



UNITED NATIONS
Office on Drugs and Crime

The Opium Situation in Afghanistan

as of 29 August 2005

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The foundations of democracy are in place

Afghanistan has undergone a political transformation during the last two years, which is testimony to the courage of its people and leaders. The process surged forward with the entry into force of Afghanistan's first ever Constitution and the historic election of President Karzai. The upcoming elections of September 18 will move the country even closer toward democracy.

As extraordinary as these changes have been, in Afghanistan democracy may never come of age if violence remains the tool in dispute resolution, if resource allocation depends on corrupt officials, and if half of the national income is generated by illicit activities. Some progress is being made in these areas, although slowly.

Important news on the opium front

(A) Opium cultivation

In terms of drug control, the latest news on opium cultivation is good. UNODC will release its full *2005 Afghan Opium Survey* in early Autumn, but it is already possible to anticipate certain trends. UNODC expects to confirm a decrease in cultivation from 131,000 hectares in 2004 to 104,000 hectares this year, a significant decline of 21%. In other words, one field out of five cultivated in 2004, this year were dedicated to other cause.

The Government of Afghanistan, with the support of the international community, thus delivered an important result in 2005. The task now should be to concentrate on 2006 and 2007, with the aim of transforming this year's decline in cultivation into a long-term, structural change.

There are several explanations for this year's decline in cultivation:

- First and foremost, the President's success in convincing a large number of farming communities to abstain from poppy cultivation is evidence of the respect Afghans have for his elected office.
- Lower cultivation is also the result of law enforcement and of the civil and religious fatwa launched against drugs. The opium eradication programme, and generally the fear of law enforcement, was strong enough to create a kind of mass psychology, an aversion to opium cultivation, in the countryside.
- Economic forces also helped to dissuade growers, as the opium stocks rebuilt since 2002 and the resulting downward pressure on prices, especially at the farm-gate, have led to an inevitable market correction.

The United Nations commends the Government of Afghanistan for its commitment to drug control and the positive outcome realized in 2005. Equally significant is the generous support lent to the drug control campaign by the world community, and especially by the United Kingdom, the lead nation for counter-narcotics in Afghanistan.

As a consequence of the lower Afghan poppy harvest in 2005, UNODC expects that, worldwide, opium cultivation will decrease by about 16 percent this year. The global share of Afghanistan's opium cultivation is thus expected to decline from 67% in 2004 to 63% in 2005.

(B) Opium eradication

Beginning in October 2004, the Government of Afghanistan ordered provincial governors to eradicate opium fields. UNODC was asked to assist in verifying the outcome. About 4,007 hectares were eradicated in the Spring 2005 under the programme led by these governors, which translated into about 4% of the total 2005 opium cultivation.

The central government also undertook separate eradication campaigns, run by a special-purpose Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). These programmes respectively reported a total 217 ha eradicated by CPEF, and an additional 888 ha eradicated by ANP in 5 provinces. UNODC was not asked to assist in verification, and cannot comment on these numbers. In total, about 5,100 hectares may have been eradicated, roughly 5% of the 2005 opium cultivation.

This relatively small achievement masks several crucial, and welcome, developments:

- the threat of eradication reinforced President Karzai's persuasion efforts;
- almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the eradication (72%) took place in Nangarhar and Hilmand provinces, the top two cultivators of opium in 2004. Hilmand is also a key Taleban haven;
- the Government learned important lessons about:
 - (a) the effectiveness of eradication;
 - (b) its most appropriate methods (i.e. locally or centrally led);
 - (c) the relation between crop destruction vs. crop diversification.

(C) Opium yields and production volumes

Unfortunately, while so many Afghan growers cooperated with the Administration in 2005, nature did not. (In 2004, just the opposite occurred.) Heavy snow and rain conditions in Winter-Spring 2005, as well as the absence of large-scale poppy diseases (as was the case in 2004), resulted in a much higher yield (kg per ha) than in the previous year. Average productivity of opium fields increased from 32 kg per hectares to 39 kg this year (representing a productivity gain of about 22% over 2004).

As a result, the total potential opium production in Afghanistan in 2005 is estimated at around 4,100 tons, representing a decrease of only 2% compared to the 2004 harvest (4,200 tons). Even so, this year's opium production remains well below the 1999 peak (under the Talebans) of 4,600 tons. In 2005, Afghanistan's share of opium production is expected to remain at 87% of the world total, unchanged from 2004.

