Asia and Central Asia since the late 1990s. Additionally, Afghan opium and hashish is being distributed regionally in Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics. Over 10 million Muslims in Asia and the Middle East have used Afghan drugs, leading to the economic and social ruin of millions of families, one report claimed.

Pakistan, a friend of the United States since the 1950s, has been most affected, with a surge in addiction rates during the last 12 years. According to the UNODC, 640,000 Pakistanis used opiates in 2007; of these, 515,000 used heroin and 125,000 used opium. A 2004 survey from Karachi found that 20% of IV-drug users were HIV positive.

The UNODC estimated that in 2007, 371,000 Iranians used heroin, 928,000 used opium, and 1.9 million used hashish. There are over 3 million Iranians who had used drugs during the previous year, but only about 1.3 million of these used opiates, and most of that is opium, not heroin.

Addiction rates have grown by leaps and bounds as the Afghan heroin moved through these areas to the north, reaching Russia and Ukraine. In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, up to 90% of drug addicts are HIV positive, and 90% of new HIV cases come from drug use.

One report pointed out that, globally, the rate of heroin addiction stands at about 0.3% for people between the ages of 15 to 64, the most commonly used sampling group. It is almost five times that in Afghanistan (1.4%), and more than twice the average in Pakistan (0.7%) and the Central Asian Republics (Turkmenistan, 0.5%; Uzbekistan, 0.8%; Tajikistan, 0.5%; Kyrgyzstan, 0.8%; and Kazakhstan, 1.0%).

In addition to Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the carrier of death and destruction, produced in the five fortified provinces of southern Afghanistan, has made its impact felt in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Bangladesh.

## What To Do Now

The Warriors on Terror have been in Afghanistan for more than seven years. During this time, in addition to aiding the explosion of opium production, the

Washington-led policy has also helped the resurgence of the Taliban, and other insurgents funded by drug money. The insurgents, who are battling the U.S. and NATO troops, reportedly tax all aspects of the drug trade, from cultivation to processing and distribution. They also earn money by providing protection for opium fields, heroin labs, drug shipments, and narcotics traffickers.

Despite having all this information, Washington and Brussels continue to flail around, blaming one another for the failure of their poorly defined mission, and for the resurgence of the Taliban. The first to be chastized was Pakistan, for allowing al-Qaeda leaders to move into its territory, and then, failing to annihilate them, and preventing the Pakistani Pushtuns from joining ranks with the Afghan Pushtuns, in the latter's fight against the foreign troops.

The second round of blame was directed against Iran, for allegedly helping al-Qaeda. Although Kabul refused to accept that argument, pointing out that Tehran does not want a Taliban government any more than does Washington, the blame game continues. While it is true that the insurgents coming from Saudi Arabia pass through Iran to Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran is committed to opposing the orthodox Sunnis of the Taliban, who are imbued with anti-Shi'a zealotry propagated by Saudi Arabia.

The third round of the blame game began last year when the failure of the undefined mission was placed squarely on the shoulders of President Hamid Karzai and his government. Mind you, those who are blaming the Karzai government for corruption and inefficiency are also aware that the situation is so dire in southern Afghanistan, that the well-trained, well-armed British/Canadian/Australian/Dutch troops find it too dangerous to venture out, and thus, leave themselves, *de facto*, with the task of protecting the drug trade.

In reality, if anyone is to be blamed, it is those troops on whose watch a huge opium/heroin production and trade is conducted; many large heroin labs continue to convert opium into heroin; and acetic anhydride and precursors needed for conversion continue to come in hundreds of tons to these labs.

With a new administration in Washington, the blame game has to stop, and work to shut down the drug production and traffic has to begin. The destruction of the opium empire set up by international cartel with the help of the Afghan drug lords, protected by British troops in five southern Afghan provinces, has



to be achieved quickly.

First, all the Afghan drug lords have to be eliminated from the scene physically through capture. If they resist, they should be considered as war combatants.

Once the elimination of the drug lords takes off, the farmers will be “liberated.” At this point, a well-organized and well-thought-out plan to eradicate the opium poppy must be implemented. The eradication has to be followed by paying compensation to the farmers that would last them a year at the least.

In a series of article last year, *Middle East Times* writer James Emery pointed out that most of the processing labs are located in southern Afghanistan. These labs are close to opium sources and are jointly protected by the Taliban and the drug lords. Smaller refineries, including mobile labs, are scattered around the country. Taking out heroin-processing labs will help curtail the market for opium.

The UNODC’s “Winter Afghan Opium Report” of 2008 noted that a massive quantity of opium is being stockpiled for future sales. The report said that even if the entire 2008 Afghan opium crop were eradicated, heroin labs would remain busy, unless opium warehouses were located and destroyed

Acetic anhydride is the essential precursor used for converting opium into morphine base and heroin. Its sole use in Afghanistan is in drug refineries that have increased their annual demand from about 200 tons to 1,330 tons during the last six years.

None of the precursors are manufactured in Afghanistan. In all, some 11,000 tons of chemicals were required to process opium during 2007. The chemicals are smuggled into Afghanistan from China, India, Pakistan, and the Central Asian Republics, Emery pointed out. The main opium markets in Helmand province are in Musa Qala and Sangin, which were under British control, reportedly for a while, in 2007. Each of the two districts has numerous heroin labs.

It is imperative that Washington engage in serious discussions with the countries from which the precursors come into Afghanistan, and work out a surveillance system at the manufacturing places themselves.

These are the basic requirements to rid Afghanistan of this menace and prevent the region from becoming a safehouse for the terrorists. The only way to defeat the terrorists is to starve them of the opium cash that helps them to proliferate. That would also help the United States earn some respect in the region.