

Where Poppies Bloom Faster Than Democracy

by Ramtanu Maitra

After years of misleading the American population, the Bush-Cheney Administration is now grudgingly admitting that the problems of Afghanistan not only are not going away, but are growing by the day. While the anti-U.S. and anti-NATO Afghan rebels are training their guns more and more effectively at the occupying forces, Afghanistan's poppy fields are blooming as they never bloomed before.

Afghanistan is not in the minds of most Americans; it is too far away, and it is not perceived as a threat to the American population. This mindset is surely helping the Bush-Cheney Administration, but the question is: How long can this mindset continue? News from Afghanistan seldom appears on the front pages of the U.S. media. But the trickle of information that does get through, is enough to make it understood that the troops sent by Washington and London are trapped, and their very survival is becoming the key issue.

Gone are the fist-thumping days of 2002, when President Bush used to talk about "Marshall Plan" to develop Afghanistan and make it opium-free. In 2006, what we hear about Afghanistan is its grinding poverty, widespread illiteracy, disease, and lack of drinking water and electricity for almost 80% of the country—and an increasingly powerful insurgency. According to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, government revenue in Afghanistan is equal to barely 5% of its gross domestic product (GDP), lower than the impoverished governments of sub-Saharan Africa.

The U.S. occupying forces did little to alleviate Afghanistan's poverty. Opium production, which was diminishing during the Taliban regime's uneasy tenure of five years (1996-2000), has picked up greatly. The Taliban militia, which was ousted by the Anglo-Americans in the winter of 2001, had enforced an effective ban on poppy growing by threatening to jail farmers, which resulted in a sharp reduction in opium production in 2001. But neither Washington nor London could conceive of threatening opium producers with jail terms. Moreover, a few of the drug warlords are now helping the U.S.-backed puppet democracy to stay in place in Kabul.

Even this nominal Afghan democracy, however, which resembles a slab of Swiss cheese, is now seemingly unworkable. In recent months, media restrictions have been introduced in Kabul. Shaken by the reports of the numbers of dead

and injured coming in Afghanistan's south, the country's intelligence agency delivered a message to the majority of broadcasters and publishers that could have been taken from a Soviet-era handbook of press manipulation. The agency warned that the Taliban commanders' interviews and nightly scenes of violence—bombs and bodies—on the news is affecting "the national morale." Washington's showcase democrat in Kabul, President Karzai did not reject the press restrictions, but instead noted that national security was the most important factor for the media to consider, while supporting a free press.

A Million Poppies Bloom

All these little deviations are embarrassing to some Americans. They find it difficult to acknowledge that since the successful ouster of the fundamentalist Taliban militia and the introduction of "democracy," opium production in Afghanistan has jumped up sharply. A Western anti-narcotics official in Kabul told the *Christian Science Monitor* on Aug. 16 that preliminary crop projections showed about 370,650 acres of opium poppy cultivated this season—up from 257,000 acres in 2005, and up from the previous record of 323,700 acres in 2004, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. At the same time, hundreds of millions of dollars were spent this year in counter-narcotics campaigns.

The final figures of the yield of opium resin from the poppies will be confirmed only when the UN agency completes its assessment of the crop in September, based on satellite imagery and ground surveys. However, the United Nations said that because there was no report of any sharp drop in opium productivity this year, it is safe to assume that at least 6,200 tons of opium resin will be harvested—enough to produce 620 tons of heroin. Thus, it is almost a certainty that the U.S.- and NATO-occupied Afghanistan, under the "democratic rule" of President Hamid Karzai, will succeed in producing almost 95% of the world's heroin.

The "failure" to control the growing annual opium production has developed in the West in recent months a coterie of people who now openly undermine the assertion of a linkage between opium-generated cash and the insurgency. On the other hand, the military on the ground does not subscribe to that. Speaking before the Pentagon reporters on Aug. 17, U.S. Gen. James Jones, who heads the NATO forces, said the opium production "certainly cries out for more international focus. The international community understands that we have to have more success in the narcotics field, and we have to do that in the fairly near future."

From the reports coming from Afghanistan, it is evident that the American and NATO troop presence there is hardly helping the Afghans. The foreign troops, who move around in armored cars with heads popping out of gun turrets, are increasingly identified as enemies, and not friends or saviors, as Washington and London would like gullible Americans to believe.

A Deathtrap

The situation in Afghanistan is becoming like that in Iraq, where the occupying forces, and their collaborators, are left with two choices: kill or be killed. On Aug. 17, the U.S. military reported that it had “mistakenly” dropped a bomb on a two-vehicle border-police patrol in southeastern Paktika province, killing ten Afghan police officers. The same day, a suicide bomber blew himself up near an Afghan police post, killing himself and wounding seven police in the volatile southern province of Uruzgan, the provincial police chief said. Soon afterwards, a foreign soldier with U.S.-led coalition troops was wounded when a roadside bomb hit his convoy in the neighboring southern province of Kandahar. The list goes on and on.