The progress made in curtailing cultivation in 2005 must be viewed with caution: these achievements are fragile and could be easily reversed in the course of a season. Also, crop decline has been uneven, as some provinces actually increased cultivation in 2005 (Kandarhar, +162%, but especially some of the smaller provinces like Nimroz, 1370%, Balkh, 334% and Farah, 348%).

Whether this year's decline will persist, or even accelerate over the years, will depend on the ability to stay the policy course, to address the corollaries to illicit drugs (corruption, etc), and to sustain development assistance. Since drugs in Afghanistan are both the cause and effect of corruption and insurgency, any such trend reversal – namely, new increases in cultivation and production -- are still quite possible and loaded with strategic consequences for Afghanistan, as well as for the entire international community.

(D) Methodology

As in the past, the 2005 survey methodology was based on a sampling approach which combined the analysis of satellite images and extensive field visits. In both cases, analysts used a much greater amount of material and wider samplings than ever before. In 2005, more than 190 high-resolution Ikonos satellite images (as against 110 last year), and 70 Spot satellite images (5 last year) were used, covering 15 provinces and a total of 214,000 hectares of agricultural land, equivalent to 16% of agricultural area in 15 provinces.

At the same time, a sample of 2,200 villages were surveyed (out of a total of 30,706 villages) by 310 surveyors who collected opium yield and socio-economic data. The survey was completed ahead of schedule, despite widespread security problems for the surveyors. Several thousand (more than 6,000) opium capsules were measured, in 160 villages, from 3 fields in each village. Over 8,300 farmers were interviewed.

Development assistance can help consolidate the 2005 improvement

Afghanistan will become a full member of the commonwealth of civilized nations only once it has succeeded in replacing the opium economy with licit activities. The fact that lawful work may be less remunerative than criminal enterprise will not impede this shift. History demonstrates that, anywhere in the world, farmers who are given the option to choose between legality and illegality choose legality, even when the money is less. When the choice is between hunger and illegality, again, history tells us that farmers choose illicit pursuits, even when they may face serious retribution.

Eradication of opium fields has been, and remains necessary: the law of the land, sanctioned by international conventions, must be respected. Still, eradication cannot be the only counter-narcotics instrument, and it cannot take place in a vacuum. Eradicated fields leave families in economic distress, trigger humanitarian disaster, and increase the temptation to join the insurgency. To a considerable extent, in 2005 eradication has been accompanied, and at times preceded, by alternative livelihood programmes and material support. Noteworthy is the fact that the 3 provinces where this year's decline in cultivation was most striking (Nangarhar –96%, Badakshan –53%,) or where cultivation remained stable (Hilmad –10%), are the same 3 provinces that received the largest contributions for alternative development (Nangarhar \$70.1 million, Badakshan US \$47.3 million and Hilmand US \$55.7 million).

This outcome is not surprising. From Western Asia to the Andeans, from the Golden Triangle to Africa's cannabis fields, the key to counter-narcotics success is the development of a countryside replete with infrastructure, with irrigation facilities, market outlets and protection under law.

UNODC actively supports the efforts of the Afghan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics to create and organize alternatives to opium cultivation throughout the country. For 2005-06, the international community has committed about US\$500 million to the Afghan countryside. For the period ahead, the Government has identified six key areas of intervention in rural areas:

- products and markets,
- infrastructure,
- rural micro-finance,
- post-war reconstruction,
- honest local administration,
- social safety net.

Meeting these goals, given the underlying resource requirements, will be a daunting exercise if we expect Afghanistan to face the challenge alone; it is manageable if the international community supports the effort. Therefore, current development assistance volumes need to be maintained, and in some provinces increased, in years to come. It is of course important to avoid a competition for funds by provinces, with opium cultivation (actual or threatened) becoming an instrument of blackmail.

The Afghan situation is similar to the one in the Golden Triangle and the Andeans: some of the poorest people are being affected by the loss of income from drugs as cultivation declines. Thus, the international community must have the wisdom to fight drugs and poverty simultaneously, to eliminate both the causes and the effects of these twin afflictions. In other words, the world will not condone counter-narcotic measures that result in humanitarian disasters. If there is one concrete measure that the Government and its development assistance partners can take now to ensure Afghanistan's future, it is this: *food security and income generation programmes must remain in place, to support both the farmers' decisions not to plant opium, and enforcement measures to eradicate the opium that is planted against the law.*

Corruption is a narcotic in itself

Worldwide, the temptation to hit illicit drug farmers first and foremost is always present, as governments of drug exporting nations believe that results can be delivered more rapidly by aiming directly at growers. While law enforcement in the countryside is easier, it is not sufficient.

