

Afghanistan: reports of record year for opium yield

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The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recently published a report revealing the latest findings on opium production in Afghanistan.

The UN has given its blessing to the occupation of Afghanistan and UNODC's *Afghanistan Opium Survey (August) 2007* paints only the most benign picture of the actions and plans of the occupation forces. Despite this, the report's findings paint an appalling picture of the impact of the US-led invasion on the Afghan people.

In its opening paragraphs the report states: "In 2007, Afghanistan cultivated 193,000 hectares of opium poppies, an increase of 17 percent over last year. The amount of Afghan land used for opium is now larger than the corresponding total for coca cultivation in Latin America (Colombia, Peru and Bolivia combined).

"Favourable weather conditions produced opium yields (42.5 kg per hectare) higher than last year (37.0 kg/ha). As a result, in 2007 Afghanistan produced an extraordinary 8,200 tons of opium (34 percent more than in 2006), becoming practically the exclusive supplier of the world's deadliest drug (93 percent of the global opiates market).

"Leaving aside 19th century China, that had a population at that time 15 times larger than today's Afghanistan, no other country in the world has ever produced narcotics on such a deadly scale."

Currently, twice the amount of opium is produced in Afghanistan compared with just two years ago. The report notes regional disparities in opium poppy cultivation; with sharp increases occurring in the south, west and east of the country and limited success in opiate crop eradication in the north. In southern Afghanistan, "opium cultivation has exploded to unprecedented levels." In 2007 around 70 percent of the country's poppies were grown in just five provinces along the border with Pakistan.

The "bread-basket" of the Afghan opium yield is the province of Helmand, where poppy cultivation has almost tripled since 2002. It is also the region with the strongest British military presence. This single province, with 2.5 million inhabitants and over 5,000 British troops, now accounts for 50 percent of the entire Afghan opium crop. The 4,399 metric tons of opium produced in Helmand alone this year was higher than Afghanistan's total production in 2005.

In the words of the report, Helmand has now become "the world's biggest source of illicit drugs, surpassing the output of entire countries like Colombia (coca), Morocco (cannabis), and Myanmar (opium)—which have populations up to twenty times

larger."

However, production is exploding elsewhere. In Afghanistan's western provinces poppy cultivation increased by 44 percent, resulting in a 57 percent increase in opium production. Significant increases in cultivation in the eastern regions (particularly in Nangarhar province) resulted in an opium production increase of 257 percent over 2006. Even in the north, where poppy cultivation decreased, the opium yield was actually higher.

There are a number of instances where the UN report provides a fig-leaf for the occupation of Afghanistan. It attempts to deny the link between poverty and the growth of opium cultivation across the country by counter-posing different regions to each other to demonstrate that some which are extremely poor have not seen a proliferation of opium production. It also attempts to lay the sole responsibility of the burgeoning drugs industry on the Taliban insurgency, while largely ignoring the influential participants who have been placed in positions of power by the occupation.

All of this leads up to an appeal for further military action on the part of the occupation forces, with the report calling for the opium economy to be "bankrupted by blocking the two-way flow of (i) imported chemicals, and (ii) exported drugs."

It continues: "In both instances several thousand tons of materials are being moved across the southern border and nobody seems to take notice.

"Since drug trafficking and insurgency live off of each other, the foreign military forces operating in Afghanistan have a vested interest in supporting counter-narcotics operations: destroying heroin labs, closing opium markets, seizing opium convoys and bringing traffickers to justice.

"This will generate a double benefit. First, the destruction of the drug trade will win popular support (only 1 out of 10 Afghan farming families cultivate opium, earning a disproportionately large share of the national income). Second, lower opium demand by traders will reduce its price and make alternative economic activity more attractive."

Here the report not only seriously understates the social impact of opium production across Afghanistan, but spreads illusions in an occupation that has created the conditions in which ruthless warlords rule with impunity, while guns and militia have flooded the country and opium production has exploded.

Even in a routine military sense, the UN reports' prescriptions are next to meaningless. Most NATO countries involved in Afghanistan, including the UK, have more or less drawn the

conclusion that they should stay clear of overt counter-narcotics operations. Most NATO troops have found to their cost that poppy eradication programmes, backed by military force, have simply turned more local populations against the occupation and swelled the ranks of the insurgency.

