

Prime Minister Bhutto addresses Pakistan's drug-trafficking menace

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

At her first press conference on Dec. 3, two days after she had been named prime minister, Mrs. Benazir Bhutto Zardari said her government would take measures to rid the country of the curse of narcotics which had "eaten into the vitals of the nation," and added that a special ministry will be created for the purpose.

Over the last decade, Pakistan has become the center of drug trafficking for the area known as the Golden Crescent, consisting of northwestern Iran, western Afghanistan, and northern Pakistan. Although production of opium in Pakistan has dropped significantly in recent years, large consignments from Iran and Afghanistan are funneled through Pakistan to the vast consumer market in the West. This funneling system, which handles close to 100 tons of heroin annually, has not spared Pakistan. Drug addiction in Pakistan, estimated to afflict nearly 2 million people, is growing at a much faster rate than the country's population, GNP, or literacy.

Although poppy-growing in the hills of Afghanistan, Iran, and the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan is a very old custom, the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and subsequent takeover by the theocratic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, combined to make Pakistan the target of opportunity for truckloads of heroin enroute to Western markets. While the Khomeini regime in Iran put death sentences on drug traffickers, the Afghans established a network inside Pakistan to sell their products.

International drug enforcement agencies sat up and took notice when opium production within Pakistan reached 800 metric tons (m.t.) in 1979-80. Subsequent enforcement measures brought opium production down to 200 m.t. in 1982 and 45 m.t. in 1984. But it took off again, and in 1986 was reported at 130 m.t.

According to available reports, Pakistan's opium production this year will be 80-100 m.t.

In addition, opium production is expected to be 600 m.t. in Afghanistan and 400 m.t. in Iran this year. This 1,100 metric tons of opium will be converted into about 110 tons of

high-grade heroin which, according to going prices, will fetch close to \$250 billion when it hits the Western markets. A kilogram of heroin which can be picked up near the Afghanistan border for \$5,000, can be sold at a premium price of \$250,000 in Britain. By the time that kilogram of heroin travels to the coastal areas of Pakistan—the major outlet to the West—the price has already risen tenfold.

Massive 'profit-potential'

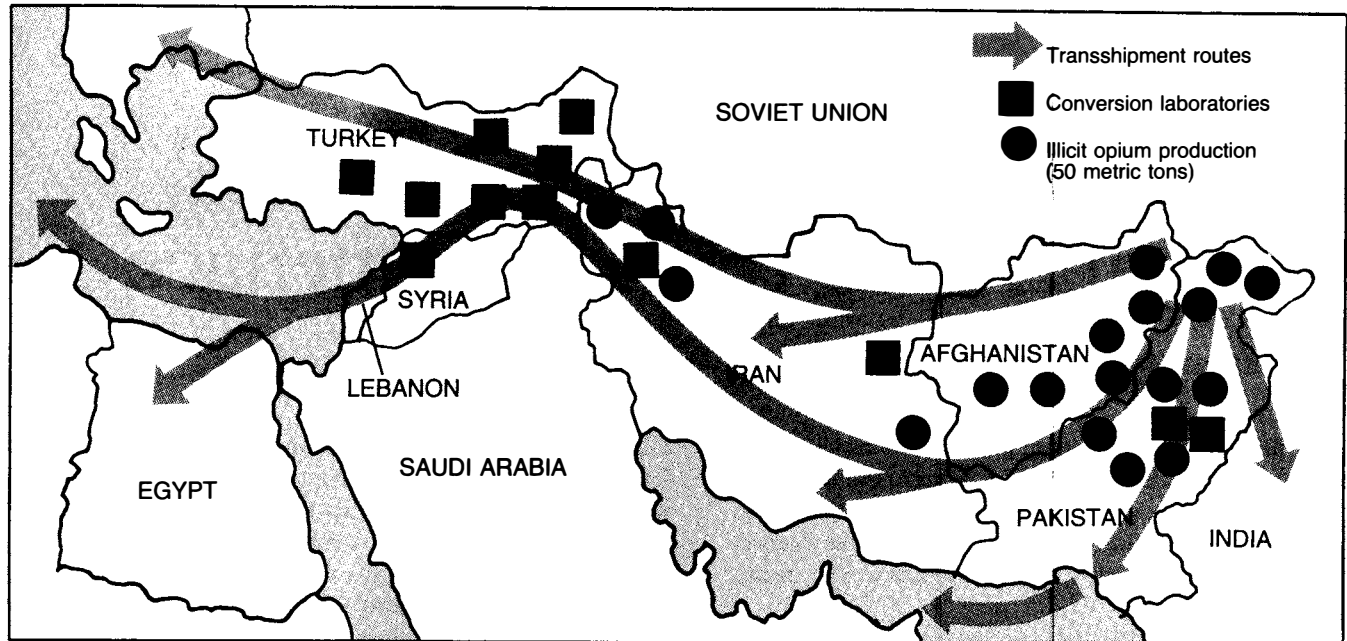
Such massive "profit-potential" makes drug trafficking in a poor country like Pakistan almost irresistible. It can also buy protection at a very high level. And, since poppy and opium use has been a way of life for hundreds of years, handling opium carries no particular stigma.

