Fighting the UK’s war on drugs in Afghanistan

Mark Sedra advocates a sharp increase in support to the UK-led counter-narcotics campaign in Afghanistan as a means to mitigate the security threat that Afghan opium production poses to the UK and the international community.

The UK faces a heroin epidemic thanks to an alarming increase in the supply of Afghan-grown opium after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.
Over the past year the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated sharply. The Taliban are resurgent; al-Qaeda has re-established a presence in the country and warlords continue to consolidate their power bases. Fueling these alarming trends has been the burgeoning opium trade, which, despite determined international efforts to arrest its growth, continues to spiral out of control. After a brief hiatus in 2001, at which time a Taliban ban on opium production successfully reduced its output to relatively minor levels, Afghanistan has reclaimed its position as the world’s foremost supplier, accounting for some 75% of world production.

While this came as no surprise to experts and international counter-narcotics agencies, recent signals suggest that the trade’s surge may exceed all expectations.

Afghan leaders have repeatedly warned the international community that failure to curb the rise of opium production will transform the country into a ‘narco-mafia state’. Their underlying message is that the proliferation of poppy cultivation is not solely an Afghan but an international problem. In the case of the UK, the statistics regarding opium trafficking and consumption substantiate such claims.

Approximately 95% of the UK’s heroin derives from Afghan opium, feeding the addictions of 295,000 Britons. In addition to the domestic socio-economic impact of the resurgence of the Afghan opium trade, its implications for international security deserve attention. Narcotics production and trafficking provides transnational terrorist groups with a massive and largely untraceable source of revenue to fund their activities.

Aware of the threat that the Afghan opium trade poses to its national interests, the UK has assumed responsibility for overseeing international support to Afghanistan’s nascent counter-narcotics programme. However, due to shortfalls in funding and a lack of local capacity, the UK-supported programme has elicited few tangible results. If Afghanistan is to avoid the proliferation of poppy cultivation is not solely an Afghan but an international problem. In the case of the UK, the statistics regarding opium trafficking and consumption substantiate such claims.

The post-Taliban drug boom
Since the fall of the Taliban the drug trade has grown at a staggering rate and shows no sign of abating. The 2003 poppy crop, the second largest recorded since surveying began in 1994, reached an estimated 3,600t, 6% larger than the yield for 2002 and 50% greater than that of 2001. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), profits from drug trafficking accounted for 20% of Afghanistan’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2002 and an astounding 50% in 2003.

UNODC’s Annual Opium Poppy Survey in 2003 clearly shows that if current trends persist, cultivation will accelerate at an unprecedented rate over the next two years. The survey found the following:

- poppy cultivation is now found in a total of 28 provinces (out of 32);
- 1.7 million Afghans, out of a population of 24 million, were involved in farming opium poppy, a figure corresponding to roughly 7% of the population;
- the average opium income per capita for the opium-growing population was $594; three times larger than the estimated 2002 GDP per capita;
- the income of opium traffickers totalled at least US$1.3 billion; and
- the estimated annual turnover of international trade in Afghan opiates was US$30 billion and involved more than 500,000 people.

Afghanistan’s counter-narcotics strategy
The Afghan government officially banned poppy cultivation and the consumption of heroin on 17 January 2002. In spite of demoralising early setbacks, the government has shown a resolute commitment to tackling the problem. With support from UNODC and the UK, Hamid Karzai’s administration has taken several steps since 2002 to combat the threat of illicit drugs:

- the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) was created within the Ministry of Interior; and
- a National Drug Law was adopted on 20 October 2003.

The most prominent and publicised aspect of the UK’s counter-narcotics support scheme has been a poppy eradication programme conducted in late 2002 and 2003. It offered US$1,750 for each hectare of poppies destroyed; however, poppy growers can generate double that sum from harvesting and selling their crops. Compounding this inherent problem, many farmers claimed that they were not duly compensated for the destruction of their crops, provoking violent unrest in many areas. The abrupt failure of this US$34 million programme prompted UK and Afghan officials to shelve it.

It will be difficult to curb opium production if farmers are not provided with alternative livelihoods. Finding substitute crops is problematic, as opium poppies are drought resistant, durable and yield massive economic returns. Nevertheless, resources must be invested in the design and implementation of alternative-crop and rural development programmes to address the root causes of opium cultivation.
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infrastructure development programs to run parallel to eradication and interdiction initiatives. The UK has pledged £70 million (US$127.3m) to fund the NDCS over a three-year period. While this is a significant contribution, a recently completed Afghan Ministry of Finance study, to be tabled at an international donor conference in March 2004, has estimated that an additional US$111 million is required over the next three years to meet the objectives of the NDCS.

The UK’s heroin epidemic

The potential consequences of the continued rise of Afghan opium production for the security of the UK can be assessed through an examination of the latest statistics on domestic drug abuse and crime. Recent Home Office figures suggest that there are 295,000 illegal heroin users in the UK, consuming about 30t annually with a value of more than £2.3 billion. This represents approximately one-third of the £6.6 billion that is spent annually on illegal drugs in the UK. Drug users are blamed for 7.5 million offences a year and for up to 90% of property crime in some areas.

The Road Ahead

“Dismantling the opium economy will be a long and complex process.” Antonio Maria Costa, the executive director of UNODC, wrote in The Opium Economy in Afghanistan: An International Problem, a report released in February 2003. Nonetheless, the next three years will form a decisive period for Afghanistan’s counter-narcotics campaign that will probably determine the country’s future path, leading either to peace, stability and a modern democracy or poverty and civil strife. To avoid the latter scenario, drastic measures must be taken to re-energise and expand existing counter-narcotics initiatives. Measures that should be taken include:

• the development of a coherent long-term action plan and investment programme for the NDCS;
• the acceleration of capacity-building for key institutions such as the CND, the CNPA and the Afghan border police; and
• the development of a tactical programme, setting out provincial and local level actions, which balances alternative livelihood approaches and law enforcement.

In 2004, the UK will spend £1.344 million to tackle the country’s drug problem. Although the UK’s NDCS explicitly recognises the interconnectedness of Afghanistan’s counter-narcotics programme and its own war on drugs, it must dedicate more resources to the former to ensure unimpeded progress in the latter. The consequences of inaction — an influx of cheap heroin into the UK and a surge in available resources for transnational terrorist groups — are clearly more prohibitive than the costs of action.

The choice is clear, as Costa has aptly stated: “Either energetic interdiction measures are taken now and supported by the international community, or the drug cancer in Afghanistan will keep spreading and metastasise into corruption, violence and terrorism.”

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NOTES

1 BBC, 10 October 2001.
3 Ibid.
8 UK Home Office Website, op cit
9 Eurasia Insight, 6 February 2003.