

Afghan Drugs Spiral Out of Control

by Ramtanu Maitra

In early February, the Kabul government declared that opium output in 2005 will be significantly less than last year's. The likely drop in production follows three years of production boom. Habibullah Qaderi, head of the newly established counter-narcotics ministry under President Hamid Karzai, estimated a 30-50% reduction in cultivation this year. "I want to see it with my own eyes," said Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime, prior to his departure for Afghanistan.

If the news turns out to be true, no one will be happier than the law-enforcing authorities in Europe, and Europeans in general. The flow of hundreds of tons of heroin through Central Asia, Russia, and eastern Europe into the farthest corner of western Europe has created a massive security problem. Europeans will be watching this year's crop particularly, since the Karzai government has categorically rejected the U.S. State Department's approval to spray the poppy fields from the air. The spraying has not begun yet, but unless Kabul succeeds in cutting down opium production significantly, the spraying will begin, with attendant harmful health effects on the population.

The entire Eurasian continent has been affected by the proliferation of Afghan opiates, which are reaching almost all European countries by road, rail, and sea. Afghan opiates have penetrated thoroughly as far into Europe as Portugal and also the sparsely populated far eastern reaches of Russia. Western Europe is the main market for heroin transported via the southern Balkan route, but it is also the countries bordering Afghanistan—Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Iran, Pakistan—and eastern Europe, which are acting as conduits bringing Afghanistan's main produce into Europe.

With almost \$600 billion in drug money laundered annually through financial markets and international banks, there is no doubt that some U.S. and European banks routinely profit from laundering the proceeds from the Afghan drug-generated cash. The former editor of the *Geopolitical Drug Dispatch*, Alain Labrousse, has estimated that 80% of the profits from drug trafficking ends up in the banks of the wealthy countries or their branches in the underdeveloped countries, where legal control is weaker.

But what angers the Europeans is the United States' "benign neglect" toward the bumper opium and heroin production in Afghanistan during the last three years, since the United States has had control over that country. This Bush

Administration attitude has encouraged hostile anti-U.S. remarks in Europe. Some British newspapers even suggested that the U.S. benign neglect is due to the fact that the Afghan heroin gets consumed in Russia and western Europe, and does not reach the shores of the United States.

The Journey of Mules

In the Spring of 2002, the British newspaper the *Guardian* reported a warning issued by the British police and intelligence agencies, which had said Britain was facing a potentially huge increase in heroin trafficking because of massive and unchecked replanting of the opium crop in Afghanistan.

The *Guardian* pointed out that the heroin assault on Britain was generated by the Afghan drug traffickers with the help of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, ostensibly one of Washington's favorite allies. In reality, this link-up got developed in the 1980s when the Afghan mujahideen, backed by the U.S. and Pakistani intelligence agencies, were battling the Soviet army.

Broadly speaking, there are three routes through which the Afghan opiates travel to Europe. These are: the "Northern" route passing through Central Asia and Russia; the "Southern" one through the Balkans; and the third one is through Iran via Pakistan.