In the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), poppy is grown along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders which are sparsely populated and marked as tribal agencies. Local politicians point out that if poppy cultivation in these areas is stopped, then the government must make amends with a plan to provide the tribals with alternative sources of income. Islamabad is also afraid that any attempt to physically destroy the poppy will only provoke tribal wrath in an already-troubled area in which the government prefers to keep a low profile.

In 1987, the government did make an attempt to destroy poppies in the field in the Gadoon-Amazai area in Swabi and Abbotabad districts. The 60-day operation, under then-NWFP Chief Minister Arbab Mohammad Jehangir Khan, from February to April, engaged 500 police and hired laborers. Supported by 400 vehicles, the force confronted the hostile tribesmen and succeeded in destroying poppies which would have yielded \$700 million on the international market. Subsequently, preventive measures were also taken to stop sowing of poppy seeds in Gadoon, Buner, and Malakand agencies in 1987.

With the help of donor countries and international aid agencies, Pakistan has now come up with comprehensive

The Golden Crescent: illicit source of opiates



Source: U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration

projects to provide alternative income opportunities for farmers in the Buner subdivision of Swat district, the Gadoon-Amazai area in the Swabi and Abbotad districts, and the Malakand agency. More poppy-growing areas nearby are soon to be included. Although most of these projects are running behind schedule, efforts are afoot to declare some of the poppy-cultivating areas industrial zones with a view to facilitating long-term rehabilitation. This means building of roads, installation of tubewells for drinking and irrigation water, supplying electrical power, and setting up agricultural extension services.

Behind PNCB smokescreen

However, Pakistan is expected to harvest about 100 m.t. of opium this year. The poppy-cultivation acreage is much more than the Pakistan Narcotics Control Board (PNCB) would like anyone to believe. Also disturbing are statements made by the PNCB to the media, which indicate that Pakistan is no longer a major drug-trafficking nation. Board officials cite statistics to suggest that smuggling of heroin from Pakistan to Europe has decreased from 39% to 7% of all heroin entering Europe over the last five years. But the statistics are misleading. While it is true that Pakistan has reduced its opium production, a vast amount of Iranian and Afghan heroin is passing through Pakistani couriers overseas. (In fact, Afghan President Najibullah has said privately that so long as Pakistan remains hostile to Kabul, the drug problem in

Pakistan will continue.)

On Aug. 9, 1988, a PNCB spokesman announced in Islamabad that the top 20 drug-traffickers named by the federal government two years before, had all been arrested and convicted. Yet, an independent investigation carried out by the news daily *The Muslim* showed that while two of those named on the list, Malik Mishtaq and Aqleem Akhtar, were arrested abroad by foreign anti-narcotics agencies, most of the others are in fact continuing daylight in the major cities of Pakistan. Such efforts to pull wool over the eyes suggest that the PNCB, if not in league with the top heroin traffickers, is at least trying to cover up for those in the higher echelons of the administration who are benefiting enormously from the trade.

Twofold problem

The drug problem in Pakistan is twofold. First, there has been an explosion of drug addiction in recent years. According to the Narcotics Control Board report of January 1985, the number of heroin addicts, which was around 20,000 in 1980, rose to 500,000 in 1985. According to the latest Pakistani report, the number of addicts in Pakistan has risen to 1.91 million, which includes about 700,000 heroin addicts—a 40% increase in three years.

The second aspect of the problem is the extensive network of drug-traffickers that has been allowed to be set up over the years. The traffickers, who are interlinked with the powerful

international narcotics cartel, Dope, Inc., also oversee the conversion of opium into heroin. The Afghan drug gets converted into heroin in the Chagai hills area of Baluchistan-Afghanistan and also in the NWFP-Afghanistan border areas. From these areas, heroin starts moving south and east—part of it is going to the Makran coast in southern Baluchistan, while the greater part is traveling to Sind and eastern Punjab. In Sind, the heroin travels to Karachi, whence it goes by air and sea toward Africa, Europe, and the United States. Narcotics moving to eastern Punjab as well as some of the heroin moving through Sind, crosses the border into India, a route whose popularity has soared in the past five years.

