

Karzai, Bush pledges to reduce Afghan Poppy turn out to be just one more Pipedream

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Just a little over two years ago, at a White House press conference on May 23, 2005, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan said his country's poppy crop was shrinking and, "if this trend continues, we'll have no poppies, hopefully, in Afghanistan in another five or six years."

"That's a promise we have given to the world and to the Afghan people," Karzai added, "and that's a promise that we will deliver on. Hold us accountable on that." President Bush chimed in that President Karzai was "very forthcoming" about the desire to eradicate the poppy, the raw ingredient of heroin.

Yet, far from reducing, much less eradicating, the poppy crop, and in defiance of U.S. and NATO military pressure, Afghan farmers planted about 400,000 acres of opium poppies last year, a 59% increase over 2005, while the war swirling around the opium harvest has also grown— in intensity. Looking back, the Bush-Karzai conference turns out to be just one more pipedream.

According to author Jon Lee Anderson in the July 9th "The New Yorker" magazine, "The debilitating and corrupting effects of the opium trade on the government of President Karzai is a significant factor in the Taliban's revival." Another factor aiding the Taliban is the rise in U.S. and NATO air strikes. Reuters reported July 7th that in Farah province the district leader lamented an air attack in Bala Boluk that killed 108 civilians. Reuters said, "Western unwillingness to accept casualties among their own soldiers and a shortage of ground troops means commanders often turn to air power to beat the Taliban, and that almost inevitably leads to civilian deaths."

The situation in Afghanistan is reminiscent of U.S. and British air strikes against Nazi targets in occupied France during World War II. These killed an estimated 70,000 French civilians, so many the Nazis put up posters of a smirking President Roosevelt dropping bombs on a small French girl clutching a doll. The French resistance begged to be allowed to take out German targets from the ground.

Anderson writes, "Karzai has complained publicly about the civilian deaths, but he is dependent on the foreign forces to prop him up." Presently, 35,000 troops from 37 countries, about half of them American, are fighting under the NATO banner, with 8,000 more U.S. soldiers under Pentagon command. Despite this support, "Karzai seems isolated and weak, and his authority barely extends beyond the capital," Anderson says.

"People are getting very angry with Karzai," Soona Niloofar, a member of Afghan's

parliament was quoted as stating. "At the beginning of the year, he promised to sack the governors where opium is grown. Nothing has been done." One governor, Abdul Hakim Munib of Uruzgan province, has poppy fields growing within sight of his palace.

Dissuading farmers from planting poppies is tough. One farmer told Anderson a four-kilo package of opium from a half acre brings him 21,000 Pakistani rupees compared with 1,000 rupees for wheat.

The poppy eradication ops, Anderson writes, "tend to set up confrontations between armed men and poor farmers" who do not want their lucrative crops chopped down. Eradication is also time-consuming and, as a top-ranking UN official in Afghanistan said, "The per-acre cost of forced eradication is also excruciatingly high." The job is done by ATV's that drive across the fields dragging metal bars behind them that knock down the poppies.

The UN official, Chris Anderson, added, "The Taliban have partnered in intimate ways with the drug networks over the past two years. Their alliance deserves to be exposed for the opportunism and criminality it represents." In Helmand and Uruzgan provinces, he said, eradication has been subject to political manipulation and corruption and has proved to be virtually impossible in districts where the Taliban is strong. This seemed to be confirmed when a poppy-eradication squad Anderson was accompanying got into a firefight in which 20 were killed.

Douglas Wankel, an American who helped create an Afghan Eradication Force using Afghani fighters and U.S. contractors from Virginia's private DynCorp firm, said, "We're not able to destroy all the poppy—that's not the point. What we're trying to do is lend an element of threat and risk to the farmers' calculations, so they won't plant next year." Wankel said it was premature to judge the eradication program by the poppy cultivation figures as his effort is just getting off the ground.

"Distracted by Iraq, the U.S. only belatedly began serious counter-narcotics and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan," Anderson says. In the vacuum, the Taliban returned, and most foreign experts and Afghan officials Anderson spoke with said Taliban holds the initiative.

One of Wankel's mercenaries described the Afghan war as "redneck heaven." He explained, "You get to run around the desert on A.T.V.s and pickups, shoot guns, and get paid for it. Man, it's the perfect job." DynCorp men said they became contractors because the pay was much higher than civilian jobs back in the States. That's the same reason Afghan farmers give for growing poppies instead of wheat. Drug running in the past has also been a source of illicit cash for the CIA, which can spend as it pleases without Congressional oversight.

Since heroin users seem to be able to get their supply come what may, why not just legalize its use in America as well as its production in Afghanistan? That way, heroin could be brought in legally, taking the profit out of smuggling. Decriminalizing drug addiction in the U.S. would also empty hundreds of thousands of prison cells, at a great savings to taxpayers, and switch the emphasis from incarceration to drug treatment. Over time, this might also reduce USA's high crime rate, much of it committed by addicts to buy heroin. Finally, Afghan farmers could make a buck off their crops and the shooting in the poppy fields might subside. The only losers in this scheme might be some "rednecks" cheated out of their unique "shoot guns" fix. Maybe Dick Cheney will take them hunting.

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