

Opium Money Kills U.S. Troops: Will Bush Fight Narco-Terror?

by Ramtanu Maitra

After almost six-and half years in Afghanistan, a few among U.S. authorities have begun to speak out against the dangerous compromises that the Bush Administration has made throughout this period by allowing an explosive growth of the opium crop there, and the hand-over of power to the drug lords. A significant part of the \$150 billion international opium trade helps to buy the explosives, arms, and suicide bombers that kill and maim American soldiers, along with thousands of innocent Afghan civilians.

If Washington continues to allow the opium explosion in Afghanistan to continue, the outcome of this crisis is a foregone conclusion: No political structure can be set up in a country run by warlords and drug lords. The opium money will not only kill more American soldiers, but its enormous magnitude is available to finance any insurgency group that wants to break up countries, even the friendly ones, almost anywhere.

Narco-Promoters in Afghanistan

A former high-ranking U.S. State Department anti-narcotics official, Thomas Schweich, is one of the few who have spoken out. In an article in the Sunday *New York Times* (July 27), Schweich accused the Pentagon and the Karzai government in Kabul of undermining the anti-drug efforts of some in the United States. While the article elaborates in great detail the process which led to the explosion of opium production (Afghanistan's opium output was less than 1000 tons in Winter 2001—the year the U.S. invaded; it is now in excess of 8,000 tons), it offers nothing more than a “blame game.” Nonetheless, it is evident from the article that the Europeans, represented by NATO, and the British in particular, are opposed to opium eradication in the region.

Schweich pointed out in his article that the Pentagon bureaucracy—particularly the South Asia office—had put up roadblocks to making eradication of opium

a part of fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. But, when new field commanders like Gen. Dan McNeill “saw the narcotics-insurgency nexus and were willing to buck their Pentagon minders,” the Pentagon “leaked the contents of the classified version to Peter Gilchrist, a British general posted in Washington.” Gilchrist told Schweich that the plan was unacceptable to Britain.

“Britain, apparently joined by Sweden (which has fewer than 500 troops in a part of the country where there is no poppy cultivation), sent letters to [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai urging him to reject key elements of the U.S. plan. By the time Wood (William Wood, US Ambassador to Afghanistan) and Secretary [of State Condoleezza] Rice pressed Karzai for more aggressive action, Karzai told Rice that because some people in the U.S. government did not support the plan, and some allies did not support it, he was not going to support it, either.”

However, Schweich is by no means the first one to expose the British opposition to opium-eradication in Afghanistan. In March 2006, the London *Independent* reported that when the U.S. Army went to eradicate opium crops in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, Britain, which had deployed a force of 5,700 there, and which was apparently working with the Afghan and U.S. armies, balked. “But this is just to make sure that we do not go anywhere near those areas,” said Lt.-Col. Henry Worsley, the senior British officer in Helmand. “Our position is quite clear; we are not going to get involved in the eradication.”

Britain's Opium War

The ostensible reason presented by Worsley was that the prospect of the farmers taking up arms and being joined by a resurgent Taliban and their Islamist allies would exacerbate problems. British commanders claimed they worry that their troops will be identified with Afghan forces and suffer a backlash.



International Security Assistance Force HQ Public Affairs

In March 2006, when U.S. Army troops went into Helmand Province to carry out opium eradication, the senior British officer announced: "Our position is quite clear; we are not going to get involved in the eradication." Shown: Afghan Army soldiers guard confiscated bags of opium in Helmand Province, Dec. 15, 2007, following four days of fighting to remove Taliban forces.

However, students of history know the inextricable link between the British and opium. Opium was used by the British Empire in the 18th through the 20th centuries to generate cash, weaken nations, and impose free trade—the hallmark of the British East India Company. The production of opium in India first came under British control in the course of the 18th Century. In the 1760s, the British started illegally shipping thousands of opium chests to China in exchange for silver bars.

Analysts point out that the opium trade was of vital importance to British imperialism at this time. It was one corner of an Eastern triangular trade that mirrored the 18th-Century Atlantic slave trade. The smuggling of opium turned a large British trading deficit with China into a substantial surplus, paying for British tea imports from China, for the export of British manufactured goods to India, and for a substantial proportion of British administrative costs in India. The opium trade was “the hub of British commerce in the East,” as one historian rightly observed.

By the 1830s, the scale of the problem forced the Chinese government to respond: The country was being drained of silver to pay for the opium, its administration was being corrupted by foreigners, and the

extent of addiction (estimates of the number of Chinese addicts go as high as 12 million) was seen as a threat to both state and society. In March 1839, the Emperor sent a special Commissioner to Canton (now, Guangzhou) to stamp out the trade once and for all. This precipitated the First Opium War. London, under Prime Minister Henry John Temple (aka, Lord Palmerston), dispatched a powerful expeditionary force to aid the opium smugglers. The British Navy first blockaded the coast, and then proceeded up the Yangtze River to Nanjing. As one British officer observed: “The poor Chinese” had two choices, either they “must submit to be poisoned, or must be massacred by the thousands, for supporting their own laws in their own land.”

