

Brits Get Caught With Their Hands in Afghan Opium Jar

by Ramtanu Maitra

In early February, the London *Independent* broke a story which said that the U.K. was in the process of using its 7,700 troops in the opium-infested, Pushtun-dominated southern Afghanistan province of Helmand, to train 2,000 Afghan militants (generically identified in the West as the “Taliban”), ostensibly to “infiltrate” the enemy and “seek intelligence” about the lethal arms of the real Taliban.

This patent little colonial game of the British, sitting atop Afghanistan’s opium province, was aborted, at least temporarily, when officers from Afghanistan’s KGB-trained National Directorate of Security got hold of a computer memory stick after they had moved against a party of international diplomats who were visiting Helmand.

Immediately, Kabul expressed anger, claiming the British agents were talking to the Taliban without permission from Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Kabul pointed out Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s pledge to the British House of Commons on Dec. 12, that Britain would not negotiate with the Taliban. Brown said on that occasion: “Our objective is to defeat the insurgency by isolating and eliminating their leaders. We will not enter into any negotiations with these people.”

Following the exposé, Britain tried to cover up one set of lies with another, insisting that Karzai’s office knew what was going on.

What was somewhat surprising was the silence from Washington and NATO capitals in Europe. In Washington, where the Bush Administration considers the Brits as the most reliable partner-in-crime, the watchword is to ignore these British perfidies. Among the NATO partner-nations in Europe, the news was ignored, and they, instead, concentrated on how to please the Anglo-American venture in Afghanistan without putting their “boys” in harm’s way.

This is like attempting to jump into the water without get-

ting wet. But NATO’s partners know, even if they would not like to admit it, that the Afghans consider them as much a part of the occupying force as the Anglo-Americans are. In other words, while all the occupying forces swear by their commitment to strengthen and stabilize President Karzai, they chose to overlook a blatant attempt to further undermine Kabul’s authority, not by the Taliban, but by Kabul’s “friends.”

MI6 Agents Wearing EU and UN Badges

In reality, however, this story broke weeks before, when, on Dec. 26, two intrepid British MI6 agents, working undercover of the United Nations and the European Union, were expelled from Afghanistan. One of them, a Briton, Michael Semple, was working as the acting head of the EU mission in Afghanistan, and is widely known as a close confidant of Britain’s ambassador, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles. The second is an Irishman, Mervin Patterson, the third-ranking UN official in Afghanistan.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who owes a lot to the Americans and the British for his present position, through his office, gave the impression that it was all a big “misunderstanding,” and that, once the UN talks it over with Kabul, these two “high-ranking diplomats” would be back in business.

But Karzai had other ideas, and clearly saw through the murderous plot the British were hatching against him. Some Western analysts, who have no respect for sovereignty of any nation, and believe their governments have the moral authority to carry out whatever is in their best interests, frowned and wondered why Karzai, who is himself negotiating with the Taliban, did not allow these two “high-ranking diplomats” to carry out their “harmless” little operation. After all, as the *Independent*, in late December, quoted a British officer, Brigadier Andrew Mackay, who had pointed out the grand British

objective in a classified briefing document issued to top officers across Helmand on Oct. 30: "Great Britain's long association with Afghanistan has shown that we got ourselves into this country by forming tribal alliances. Equally we will get ourselves out, over time, by forming tribal alliances that support the government of Afghanistan. Everything we do will have as its singular focus our ability to influence the population of Helmand in order that we can retain, gain and win their consent."

Karzai's Moves

But, what President Karzai saw was quite different from what Mackay said. To begin with, reports he received indicated the training camp was part of a British plan to use bands of reconciled Taliban, called Community Defense Volunteers, ostensibly to fight the remaining insurgents. "The camp would provide military training for 1,800 ordinary Taliban fighters and 200 low-level commanders," the report said.

