

# A drug-free Afghanistan not so easy

VIEW



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LAST WEEK, THE INTERNATIONAL Narcotics Control Board made official what everyone in Afghanistan already knew: poppy production rose to near-record levels in 2004. This is one indicator of economic growth that spells trouble for the country.

While the surging poppy production — now accounting for at least 40 percent of the country's small GDP — could lower street price for heroin, it rocks the country's rickety economic prospects and further complicates Afghanistan's warped politics. The dismal news reflects deep divisions within the development and political communities about how to sustain post-conflict recovery in a drug-torn state.

Poppy has emerged as major bone of contention among donor governments, and between donors and the Afghan government. Without acceptable solutions, Afghanistan's renewal could easily fail.

Afghanistan's narcotics problems have long accompanied its long journey through war. Poppy profits helped finance the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s: almost every *mujahidin* group profited from drugs, but patrons valued Soviet defeat over stopping trafficking. When anarchy overtook war, narcotics trafficking increased dramatically. After Central Asia's borders opened in 1991, Afghanistan became the primary source of opium in London and Moscow. By the time the Taliban seized power, solving the drug problem had risen high on the West's diplomatic agenda. The Taliban government banned cultivation and production before it lost power. The absence of poppy was more formal than real: poppy was a profit-centre for war, so the ban was meant to help correct a market glut in an otherwise devastated economy. When the Taliban were overthrown in late 2001 almost no poppy was grown in Afghanistan.

That's when current troubles began. The new Afghan government certainly didn't want illegal poppy. But warlords across the country — patronised substantially by the Western coalition in its fight against Al Qaeda — invested in poppy to support their private armies. President Hamid Karzai and his major donors missed their chance. Desperate for political unity, he cultivated warlords to avoid cultivating conflict. Poppy was outlawed, but took over the economy.

How important is poppy for today's Afghan economy? The answers loom large and small. Before war overtook the economy, Afghanistan could easily feed itself and even export foodstuff. But violence and subsequent anarchy destroyed the state; in the wake of that destruction, drug traders became surrogate bankers. For a small investment in food seeds, farmers agree to grow poppy. Though they rarely see direct profits from the crop, poverty-stricken rural Afghans strike these deals just to survive. For the state as a whole, the consequences are equally severe. Poppy is illegal, and illegal profits cannot be taxed. Drugs, therefore, enrich a few at the expense of the many, and cost the government (in law enforcement) without contributing to public funds.

This is how humanitarian and development groups understand the economy. They note, quite accurately, that poppy fills an economic vacuum, and argue that only investments in the rural economy, education, and health can release Afghan farmers from a tragic poverty cycle. Afghanistan ranks fifth from the bottom in the UN's human development index, and

even with the benefits of foreign assistance, 15 percent of the population received 80 percent of the benefits of growth, with rural areas disproportionately disadvantaged. Even though Afghanistan now has a banking system and unified currency, and aspires to join the World Trade Organisation, farmers remain small cogs in an illegal economic machine. The machine itself must be rebuilt from scratch.

But discord now reigns among aid providers and development experts about how to remove drugs without creating greater poverty and courting instability. Recent debates have highlighted the eradication policies that are promoted by major donors (and political allies) in the United States and UK. Fearing the premature eradication of poppy — removing it before alternative crops and stable economic policies are put in place — an alliance of 31 international and Afghan aid organisations publicly petitioned US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice this winter to end current US poppy eradication practices in Afghanistan. They cited the fears of grassroots organisations — more than 150 were represented in the letter — that a political system dominated by drug profiteers will compromise Afghanistan's potential recovery. The World Bank has since echoed these sentiments, warning against the "vicious cycle associated with the opium economy warlords". Many observers rightly anticipate that parliamentary and local elections, scheduled for later this year, could be held hostage to narcotics profiteers and provoke more instability.

But stability means something different to the US-led anti-terror coalition, which views Afghanistan as a signal player in a global war — and predictably, Rice promised little. Until now, the coalition has alternately ignored drug production, cultivated drug lords as intelligence and military assets — and occasionally provided funds to areas that might otherwise support alleged terrorists. The result: high poppy producing areas receive disproportionate assistance that — no surprise — often ends up in the hands of warlords already enriched by poppy. Power doesn't change hands, law and order deteriorates, Afghanistan's development becomes increasingly unbalanced, and narcotics flourish in Afghanistan and among its neighbours.

But with cultivation and production rising steadily and dangerously, coalition partners are looking for quick fixes to Afghanistan's problem. For them, eradication seems an efficient tactic. Indeed, Afghan farmers in some areas believe that aerial spraying began last autumn — despite US and UK denial — and now fear that crop contami-

nation will turn a short-term tactic into a strategic disaster. Drug lords can live off their stockpiles, but farmers can easily starve.

The coalition's backup strategy is to condition all economic aid to tangible anti-narcotics process. The goal isn't wrong: combating trafficking is a clear social and economic good. But holding all recovery to an anti-drugs standard is a risky venture. Afghans know too well the devastation that poppy wreaks on the country's fragile politics. They also know that when fighting drugs weakens the Afghan polity, the anti-narcotics fight fails and when fighting terrorism allows drugs to flourish, the anti-terror fight fails, too. In fact, since Karzai took office three years ago some Afghan ministers have been warning of the dangers of drug cartels, narco-terrorists, and possible state failure.

Even more, Afghans know that a commodity is valuable only if someone buys it. The market for opium is not in Afghanistan but in Europe — where Afghan opiates account for at least 75 percent of the market. If any place is to benefit from these blunt anti-poppy measures, it will be Europe, not Afghanistan. Although Karzai has assured the Narcotics Board that Afghanistan will take all measures to become "narcotics-free", his minister of counter-narcotics continues to remind donors that drugs are a multi-dimensional problem whose solution requires shared responsibility — and refuses aid that is "tied, in any direct or indirect way, to the fight against narcotics".

These disputes pit rich donors against poor farmers, and Afghanistan's hard-won sovereignty against a global anti-narcotics struggle. When Afghanistan's state failed, the world learnt that Afghanistan cannot go it alone — on drugs or anything else. Only a legal economy, honest politics, and educated citizens will make it possible for Afghanistan to survive. The first step is taking its government seriously by helping it replace drugs — investing, not destroying. Otherwise, Afghanistan's failure will be built on the self-defeating intentions of others.

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