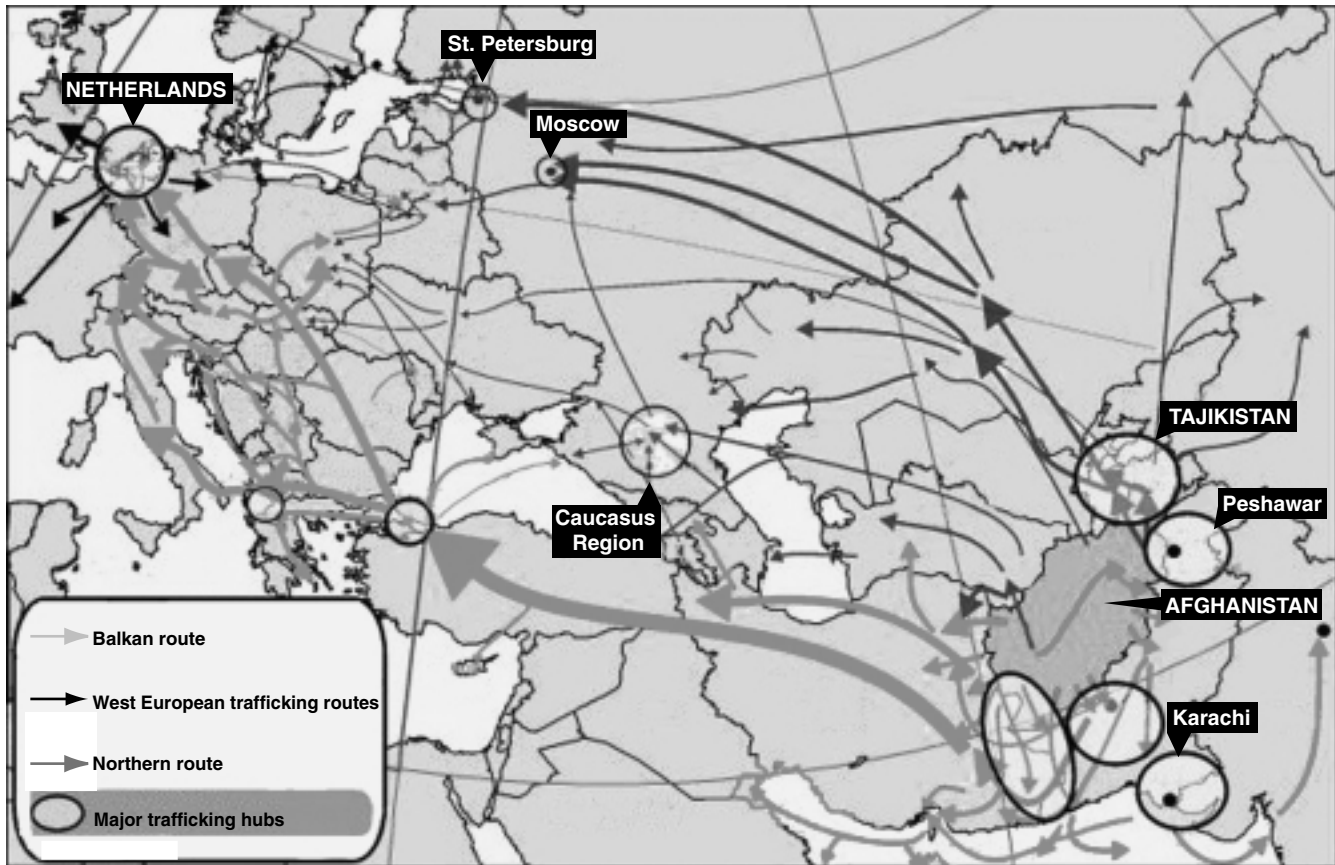
According to the UN estimates, 65% of Afghan opiates pass through Central Asia, and there is no question that this route is growing in importance every year. But before the Afghan opiate heads westward, it gets converted into heroin. The precursor chemicals required for this process, such as acetic anhydride, are often diverted illegally from factories in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. From these states, the lethal consignments—hidden in truckloads of raisins or walnuts, disguised as bags of flour, or transported in rusting Soviet-era railway cars—travel to western Europe. The 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.

Old Silk Road/New Drug Route

Suddenly the old silk routes were revived, to let the Afghan opium and heroin move up north. Rashid Alimov, Tajikistan's UN representative, said his country was a victim of an "opium tsunami" and "narcotic aggression." Tajikistan claimed to have experienced a 250% increase in drug trafficking between 1998 and 1999 alone. His Uzbek counterpart, Kamol Dusmetov, reported a 600% increase during the same period, while in Kyrgyzstan the Interior Minister reported a 1,600% increase in illicit drugs seizures between 1999 and 2000, including an 800% increase in heroin alone.

The area north of the Pyandze River separating Tajikistan from Afghanistan, has become the main corridor for Afghan opiates traveling to the emerging Russian market and the traditional European markets. Travelling from Ishkoshim to Nijni Pandj, drug traffickers have turned Khorog into a main

Drug-Trafficking Routes Out of Afghanistan



Source: UNODC.

transit town, from where the main road from Badakhshoni Kuhi province in Tajikistan led, via the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, to Osh in Kyrgyzstan, and to the Ferghana Valley. Afghan opiates are then carried westward to the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, or northward, through Kazakstan to Russia. A poorly manned border in Turkmenistan has invited a massive influx of Afghan opiates in recent years. Many major seizures have been reported in Kushka, the main border post between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan.

