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## Drugs & Democracy

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### Opium jihad

Martin Jelsma and Tom Kramer

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*With Afghanistan now responsible for more than 90 per cent of the world's opium production, there is massive international pressure for repressive policies. But quick-fix solutions like opium bans and eradication don't work, write Martin Jelsma and Tom Kramer, who report back from Afghanistan on the rising anger of poor farmers on the front line*

'We should not destroy opium fields before alternatives are in place,' says Mohammed Ibrahim with an angry voice. 'Instead we should assist the poor farmers.' Ibrahim works for Afghan Aid in Badakhshan province in northeastern Afghanistan, an isolated mountainous region that has been one of the country's primary opium cultivating areas. In 2006 total opium production in Afghanistan was estimated at some 6,000 tons, more than 90 per cent of world production. The Afghan government has been put under huge international pressure to come up with quick solutions to bring these figures down. Afghan president Hamid Karzai has announced a 'jihad against opium', and has implemented repressive policies, including the eradication of opium fields. This has caused great anger among farmers.

### No other option

'The main reason farmers grow opium is the bad economic situation,' says Ibrahim. Badakhshan has a high population density, and most farmers own insufficient land to meet their needs. 'There are also not enough jobs,' he continues, 'and many families have to send members to other provinces or Pakistan and Iran to get enough income.'

Ibrahim brings us to Argu district to talk with opium farmers. 'Our main problems are lack of water and the drought,' says an old farmer with a long grey beard and a white turban. 'My land depends on rain, and does not produce enough to feed my family,' explains another farmer. 'Now we solve our food shortage with growing opium.'

The eldest farmer in the group agrees: 'Destroying our opium fields leaves us with no other options. Instead we want the government to come and talk with us how to solve the problem. Now all they do is destroy our harvest.'

We meet with provincial governor Munshi Abdul Majid, seated behind his large desk flanked by huge baskets of plastic flowers. President Karzai has made governors responsible for reducing opium cultivation in their provinces. 'This year I will bring down opium production here by 40 per cent,' says Munshi.

In reality, the power of local governors is limited, and they often have to negotiate eradication, in order to 'spread the pain' equally over different districts and tribes. Corruption can also play a role, with farmers complaining that some local authorities are themselves involved in the opium trade.

'I feel pity for the people,' says the governor. 'I put tremendous pressure on them to stop poppy cultivation, but I come with empty hands.' The governor faces a difficult dilemma. If his actions are too harsh, it may upset the delicate power balance in the province. But if he does not do enough the central government will send the US-trained Afghan Eradication Force (AEF) to his province. Last year this immediately resulted in conflict and several deaths, which he now wants to prevent at all costs.

### PEP-talk

In theory, eradication is only taking place in so-called target areas, where farmers have access to other means of making a living. The British have produced socio-economic maps delineating areas deemed to be eligible for eradication. We are invited to join an eradication mission in Baharak district with the provincial Poppy Elimination Programme (PEP) team. These teams are set up to assist the governors.

When we arrive a tractor is already ploughing up a field with 30-centimetre high opium plants close to the road. The owner of the field looks bewildered.

'I borrowed \$500 to pay for labour and fertiliser for this field,' he explains. 'Now I have no idea how I can repay this debt. And it is too late in the season to grow something else.'

In practice, it seems the targeting policy is not being implemented. Sue Jordan, the US advisor to the PEP team, has never even seen the eradication area maps. 'We should not just eradicate the opium fields, but follow it up with development programmes,' she says. 'There is a causal relationship between poverty and the need to feed your family and opium cultivation. These are the people that are being hit by eradication, not the rich farmers or the traders.'

### **Nangarhar's 'success story'**

We drive east into Nangarhar province, following the main trade route with Pakistan. Nangarhar has been the one big success story of drug control in Afghanistan, supposedly proving that 'it can be done'. Promises of large-scale development assistance convinced local authorities and village elders to support an opium ban and make the province opium-free.

Poppy cultivation did fall from 28,000 hectares in 2004 to just 1,000 in 2005. But the economy plummeted and farmers were caught in a debt-trap.

