

Afghan Opium Explosion Worries Asian Leaders

by Ramtanu Maitra

The newly elected Kyrgyzstan President Kurmanbek Bakiev and Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov for the first time publicly identified the dangerous alliance of drug traffickers and religious agitators, based in the U.S.-controlled Afghanistan, as a major threat to nations across Central Asia.

In early July, the six-nation summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security group that includes Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, in addition to Russia and China, cited the threat as an aggressive international alliance between drug barons and Islamic militants infiltrating the backyards of both Russia and China from Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Karimov has gone on record saying that a vast international “radical religious” conspiracy, fueled by drug money, “aims to destroy stability in order to dominate the region . . . and introduce its own model of development.”

Furthermore, the SCO as an organization, and the Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan heads of states in particular, have pointed their fingers at the dubious U.S. role in Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban in the Winter of 2001.

According to Bishkek-based columnist Fred Weir of the *Christian Science Monitor*, there is a growing understanding of an interwoven relationship between the Islamic radicals and drug traffickers operating into Central Asia from the “recently liberated” Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: The Source

“The drug pipeline from Afghanistan, through Central Asia and Russia to the West, is overflowing because production volumes are exploding,” says Orozbek Moldaliyev, director of the independent Politics, Religion, and Security think-tank in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. “The narco-barons fund religious extremists and terrorists, on the principle that anything which weakens central government control and spreads chaos will make their business easier,” he added.

Although many single out the lack of democracy and repressive regimes in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, as fostering radical Islam, there are other causes as well. The poverty in the region is getting only worse, and it is most pronounced in the Fergana Valley, where Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan intersect. The valley has also become a primary staging area for drug dealers moving their product westward, experts say. “Drug pro-

duction is multiplying rapidly, and this is radically changing the political outlook for the entire region,” says Sergei Kolmakov, co-director of PBN, a business risk consultancy.

But there are others who blame the United States for the deteriorating conditions. They point out that Afghan drug production was being brought under control by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which was overthrown by the U.S.-led intervention in 2001. “Everyone doubts the intentions of the Americans nowadays,” Kimsambai Abdurakhmanov, a leading Muslim cleric and former head Mufti of Kyrgyzstan, told the *Christian Science Monitor* recently. “The Americans come here, and all these bad things start happening. They say they’re fighting terrorism, but terrorism just gets worse. How can we explain these things?” he asked.

The U.S. Role

There is, however, no indication that Washington is paying any attention to these complaints. Afghan drug production remains virtually undisturbed, and the U.S. policy to support the drug warlords in order to maintain a facade of stability in Kabul is pursued relentlessly.

On the other hand, what worries the Bush Administration is the joining of voices by the Central Asian nations with Russia and China. The SCO Summit took the unexpected step of asking the United States to set a timetable for closing its military bases at Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, which were set up with Moscow’s approval prior to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived in Kyrgyzstan on July 25, and was scheduled also to visit Tajikistan. Rumsfeld had previously made it clear to the Kyrgyzstan leadership that the United States has no intent to leave the U.S.-led air base in Manas. He told reporters on his flight to Bishkek, “The basic premise that combat or anti-terrorist operations are complete in Afghanistan is flawed. It is not true.” And Rumsfeld and other Pentagon officials have already indicated that they were looking for solutions to keep the U.S. military base in Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan.

Before Rumsfeld landed in Bishkek on July 25, U.S. media were already propagating the idea that the Kyrgyzstan leadership was pressured by both Russia and China at the SCO summit to agree to the organization’s declaration on U.S. bases. Gen. Richard Myers, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked that “bullied by two big countries” (Russia and China), the Central Asian countries had made the demand.

But Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan now seem to be trying to wiggle out of a Russo-Chinese vise, and the Kyrgyzstan leadership is making conflicting statements on the issue. But, it is also evident that Moscow is hardening its position on the U.S. base issue, with apparent support from China.