



FIGHTING TERRORISM IN AFGHANISTAN MEANS COMBATING DRUG TRADE

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Once seen as only one of the problems facing war-torn Afghanistan, destroying its thriving poppy crop is gaining importance in the central Asian country, as experts link support for the Taliban to the growth of poppies.

Afghanistan is the largest opium producing country in the world. Opium and other illegal drugs such as heroin come from a type of poppy plant that thrives in the arid country.

This year's illegal poppy crop in Afghanistan is bigger than ever, and experts anticipate it will yield up to 20 percent more than last year's record crop that produced 6,100 tons of opium on poppy fields that made up 407,000 acres of land, according to the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crimes.

The country provides more than 90 percent of the world's heroin. This is a huge increase from 1985 when Afghanistan provided 31 percent of global opium production or 12 percent of the global supply in 2001 after the Taliban banned production a year earlier.

Opium trade fuels Taliban

According to American and other officials, the trade was estimated at \$3.1 billion last year with the bulk of the profits going to Taliban warlords and other militants.

This has lead many U.S. and NATO officials there to say that efforts to rid the country of terrorists must also include increased efforts to eradicate the poppy crop.

"It's wrong to say that you can do one thing and not the other," Ronald Neumann, who recently stepped down as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, told the Associated Press. "You have to deal with both at the same time."

Who's responsible for poppy eradication?

But getting rid of illegal drugs has not been a part of the official mission of international forces in the country. It is the responsibility of the Afghan government, which receives assistance from the United States and United Nations.

"Our line is that we have nothing to do with poppy eradication," Canadian commander Maj. Steve Graham told the Canadian Press. "But even though we want nothing to do with it and we stay away from it, it can't help but have an impact on us."

According to Graham, local poppy farmers provide key intelligence to troops about the Taliban or the location of bombs. But they are less likely to provide information if troops are involved in eradication efforts.

"Anything that damages that relationship is detrimental to what we're doing, and there's no doubt that poppy eradication damages that relationship," Graham said.

American-backed projects to rid the country of illegal poppy crops include bringing in experts from Colombia, where there also is a wide-spread drug eradication program; helping create a judicial system to prosecute those guilty of drug crimes; and providing American contractors to act as security for laborers who are helping destroy poppy fields.

To date, the Afghan government does not allow any chemical spraying because of concern it will harm livestock or other crops.

But those who believe that getting rid of terrorists means getting rid of drugs say a broader effort is needed.

"I think everybody recognizes that with the Taliban receiving funding from narcotics, much more so than in the past, that there has to be a coordinated effort," Thomas Schweich, a senior State Department official who advocates more military involvement in fighting narcotics, told the AP.

Some critics, however, say the current effort is too little too late.

"This is the Afghan equivalent of failing to deal with looting in Baghdad," Andre Hollis, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for counternarcotics, told the New York Times. "If you are not dealing with those who are threatened by security and who undermine security, namely drug traffickers, all your other grandiose plans will come to naught."

Creating alternative sources of income

Others believe that the United States and international community need to fund more projects that help create alternative sources of income. As it is now, the poppy trade simply pays more.

Farmers can earn three times as much growing poppies than growing wheat.

"I can feed my family very well by poppy cultivation, not by cultivating wheat or other vegetables -- and several other families are being fed while working in our field during harvesting season," a farmer who called himself Abdullah told the Canadian Press.

Most of the poppy cultivation is happening in the Taliban-strong south of the country; Helmand Province, for example, is expected to produce more than 50 percent of Afghanistan's poppy crop this year.

This growth brings in people from all over the country and even Pakistan to work in the fields.

"I will work hard for one month and my family will be better off for months," Khair Mohammad, a poppy laborer from Ghazni province who earns US\$15 a day in Helmand, told IRIN News.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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