It is easier because illicit cultivations are, of course, visible from Ikonos and Spot satellites positioned at 850 km above the fields. Farmers are also the weakest link in the drug chain: they typically pocket only a fraction (3-4%) of the illicit drug income. This makes them defenceless and generally unable to oppose law enforcement operations. They are an appealing target.

On the other hand, fat bank accounts inflated by narco-dollars are harder to spot, whether the money remains in Afghanistan, resides in neighbouring countries, or is stowed away in offshore havens. Also, this money belongs to people with influence. Yet, the international community has to have the wisdom to fight drugs, corruption and terrorism simultaneously. In other words, the world will not condone counter-narcotic measures that hit only the poorest of the poor, namely measures that do not target the illicit wealth belonging to corrupt officials, or to warlords seemingly engaged in the fight for democracy, or to newly elected members of the Afghan Congress who are seeking impunity through parliamentary immunity.

If there is another concrete measure that the Government and its coalition partners (including NATO forces) can take now to ensure the country's future, it is this: *as fields are eradicated, all other links of the drug chain, in Afghanistan and abroad, must be broken: heroin labs destroyed, trafficking disrupted, bank accounts closed, corrupt officials arrested, and warlords neutralized. Also Afghanistan's counter-narcotic efforts are more likely to succeed if supported by lower heroin demand in drug consuming nations.*

Progress on a four-point promise

In Fall 2004, UNODC asked the Government of Afghanistan to focus on four priorities, and there are signs of some progress:

- the government has indeed conducted a combined eradication cum persuasion campaign, as mentioned above;
- traffickers are being prosecuted, albeit slowly. The Afghan Counter Narcotics Criminal Justice Task Force has fast-tracked 92 drug cases, most of them already sent to prosecutors. The Government has also assisted, and provided evidence in support of foreign indictments of Afghan traffickers;
- the Government has slowly begun addressing corruption, in Kabul and in the provinces. It is a tough campaign, marked by disputes, controversy and resistance;
- the Government has created a Ministry of Counter-Narcotics and appointed a Deputy Minister of Interior, charged with drug interdiction. The coordinating role of the earlier drug control agency was thus reinforced, supplemented and given more muscle.

What's next?

It has taken a decade, in some cases longer, to put an end to illicit drug supply in countries like Thailand, Pakistan or Turkey, nations with strong and committed governments. It has just as long, a decade or more, to reduce production substantially in countries like Colombia, Peru or Laos. Clearly, it will take a similar length of time to deal with the Afghanistan opium problem. Much will depend on progress made on elections, security, justice, disarmament of militias, good governance, rural development. Conversely, progress made in these areas will help abate the severity of the drug problem.

In particular, among the measurable initiatives to be pursued in the course of the next 12-24 months as a way of maintaining the 2005 improvement of the opium situation, are:

- removal of corrupt governors in provinces where opium cultivation is not declining, and/or who are not complying with the Government eradication programmes;
- removal of all government administration officials found to be involved, or to benefit from the drug industry;
- commitment by all newly elected members of the Afghan Parliament to abstain from direct or indirect involvement in the drug industry and to resign, surrendering parliamentary immunity, when evidence of such involvement is provided in the Courts;
- complete the process of disarmament and reintegration of militias, maintaining a zero-tolerance policy towards their commanders' (warlords) involvement in drug refining (labs) and trafficking;
- undertake measures that would facilitate mutual legal assistance and extradition of major drug traffickers, including making Afghan domestic legislation compatible with the need to provide evidence for, and serve international arrest warrants;
- support a commitment by farming communities to refrain from drug cultivation as a condition for the receipt of future development assistance.

Dismantling the opium economy in Afghanistan with the instruments of democracy, the rule of law and rural development continues to be a very complex process. UNODC is, and will remain a loyal partner, committed to helping Afghanistan and other Member States realize every aspect of this historic task. We owe this not only to the Afghans and to their efforts to free themselves from the slavery of drug production. We owe it also to the over 100,000 people who die annually, directly or indirectly, because of their addiction to Afghan opium.

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