Then, in March, on this road towards the Pakistan border, US troops caused a massacre that is vividly remembered by everyone we meet. In panic after a suicide bomber attacked their convoy, the US Marines shot at everything that moved, killing at least 16 people and wounding dozens more. The atmosphere is still tense, now even more so because ongoing poppy eradication has increased hostility towards foreigners.

On both sides of the road we see blooming poppy fields; we park the car near a large field where farmers are harvesting. The friendly owners walk us through their beautiful pink-white sea of flowers. Here and there the petals have fallen off and people are lancing the pods to make the sap drip out. Tomorrow morning the raw opium will be scraped off.

'Last year we grew wheat here,' says one of the farmers, 'but I have six sons and three daughters all going to school and this is the only way I can pay for their education.' Rain has been good this year, so he is hopeful of a record harvest.

The PEP team in Jalalabad confirms that opium production is increasing again. 'At first when the stranglehold of the ban started to loosen, farmers were still careful,' according to the American advisor. 'This year we see the full-blown response to the loss of livelihoods: poppy everywhere.'

In response the US had everything prepared to start chemical spraying; even the leaflets were printed. Its frustration was huge when the Karzai government maintained its opposition to the use of herbicides for poppy eradication. The Nangarhar governor tries to keep a balance between eradication and stability after shoot-outs and riots broke out in several districts. Tractors were burned, roads blocked and several people got killed. He made clear the AEF was not welcome in his province.

### **Rose island, poppy ocean**

At the foot of the Spinghar mountains, right on the Pakistan border, we visit a village in Achin district notorious for being a centre of the opium trade. 'Don't go there,' everybody had warned us. The situation is quite explosive because of Taliban groups crossing the mountains and because of the fear of eradication so close to harvest time. At a local roses distillery – built with German funds to provide an alternative to poppy production – we meet a local who is willing to take us along as his personal guests.

Nearing the mountain ridge, the poppy fields get bigger and bigger until we stand in the midst of an ocean of white poppies stretching to the horizon in every direction. On the edges of the fields we also see familiar fingershaped leaves: during summer these same fields are a forest of cannabis. In the midst of the poppy ocean we find one small island planted with roses, symbolic of the scale of 'alternative development'.

We spend hours in the village drinking tea and talking about the local drugs economy, price trends and yield expectations. A local trader shows us his sack of dried opium from last year. He breaks open a piece to have us smell

and taste it. 'I make about 20 per cent profit by buying raw opium from the villagers and selling it to the ones with heroin laboratories up in the mountains,' he explains.

Some of the villagers sitting around us work in such a laboratory and explain the process: 'Seven kilos of opium can be processed into one kilo of morphine-base, and to transform that into one kilo of heroin you need about the same amount of acid.' The price of the acid has increased enormously due to drug control efforts, and now surpasses the price of opium per kilo. The end product from these mountains is 'brown sugar', the heroin type dominant on the European market. After lunch, someone shows us a kilo of pure brown heroin, worth \$2,300 here and about 20 times more on the European market.

## Flowery future

From the outset we have objected to claims that the opium ban in Nangarhar was a 'success', given its dramatic consequences for farmers, share-croppers, day labourers and the population at large. When drug control agencies issued jubilant press releases heralding a 96 per cent drop in poppy cultivation in the province, they neglected to mention the humanitarian drama this helped to trigger.

The beautiful flowery views of today confirm that the reduction of the opium economy in Nangarhar was unsustainable and cannot be seen as a model for the rest of Afghanistan. Yet policy makers continue to search for illusory quick solutions. Eradication has been stepped up significantly this year – 22,000 hectares by the end of April and rising. Yet opium production in 2007 is still likely to reach an alltime record high, leading to further pressure to apply more aggressive policies next year. Martin Jelsma and Tom Kramer are researchers for the Transnational Institute Drugs and Democracy Programme, and co-authors of *Losing Ground: Drug Control and War in Afghanistan* ([www.tni.org/drugs](http://www.tni.org/drugs))