

Blooming Poppies Widen Clashes in Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

The fragile interim administration of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan is now confronting another formidable opponent: the owners of the country's blooming opium-poppy fields, who are ready to harvest a huge crop. Confrontation has already begun, bringing in a new set of conflicts into the complex Afghan ethnic, tribal, and religious mosaic.

UN spokesman Yusuf Hassan said that about 14,000 Afghan refugees, travelling in 700 vehicles, were stranded April 8 between Jalalabad and Torkham, on the Pakistani border, when Shinwari tribesmen opposed to a government program to eradicate the opium-producing poppy crop, blocked the highway and stoned vehicles. The government had begun offering cash to growers. This followed the arrest of 300 Afghans identified as followers of a major Pushtun warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, accused of a plot against the government; and immediately preceded a bomb-assassination attempt on the Afghan Defense Minister.

The poppy farmers have complained that the money offered to them won't even cover the cost of eradication. More important, they are indebted to the opium traders who have paid them cash in advance. The farmers are required to pay them back in opium, not cash, and non-payment could mean starvation, or even instant death.

The first signal that the government has an impossible task on its hands, came on April 7. In the southern province of Helmand, which produces more than half of country's opium, government forces opened fire when a protest of some 2,000 farmers got out of control, reports Shah Wali, a local official. Eight farmers were killed and 16 wounded, said provincial Governor Sher Mohammad. The next day's highway-blocking incident took an ethnic turn immediately. Then, Panjshiri-Tajik Defense Minister Gen. Mohammad Qassam Fahim, visiting Jalalabad, came under the attack. Jalalabad, which is largely a Pushtun town, is also a stronghold of the same Gulbuddin Hekmatyar whose followers were being arrested. He is now considered an arch-enemy of both Hamid Karzai and former King Zahir Shah, and is reportedly banding up with another major warlord, Ismail Khan of Herat, to topple the Karzai Administration. Zahir Shah, backed by the West, is planning to return to Afghanistan to prepare to hold a *loya jirga* (grand council of elders). The *loya jirga*, if elected, would act as provincial governments.

But the Karzai government, in order to appease the U.S.-led coalition, accused the Taliban and al-Qaeda for the failed

assassination attempt on General Fahim.

At the outset of the new Afghan war, unleashed by the West to remove the Taliban regime and demolish the al-Qaeda terrorist network, the opium issue was pushed to the background. Now, within a couple of weeks, the poppy farmers in eastern and southern Afghanistan will begin to collect the sap, the unrefined opium, and deliver the load to the opium traders in return for cash. Many opium traders are resuming that profession to pay debts which may date back to before the Taliban took power in 1995.

The Entrenched Drug Network

Most Afghan heroin travels to Western Europe and is consumed there. But the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has become increasingly concerned that West Asian suppliers have begun to target the U.S. market. In a notable seizure—24 kilograms—in New York in May 2000, some 90% of the heroin was found to have originated in Afghanistan. Increasingly, according to the DEA, traffickers based in Thailand who normally trade in Golden Triangle (Myanmar-Laos-Cambodia-Thailand) heroin, are instead buying Afghan heroin in Pakistan, where a kilogram costs \$1,000-2,000, not \$10,000-12,000 as in Bangkok.

The opium traders sell raw opium to the drug cartels, who convert it to heroin in well-guarded refineries and ship it out to Europe through Central Asia and Turkey, via Iran. Iran has significantly enhanced its anti-narcotics monitoring in recent years, making large seizures. As a result, more and more of Afghan heroin is now travelling northwards, through Central Asia.

The opium is first converted into morphine and then, into heroin. The "precursor" chemicals required for this process, such as acetic anhydride, are often diverted illegally from factories in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. These Central Asian states provide a comfortable working place for the drug lords, with lax laws and often corruptible police and customs officers, whose wages are a pittance compared with the sums at stake in narcotics.

From these states, the Afghan narcotics—hidden in truckloads of raisins or walnuts or almonds, disguised as bags of flour, or else transported in rusting Soviet-era railway cars—take two different routes. The northern route follows the old Silk Road into Russia, the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic. From there, it runs through Scandinavia, Germany, and points farther west. Former chief of the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) Pino Arlacchi points out that Russia's "new rich" are among the biggest potential growth markets for the Afghan heroin cartel. Several other ex-Soviet republics, including Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, with their good road and rail routes, have been described in U.S. DEA reports as increasingly important conduits for heroin from Afghanistan.