Russian and Kazak authorities mention the leading role of Tajik drug traffickers: One-third of traffickers arrested on the Dushanbe-Saratov train are Tajik, and Russian police forces in Irkutsk have declared that they seized heroin in trucks driven by traffickers suspected of being Tajik special services personnel. In Kazakstan, in January 2000, a Tajik police officer was caught preparing to deliver 7 kilograms of heroin to a senior Tajik official, while in May of the same year, 62 kg of heroin was seized from the car of the Tajik Ambassador to Kazakstan. According to the Russian Interior Ministry, in 2000, half the heroin penetrating Russia came through Kazakstan.

The Balkan Route

As new routes were established to link the Balkan nations with eastern Europe, police reports show that almost the entire gamut of criminal activity was taken over by ethnic-Albanian syndicates as drug-smugglers. These syndicates, whose origins are likely in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, or in the long-established Albanian communities of southern Italy, have apparently made peace with Serbian gangsters. They share with them the proceeds from drug and gun running, as well as the trafficking in prostitutes from Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova. According to Europol, ethnic Albanian drug-running families are almost impossible to penetrate because of the closeness of the family-structure and clan-structure, and the difficulty of the language.

In Prague, Albanians are fighting turf wars to oust Ukrainians who still control the heroin trade there, while in London, Jamaican drug dealers complain of Albanian violence toward the east European prostitutes they control. When police in Oslo made Norway's largest-ever heroin seizure in 2002, they discovered that former fighters from the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) controlled the drug-distribution chain in Nor-

way. Heroin-dealing in Switzerland is dominated by Albanians. It is also said that much of the money made through drug trafficking was used to buy arms for the rebels fighting in Macedonia and in a strip of southern Serbia.

In western Europe, less than an hour's drive from Vienna, where the UN bureaucrats monitor the Afghan opiates' movements, the town of Graz serves as a sort of nodal point for connections to the Balkans. Again, reports indicate that the heroin dealers who operate in Graz are from northern Albania, plying their trade in western Europe.

The southern, or Balkan, route goes through Turkmenistan, across the Caspian Sea, into the Caucasus, then into Turkey, from where the heroin is shipped to Albania and Italy. Other consignments cross Bulgaria and Macedonia in container trucks, finding their way to Serbia, Hungary, and Austria. A second route goes through Albania, then across the Adriatic in speed-boats on nocturnal dashes to beaches on the eastern coast of Puglia, and then by motorway into Austria. A third route involves container vessels sailing from Constantza, on the Black Sea, to Turkey and on to Italy.

Several other ex-Soviet republics, including Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, with good road and rail routes, have been described in U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) reports as having become increasingly important conduits for heroin from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the German authorities have been struggling to stem the flow of drugs coming through Poland. In 1999, for example, 80% of all heroin stopped on Germany's borders was seized at the Polish frontier. European authorities are particularly concerned by the arrival on the international market of a strain of high-grade narcotic known as Heroin No. 4, or white heroin, which is estimated to be at least 80% pure. Recent seizures in Germany, Turkey, Finland, and Poland have all proved to be white heroin transshipped via Central Asia from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Third Route

The third route runs through Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, and was once arguably the main route for Afghan opiates to get into Europe. In 1998 in Khorasan, opiate seizures by Iranian authorities accounted for about 40% of all such seizures worldwide, with the country as a whole accounting for 85% of worldwide opiate seizures. Iran shares borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and was a convenient outlet for Afghan opiates on their way to the main consumer market, Europe.

A 2,440-km-long coastline also makes Iran highly attractive to maritime drug traffickers. In Iran, as well as in Pakistan, anti-drug-trafficking operations are characterized by their extreme violence: Drug traffickers are typically armed with weapons such as rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and large-scale battles are regularly waged with Iranian law enforcement authorities. During 20 years of anti-drug operations, Iran has lost close to 3,000 men on active duty. Iran's anti-drug-trafficking effort is subsidized by Switzerland, Britain, and Germany.