The number of heroin-refining laboratories operating in the hills is unknown. According to a 1982 interview with a Western newspaper, Zia ul-Haq estimated that “half a dozen such contraptions” were in operation on the Pakistan side. However, intelligence reports indicate that at least 12 laboratories operate in the Chagai hills alone, and the overall number could be as high as 30. In 1983, the *Pakistan Times*, a government newspaper, said that the political authorities in cooperation with the tribal chiefs of the Khyber Agency brought the tribesmen into an agreement to ban the conversion of opium to heroin, and as a result, 41 laboratories were demobilized.

Over the years, the port city of Karachi has been set up as the main outlet for drugs. The Pakistan National Shipping Corporation (PNSC) has been tainted as a major drug-trafficking line. In 1986, within a span of three months, three PNSC vessels were seized with heroin in Antwerp, Belgium. During the same period, other seizures were reported from European and American ports. Last July, the national flag carrier, *M.V. Multan*, was found with 8 kilograms of heroin during its stop in the Suez Canal. During the same ship’s stopover in Baltimore, U.S.A., customs searched and found another 7 kilograms of pure heroin stashed away in the engine room. In the process, *M.V. Multan* earned the dubious honor of becoming the first national flag carrier to be fined for heroin trafficking.

As early as 1981, Western press indicated that, according to intelligence reports, “narcotics networks have become increasingly active with the Pakistani International Airlines.” The U.S. State Department has long been aware of this development, according to the reports, but chose to look the other way.

Karachi shows impact of Dope, Inc.

The Soharab Goth market in Karachi, where Pathans of Afghanistan origin dominate the scene with the help of AK-47 assault rifles, is overflowing with both heroin and drug-pushers. According to the London *Sunday Times* correspondent who visited Karachi in the spring of 1985, the police in the city are fully aware of the situation. During his talks with one police officer, the latter said, “Look, the government is making money. Take the Coast Guard. They make millions

out of smuggling. Not just heroin. Everything. Of course, the police are paid not to raid Soharab Goth.”

The Pakistani daily *The Muslim* has exposed in detail the impunity with which the top drug-traffickers move about in Pakistan. *Muslim* correspondent Kamran Khan, in a report published in August 1988, pointed out that drug traffickers such as Anwar Khattak, Mohammad Ashraf Rana, Abdul Hazzak Awan, Mirza Iqbal Baig, Malik Salim, Afzal Khan, and others are not only not on the list of the five anti-narcotics agencies, but are living a life of great luxury and laundering their drug money through legal business. Khan points out, for example, that Anwar Khattak, who was tried and convicted *in absentia* by a special military court after it was proven that he was behind the smuggling of 13 tons of hashish to Holland and Belgium using army embarkation headquarters personnel, can be seen regularly in Karachi inspecting the luxury residential complex that he is building. Khattak never went to jail because, as Kamran Khan says, “The multimillionaire trafficker has the capacity of providing enough feed to the corrupt officials.” It is said that Khattak has friends in high places, one of whom allegedly is the deputy inspector general of police in the city.

At the lower level, Afghans like Awal Khan, Ghani Khan, Shorang Khan, and Olus Khan are using Karachi’s Afghan refugee camp to peddle heroin. More Pathans like Haji Ayub, Iqbal Shah, and Haji Arbab are running restaurants and hotels, while trafficking in millions of dollars worth of heroin to the Western markets. The guests who accept Haji Arbab and Iqbal Shah’s hospitality in those hotels and eateries include officials from the five anti-narcotics agencies of the country, according to the evidence compiled by *The Muslim*.

In 1981, this newsweekly reported that Lt. Gen. Fazle Haq (ret.), who was the chief minister of the NWFP until Dec. 1, 1988, and is now one of the deputy leaders of the opposition Islamic Democratic Alliance in the National Assembly, is up to his neck in drug money and was a source of constant embarrassment to the late President Zia ul-Haq. Fazle Haq, who remained close to the late President and was portrayed as the “uncrowned king” of the NWFP, has a brother who has long been on the Interpol list for drug trafficking. It is not clear whether his notoriety as a protector of drug traffickers played any role in Fazle Haq’s loss of all four Provincial Assembly seats he contested in the recent general elections.

Drug trafficking has permeated every level of Pakistani society. The drug money has brought the traffickers, besides luxury living and protection at every level, AK-47s and other weapons, and the dynamic has turned cities like Karachi and Peshawar into tinderboxes where, at the drop of a hat, a riot can be organized. In effect, the drug mafia, with billions of dollars at its disposal, controls these cities. It will be an uphill task to uproot this cancerous growth, but for the nation’s security, Prime Minister Bhutto has been left with no other choice.