The opium trade weakened China severely. It drained the country’s wealth and created hundreds of thousands of addicts. As a result of the First Opium War, Britain gained control of Hong Kong, a source of all kinds of illegal trade and activities that filled British coffers over the following 150 years.

Why Britain Loves Opium

The British role in the ongoing Afghan war (and the lack of understanding of history by the powers-that-be in Washington) is not much different from the way the East India Company used opium to enhance Britain’s geostrategic interests. In the present context, the explosion of opium has resulted in the generation of billions of dollars in illegal cash, legalized through complex money-laundering schemes by the international banks. One report claims the annual global proceeds of the Afghan drug trade is in excess of \$150 billion. A major financial beneficiary of the drug trade is the City of London. Less than 1% of the billions of dollars that are laundered stays in Afghanistan, and most of what does stay remains under the control of warlords and drug lords who virtually run Kabul.

When Britain had its empire, the opium trade created “opium capitalists.” While many among the Brit-

ish aristocracy enriched themselves by poisoning the Chinese, the two most notable were William Jardine and James Matheson. Jardine's opium-derived wealth was sufficient to buy him a seat in the House of Commons in the early 1840s, and give him access to those in power. In the 1840s, Matheson, too, became an MP, sitting in the House of Commons for 25 years. He went on to become a governor of the Bank of England, chairman of the vast P&O shipping line, and the second-largest landowner in Britain. He bought the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, and spent a bit of his opium fortune building himself a castle there.

In Afghanistan, warlords have existed all along. Drug lords are relatively new, and became particularly powerful in the post-2001 invasion period. Americans tried to win their support, but failed, because they are controlled by drug cartels. Human Rights Watch estimates that 60% of the new legislators have links to warlords. The New York-based rights group singled out Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a powerful militia commander whose guns ravaged Kabul residents in the 1990s, and Mohammed Fahim, a former defense minister, who has been accused of war crimes.

In addition, President Karzai has put criminals in high official posts. One such individual is Izatullah Wasifi, an Afghan drug lord who was jailed in the U.S. for selling heroin in Las Vegas. After his release, he returned to Afghanistan where Karzai made him governor of Farah province. In this post, Wasifi engaged in drug trafficking and corruption, and now Karzai has made him head of the government's anti-corruption body in 34 provinces. There also have been serious allegations that Karzai's own brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, is a powerful drug trafficker based in the seat of Taliban power, Kandahar. The allegation was made by none other than Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Opium and the Separatist Movement

Its protection of Afghan opium has resulted also in Britain meeting its objective of weakening nations beyond Afghanistan. To begin with, a U.N.-Afghan nationwide survey in 2006 found nearly 1 million addicts out of about 30 million people, including 60,000 children under age 15. Drugs of choice range from hashish, opium, and heroin to pharmaceuticals.

Equally dangerous is the development across the Durand Line inside Pakistan's tribal areas and Northern Areas. In this area Britain's MI6 and Pakistan's ISI

(Inter-Services Intelligence) are involved in boosting an anti-Kabul and anti-U.S. jihadi movement. While the ISI's objective is to get the U.S./NATO troops out of Afghanistan and gain control of the country, Britain's objective is to split Pakistan, and create a weak nation between the River Indus and the Durand Line that separates Pakistan and Afghanistan.

This has remained a Pushtun-led separatist movement, and the funding to arm and train these terrorists is generated by opium. In addition to the abundant Afghan opium, reports from Pakistan's tribal areas indicate that poppies are cultivated on more than 4,571 acres in the remote areas of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) this year. The Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) and local law enforcement agencies have carried out aerial surveys of the tribal region and parts of NWFP, where poppy fields have been detected.

If, and when, Washington finally takes off the blinders and goes after the opium crop—it can expect a reaction from the British, as well as from the Afghan drug- and warlords, and behind them, the international drug cartels; not to mention, the bankers.

London: Legalize Opium in Afghanistan

There is now a push to legalize the growing of opium in Afghanistan, pushed by the London-based Senlis Council, which has offices in Paris, Brussels, Rio, and Kabul. In addition, in Afghanistan, it has offices at the center of the drug production, Helmand Province, and Kandahar, the seat of the Afghan Taliban power. Senlis's advocacy has been objected to by U.S. authorities. Legalizing some cultivation could also undermine use of moral persuasion to deter growing, says Bobby Charles, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for international narcotics law enforcement. "Anything that went about legalizing an opiate in that market would send exactly the wrong message. It would suggest that there is something legitimate to growing."

But the British are not going to give up their opium easily. Paul Fishstein, an analyst with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, an independent think tank in Kabul that walks in lock step with the Senlis Council, says that outside political pressure on Afghanistan to eradicate the crop makes this idea a "non-starter." At best, he says, it is a "long-term prospect" that requires the difficult work of strengthening Afghan institutions first.