

Afghan Heroin Flow Channeled to Russia

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Global Research, May 24, 2010

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#) 24 May 2010

Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

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According to head of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Assistant Secretary of State D. Johnson, the US State Department's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report should reject the idea of opium poppy crop eradication.

The production of narcotics in Afghanistan has gone up 40-fold since the country's occupation by the NATO forces. Precursor chemicals are imported to Afghanistan from Pakistan and other countries including some of the EU members. Massive injection of liquidity into poppy harvesting is in many cases disguised as the financing of agricultural activities, and Afghanistan hosts the full cycle of illicit drug production comprising opium poppy cultivation, conversion into heroin and opium at some 400 drug facilities, stockpiling, and wholesale supply to the Afghan and Pakistani drug markets.

At the moment the stock of pure heroin in Afghanistan is estimated at slightly below 3,000 tons, and the revenues of Afghan drug suppliers reach around \$3 bn annually. The international drug mafia earns at least \$100 bn annually on heroin from Afghanistan, the money nourishing organized crime not only in Afghanistan but also across Central Asia - in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

The revenues generated by the drug business are distributed among the criminal groups controlling various segments of the supply chain linking poppy farms to narcotics consumers. While Afghan poppy growers are enduring extreme poverty, the owners of the fields mostly reside in the US, Great Britain, and other Western democracies. Concern over the owners' well-being could be the only explanation behind the suggestion made by Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan under B. Obama's Administration Richard Holbrooke to go after the traffickers and drug lords rather than to eradicate poppy farms. The US and several EU countries rejected the Russian delegation's proposal to have the problem of narcotics production in Afghanistan listed in the resolutions of the 52d session of the UN Commission for Narcotic Drugs, which convened in Vienna in March, 2010.

Russian law-enforcement agencies - the Federal Drug Control Service, the Federal Security Service, and police - supply to their US peers and to the Afghan administration intelligence data on drug laboratories and stock, major drug trafficking routes, etc. on a regular basis, but there have never been any response. Under the conditions of recurring warfare and the Afghan administration's notorious inaptness, the funds allocated by international organizations to help Afghan farmers switch from poppy harvesting to legitimate agriculture are routinely used to support poppy cultivation. In 2004, Karzai's administration offered Afghans \$1,250 per hectare of eradicated poppy crop, while the amount an average poppy grower earned off a hectare was \$16,000 (with an average of three crops a year).

The US forces prefer to impede drug trafficking in the southern part of Afghanistan, where large-scale drug production is impossible due to continuous fighting anyhow. In the north of Afghanistan, the US has built roads and bridges linking Afghanistan to Tajikistan, the route stretching further to Russia via Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan.

In the western part of Afghanistan, the proliferation of drug activity is totally blocked by Iran. The border in the region is one of the world's heaviest fortified, with five-meter deep ditches, walls, and gallows per every 300 meters. It is guarded by some 60% of Iran's armed forces.

The narcotics situation in Afghanistan is monitored by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), but the figures describing Afghan poppy farming and drug production churned out by the agency look suspiciously modest. While UNODC estimates that only 15% of the Afghan drug output are trafficked via the northern route traversing Russia, Russian law-enforcement agencies argue that - after a recent sharp increase - the northern route's share is at least 35%.

Drugs are smuggled into Russia using all types of transportation (cars - 70%, rail - 20%, planes - 10%). Much of the smuggling is disguised as agricultural supplies, and, making life a lot easier for smugglers, the Kazakh customs service does not subject cars from Asia to inspection procedures as a general rule.

Andrew F. Tully, a US analyst whose interests are centered around Afghanistan, says openly that Iran and Russia are facing "heroin pressure" from Afghanistan, and the Russian statistical data fully support the view. The incidence of severe crimes linked to illicit drug circulation grew steadily over the past several years. In 2008, 212 people were arrested at border checkpoints from smuggling drugs, and the Federal Drug Control service alone detained 753 foreign nationals for wholesale drug dealing. Over the first three months of 2009, the number of people arrested at border checkpoints - mostly citizens of Central Asian republics - reached 97.

In the fall of 2009, Kyrgyzstan disbanded its drug control agency. The majority of its functions were passed to police, and the control over legal drug circulation - to the ministry of healthcare. Given Kyrgyzstan's reputation of a global financial laundry extensively used by drug lords, the reform is truly alarming.

Kazakhstan is Russia's "strange" ally in combating the proliferation of drug business, as the current Kazakh regulations make it impossible to even monitor the flow of foreign nationals and stateless people across the border between Russia and Kazakhstan. The border is long (almost 7,600 km), poorly equipped technically, and hardly serves as an obstacle to smuggling drugs into Russia.

Western watchers opine quite reasonably that it is not in the interests of the US to fight the enormously profitable illicit drug production in Afghanistan. It should be also taken into account that the drug business serves as a serious source of income to many companies working with the Western coalition in the country. Heroin production takes massive quantities of acetic anhydride, acetone, and hydrochloric acid which are neither available in Afghanistan domestically nor can be delivered in required quantities by individual go-betweens. Recently the command of the German forces in Afghanistan suspected Ecolog, a Düsseldorf-based company providing laundry and garbage removal services to NATO in Afghanistan, of drug smuggling. The scandal is currently at full swing in Germany.

It must be realized that at present all conceivable conditions are created in Afghanistan for channeling the flow of heroin from the country to Russia. The answer to the question whose interests the arrangement is supposed to advance should not be hard to find.

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