In 2000, Afghanistan harvested a record 4,600 tons of opium. As the warehouses filled up to the eaves and the price

of opium (and the street value of cut-heroin) began to dip, Taliban supremo Mullah Mohammad Omar banned poppy cultivation for 2001. According to CIA reports, Afghanistan produced only 81.6 tons last year. The UN figures, however, claim it was close to 185 tons. But the Taliban kept the refining and trafficking parts of the trade legal, banning only growing. Western governments credited the Taliban with a “bold act,” but increased drug seizures in Afghanistan’s neighboring countries dispelled any notion that the Taliban was keen to prevent outward flow of Afghan heroin. News came that the country had enough stock of the contraband to supply regional drug routes for the next six years.

The drug cartel was content, but farmers took the brunt of the ban. Although experts were urging the international community for years to assist Afghan farmers to cultivate alternative cash crops, no one lifted a finger. The UN reported 85% of Afghanistan’s 24 million inhabitants depended on agriculture, and a vast number of them have switched to cultivate the lucrative poppy crop.

The Largest Source of Income

The UNDCP recently conducted another survey in 208 villages in 42 districts in the traditional opium-growing areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan. Excluded were northern regions of Afghanistan, where the colder climate delays the opium-poppy planting season. Based on its preliminary findings, the UNDCP estimated that opium cultivation this year could cover between 45,000 and 65,000 hectares, consistent with the area under cultivation during the mid-1990s. Cultivated area was at its greatest in 1999, when it covered 95,000 hectares and the harvest reached a record of 4,600 tons. This year, production could reach between 1,900 and 2,700 tons.

The Afghan interim administration banned opium-poppy cultivation in January 2002, but by then most poppy fields had already been sown. The flowering of the poppies and collection of opium take place between April and May in southern and eastern Afghanistan, and from June to August in the North. “Narcotics are the largest source of income in Afghanistan due to the decimation of the country’s infrastructure caused by years of warfare,” says the DEA.

But the United States and the UN have ignored repeated calls by the international anti-drug community to address the increasing menace of Afghanistan’s poppy cultivation, threatening a rift between Europe and the United States over Afghanistan policy. With the United States focussed on its anti-terrorist campaign and the UN hamstrung by a drug agency discredited by the misallocation of funds by its former chief, Pino Arlacchi, the fight against Afghanistan’s drug problem is uphill. The April 5 *New York Times* reported the Pentagon’s outright rejection of the idea of destroying the poppyfields with airborne herbicide spraying, as the State Department had apparently requested.

American officials, in recent years, said taxes on poppy farmers and opium dealers helped finance the Taliban’s

“rogue state,” and helped al-Qaeda move money and fund terrorist attacks. Afghanistan’s diplomatic isolation and its adoption of an orthodox Islamic rule gave Washington an excuse to ignore the poppy factor in Afghanistan’s, and the region’s, instability. But Washington is now keen to bring Afghanistan and Central Asia into its sphere of influence, and the blooming poppies thus soon will be an American problem. According to Ariel Cohen, writing for Eurasianet Online, a U.S. State Department official had said last Spring that “nothing indicates that either the Taliban or the Northern Alliance intend to take serious action to destroy heroin or morphine-base laboratories, or stop drug trafficking.”

Whether the State vs. Pentagon fight is a mere dog and pony show, it is widely acknowledged that Washington cannot afford to antagonize the warlords in Afghanistan—even those who are protecting the farmers growing poppies. The immediate objective of the Pentagon is to show positive results of its military operation in Afghanistan. Nor is it a secret that in the eastern and southern part of Afghanistan, the U.S.-led coalition force can achieve “success” only if it can garner support of the locals. Now, the question is: Who can deliver the local support? Warlords, of course. And success is important for the Pentagon because it helps to drive away the ghost of Vietnam, which even now, years later, seems to loom large in the background.

Further Complications

Serious complications are arising. Reports indicate that the Pushtun warlords, who dominate eastern and southern Afghanistan, will resist any attempt by the Panjshiri-Tajik-dominated Karzai government to eradicate the only cash-generating product. Karzai, being a Pushtun himself, may not go along with this eradication policy for long. His and ex-King Zahir Shah’s futures depend on the Pushtuns. Syed Saleem Shazad, writing for Asia Times Online, reported that the Afghan administration in Kandahar province admitted recently that it had been sent messages by the Taliban calling on it to step down to avoid fighting among Afghans. At the same time, it is believed that the spiritual leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar, openly visits Kandahar—his former stronghold—once a week or so along with a convoy of vehicles to visit a shrine of Sufi saint Mullah Hasan Akhund, located in suburban Kandahar. Despite having full knowledge of Mullah Omar’s activities, and despite the premium the United States has placed on Omar’s head, the local administration did not intercept him for fear of arousing rival local warlords into fighting one another.

The explosion in Jalalabad, which authorities say was an assassination attempt against Defense Minister Fahim, may also be linked to the eradication program. The bomb, which killed at least 4 people and injured 18, went off on General Fahim’s arrival to meet with local commanders and tribal leaders to discuss the poppy eradication program, among other issues.