The camp was due to be built outside Musa Qala, in Helmand, under the pretext of reconstruction, and using the reconstruction money. It was part of a package of reconstruction and development incentives designed to win trust and support in the aftermath of the British-led battle to retake the stronghold last year. The memory stick revealed a three-stage plan, called the European Union Peace Building Program. The third stage covered military training. The European Union says the program did not exist and there were no EU funds to run it. Afghan government officials insist it was bankrolled by the British. U.K. diplomats, the UN, Western officials, and senior Afghan officials have all confirmed the outline of the plan, which they agree is entirely British-led, but all refused to talk about it on the record, the *Independent* said.

An Afghan official told the *Independent*: "When they [the two MI6 agents] were arrested, the British said the Ministry of the Interior and the National Security Council knew about it, but no one knew anything. That's why the President was so angry."

The Afghan President's anger became public on Jan. 24, while speaking to journalists on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. Karzai told reporters that he should not have listened to British and U.S. officials who said he should remove the local security forces that were already in place in Helmand province, according to the *London Times*.

Referring to the strengthening of the Taliban in Helmand due to the British interference, Karzai told the press: "Both the American and the British forces guaranteed to me they knew what they were doing and I made the mistake of listening to them."

A few days earlier, Karzai had resisted a strong effort by the British and the Americans, with the help of Ban Ki-moon, to appoint Paddy Ashdown as the UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan.

The *Asia Times* pointed out that Karzai anticipated that

Ashdown, true to his reputation in the Balkans, would function like a colonial viceroy under orders from London. Karzai was aware that the Western agencies and organizations operating in Afghanistan lack coordination. But a "unified command" under Ashdown would create a counterpoint in Kabul to Karzai's own authority. The President didn't want this to happen.

What Were the Brits Up To in Helmand?

The answer to that question is not difficult for those who have followed the British colonial modus operandi over any length of time. Brigadier Mackay spelled out a small part of it in his classified briefing on Britain's "tribal alliances." The truth, however, is a lot more vicious, and even, bloody.

To begin with, now, after a half-hearted effort that lasted for almost 74 months, the Bush Administration has come to realize that it is impossible to tame Afghanistan, where the Afghans are singularly focused on dealing with the foreign occupiers. Washington realizes, but is afraid to admit, that it is not possible to keep Pakistan a friend, and simultaneously keep the Northern Alliance-backed government in power in Kabul. The Pushtun leader in Kabul, Hamid Karzai, does not have the approval either of Pakistan, or the majority of the rest of the Pushtun community straddling both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

So, the only option open to Washington is to get Karzai accepted by the majority of Pushtuns; in other words, it means opening a dialogue between Karzai and the Taliban. Such talks were taking place. But, the process is complex since the anti-U.S. and anti-NATO militant Pushtuns would not accept foreign troops on Afghan soil as part of any solution.

While this complex process was in play, Britain wanted to have its own "Taliban" as opposed to the Karzai-Washington-favored Taliban. Britain's objective was to train these Taliban militants and use them to capture, or if necessary, to assassinate Hamid Karzai, to get their Taliban secure control over Kabul. These Pushtun Taliban will remain under the British control, while Karzai is under the American control. To gain control of Kabul at a time when Pakistan is being exploded by externally controlled Pushtuns inside Pakistan, would, no doubt, put Britain in the jockey's saddle.

The second objective of Britain is to get hold of a chunk of the opium money floating around in Afghanistan, and in Helmand, in particular. The British East India Company, at the end of the 18th Century, helped Britain to wipe out its huge trade deficit with the Qing Dynasty of China, by establishing a British monopoly of opium trading in the Indian province of Bengal.

Helmand produced 53% of Afghanistan's 8,200 tons of opium in 2007. In 2008, it is likely the total production would exceed 8,200 tons, and Helmand's contribution could be even more. That amount could kill a lot of people, but the British note, it can bring in a lot of cash at a time when the banks are cash-dry and bankrupt.