Based on opium production and reported opium prices, the “farm-gate value” of the opium harvest amounted to US\$1 billion in 2007. Higher production and only slightly lower average prices resulted in a 32 percent increase of the overall farm-gate value of opium production over 2006 (760 million). The farm-gate value of opium as a proportion of Afghanistan’s GDP in 2007 (US\$ 7.5 billion) increased from 11 percent in 2006 to 13 percent this year.

The average Afghan poppy farmer obviously receives the tiniest fraction of these huge proceeds, but the following statistic, quoted in the report, demonstrates the trade’s importance in a shattered rural economy—as well as contradicting the report’s assertion that the link between poverty and the drugs industry is tenuous. Indicative gross income from opium per hectare is US\$5,200, while gross income from wheat, per hectare is US\$546. As part of the UNODC report, 2,996 farmers in 1,500 villages across Afghanistan were surveyed for their reasons for growing or not growing the opium crop. The survey found that in 2007, the main reasons given by farmers for opium poppy cultivation were “poverty alleviation” and “high sale price of opium” (29 and 25 percent respectively). The overwhelming majority (98 percent) of Afghan farmers surveyed reported that they would be ready to stop opium poppy cultivation given access to an alternative livelihood.

Farmers who never cultivated opium poppy cited “religion” as the main reason (38 percent), followed by the fact that it was an “illegal crop” (28 percent) and “respect for a shura/elders decision” (18 percent). Only 0.4 percent of the farmers did not cultivate opium poppy due to “fear of eradication”. Significantly, “respect for the government ban” figured lowest of all at 0.2 percent.

The report largely says little about high level corruption and officially sanctioned drugs trafficking. But what little it does say, shorn of its hypocritical pronouncements, is indictment enough:

“Drug metastases have spread throughout Afghanistan, providing capital for investments, foreign exchange for expensive imports, revenue to underpaid officials as well as funding for weddings, burials and pilgrimages.

“Corruption has facilitated the general profiteering. The government’s benign tolerance of corruption is undermining the future: no country has ever built prosperity on crime. Similarly, in the provinces bordering with Pakistan, tacit acceptance of opium trafficking by foreign military forces as a way to extract intelligence information and occasional military support in operations against the Taliban and Al-Qaida undermines stabilization efforts.”

“The Afghan judicial system is weak and vulnerable to corruption. Around the country more resources are needed to enhance integrity and increase the likelihood of retribution against crime. The new maximum-security prison at Poli-y-Charkee (near Kabul) still awaits major drug dealers—rather than drivers and couriers.”

According to the report, 2007 also saw the number of heroin

laboratories in Afghanistan increase. In the south and eastern parts of Afghanistan, opiate and precursor trafficking is mainly controlled by tribes whereas in the northern provinces they are controlled by local commanders—most of whom have the official approval of the US-backed Karzai government.

The vast bulk of the opium produced in Afghanistan is converted to heroin within the country. However, as the report points out, the precursors needed for this conversion are not available in Afghanistan, which means that they are imported via neighbouring countries. The report states there are “probably hundreds of unofficial border crossing points between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Pakistan. In short, Afghanistan exports opiates and imports precursors from neighbouring countries.”

In turning to the global ramifications of the expanding Afghan opium economy, the report says the following: “As UNODC has often pointed out, a major responsibility rests with the governments of opiates consuming countries in the European Union, the CIS nations and China. This concern remains urgent. Once again, the yearly Afghan opium harvest may kill, directly and not, over 100 thousand people. However, since the opium supply from Afghanistan currently exceeds global demand by an enormous margin (over 3,000 tons), the highest priority is to deal with the problem at the source—namely in Afghanistan.”

This last point, on the global significance of the increasing Afghan opium yield, was made more forcefully in another recent UNODC report; *World Drug Report 2007*, which presents itself as “the most comprehensive statistical view of today’s illicit drug situation.”

“In recent years, the world heroin market has been divided into three regional submarkets. Afghan opiates have supplied the markets of neighbouring countries, Europe, the Near and Middle East, and Africa. Opiates produced in South-East Asia have supplied the markets of China and other South-East Asian countries, as well as Oceania. Opiates produced in Latin America supplied the North American market.

“However, it appears that cross-regional trafficking is gaining in importance. For example, there are indications that a small but increasing proportion of opiates from Afghanistan are being trafficked to North America, either via eastern and western Africa, or via Europe...

“Countries experiencing an increase in heroin usage include those surrounding Afghanistan (Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia), as well as Russia, India and parts of Africa. Many of these areas have high levels of poverty and HIV, leaving them vulnerable to the worst effects of this drug.”



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