The attacks are the latest in a rising cycle of violence, especially in the south, where the opium landlords and the Pushtun opposition to the foreign troops and the opium landlords rule supreme. More than 1,600 people have died nationwide in violent incidents since the beginning of May, mostly in the south, according to a tally compiled by the Associated Press based on reports from Afghan officials, the U.S. military, and NATO.

In the south and southeast, the insurgents have fully asserted themselves, and the NATO-led security forces are either evading the enemy or moving around in armored cars in less-congested urban areas. In the northeast, too, the U.S.-led troops have run into serious resistance. Coming in from the Pakistan side of the border, insurgents have now begun to threaten the American troops.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the only way either the U.S. troops, or the NATO-led security forces, can survive in Afghanistan is by killing the Afghans. Any Afghan civilian who gets killed by NATO or U.S. troops nowadays is immediately identified as a “Taliban militant.”

While both the Bush Administration and the Blair government have adopted the principle of establishing “democracy” by killing off the “bad guys,” they are beginning to feel the heat. In Iraq, of course, the heat is intense and large-scale desertion from the Iraqi Army has been reported. In Afghanistan, troop desertion is not new news. According to available statistics, about one-third of the troops leave with their weapons after receiving military training. Many of these deserters were known followers of dozens of powerful warlords, who work selectively with the occupying foreign troops.

The endless killing of Afghan civilians has worried President Karzai—America’s best hope in Afghanistan. Karzai, who has a very small following within the Pushtun community, to which he belongs, has already announced that he will not seek another term as Afghan President.

Addressing a press conference in Beijing during his visit to China in July, Karzai said: “I did expect a rise in militant activity. And for two years I have systematically, consistently, and on a daily basis warned the international community of what was developing in Afghanistan and of the need for a



UN Office on Drugs and Crime

Since 2005, when this report was released, Afghanistan’s opium poppy cultivation has soared from 257,000 acres to a projected 370,650 acres. The UN estimates that Afghanistan will produce enough opium this year to make 620 tons of heroin.

change of approach in this regard.” Karzai called for strengthening the police and army, extra resources and equipment, and better assistance for provincial government improvements, but perhaps more important, he urged a change in the broad strategy and “the need on behalf of the international community to reassess the manner in which this war against terror is conducted.”

Karzai’s recent utterances indicate the failure of the government and its international supporters to stabilize the Taliban heartland has severely impeded efforts to develop the area, shaking faith in Karzai’s ability to bring change. His government is weak and unable to find solutions to people’s problems, and “you see this unhappiness in the assembly and the bazaar,” Abdul Hamid Mubares, a former deputy minister for information and culture told the ABC news recently.

Although Karzai was careful not to blame Pakistan while he was in China (keeping in mind the close relationship between Beijing and Islamabad), he nonetheless urged the international community to switch the “war on terror” to focus on the sources of the “terrorism” in Afghanistan.” It was evident that he was diplomatically pointing the finger of blame at his eastern neighbor. Speaking in Dari, the language spoken in Kabul, Karzai expressed “dissatisfaction with the lack of strategic decisions from the international community to stop terrorism. . . . Strategic means the world should address the place where the terrorism is being trained, financed, given an ideology, and encouraged,” he said.

Forgotten Promises

It is almost a certainty that Afghanistan, where the Bush Administration would like the American troops to stay for a long, long time, will pose serious moral questions in the future. The armed action that ended the Taliban government in the Winter of 2001 was perceived by most Americans as just, at that time of history. Five years later, the limitations of even a just war are also becoming painfully obvious. Bush and Blair went to war to find Osama bin Laden. "We will smoke him out" the Texas way, said President Bush.

If the Taliban had handed Osama over for trial, the *cause célèbre* for the Afghan War would have disappeared. Five years of armed efforts later, Bush and Blair still cannot find Osama. On the other hand, as one leading Indian journalist, M.J. Akbar, pointed out, Osama bin Laden can find any television channel he wants, when he chooses to send a videotaped message. "Any journalist from a television channel can get in touch with his group. Those videos do not travel from Pakistan to Qatar on a flying carpet, do they? But the combined might of the CIA, MI6, and Pakistan's ISI cannot find Osama," Akbar said.

Five years is a long time for an average American to remember what was said back then. A favorite phrase of America and Britain five years ago was to label the Taliban militia as the "bad guys," accusing them of narco-terrorism. Terrorists were using the wealth from Afghanistan's poppy crop to finance their evil plot to destroy the American way of life, Washington and London had said then, to justify the war and take the moral upper hand against the obscure Islamic jihadists, the Taliban militia. But in the five years of Bush-Blair management, Afghanistan's poppy cultivation has reached a record high. This narcotic is not meant for Afghans, or it would fetch a very small price; its true value comes from the euros and pounds and dollars it fetches in Europe and America.

Akbar points out that "those are the currencies that keep farmers in Afghanistan happy, and the criminals who run the drug trade in comfort. Have you ever wondered why not a single supply line of drugs from Afghanistan to the West is ever busted by the military forces stationed in Afghanistan? I may have missed the news, but have you ever heard of smugglers being caught and punished?" On the other hand, as Amin Tarzi, another journalist, commented recently, some countries' troops are under orders to look the other way when trucks loaded with narcotics pass by.

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