

Narcotics: The Best-Known Afghan Business

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The parts of the world hit hardest by the best-known Afghan business – the drug business – are Europe, Russia, and Iran, which absorb some 80% of the drugs produced in Afghanistan. Currently the country is responsible for 90% of the global heroin output. Russia's drug control agency chief V. Ivanov outlined the situation at the «Drug Production in Afghanistan: A Challenge for the International Community» international forum.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan has bred unprecedentedly favorable conditions for the country's drug business which is presently flourishing in the NATO-controlled oasis. While the Taliban banned opium cultivation, the Western coalition brought unchecked freedom to Afghanistan, the result being that opium production in the country has grown more than 40 times over since 2001.

To justify its inaction, the US claims that for the Afghan farmers poppy cultivation is the only way to make a living. In practice, the justification translates into ever greater license for various drug lords who amass fantastic riches at the cost of lives of Russian and European young people. Allegedly out of compassion for the disadvantaged Afghans, the US and its allies have turned Afghanistan into a giant drug factory. In this regard, countering US presence in Afghanistan constitutes a means to fighting the global threat posed by the drug business.

«We cannot defeat the evil alone — efforts have to be made by the international community, by all the interested countries», said Afghan counter-narcotics minister Zazar Ahmad Moqbel. It is clear which countries are interested and just as clear that the US is not one of them. Opium from Afghanistan does not reach the US, unlike the drugs from Columbia where Washington — evidently unconcerned about the well-being of Latin Americans – is ready to wipe out coca fields by bomb strikes. The US would rather not do the same in Afghanistan and leave it to Russia and Europe to face the consequences...

Currently Afghanistan supplies twice the amount of drugs the whole world produced a decade ago. Most of the cultivation takes place in the Kandahār and Helmand provinces. In 2010, Afghanistan also became a leading producer of hashish – with this year's crop totalling some 3,000 tons. It is easy to guess where the drugs will land as the shortest supply routes run north, via Central Asia to Russia.

The spread of drug consumption and addiction in Russia ranks among the most serious threats to its national security. It is an open secret that Afghanistan has a completely transparent border with the Central Asian republics, most of the drug traffickers arrested in Russia being their citizens. Last week two policemen were injured in Moscow during an anti-narcotics raid against a group of ethnic Tajiks who put up resistance and attacked the

policemen with knives and iron rods.

Russia is the country with the world's third largest group of drug addicts (after Afghanistan and Iran). Whereas a decade ago Russia officially counted 369,000 drug addicts, by 2009 the figure topped 500,000. The reality is even more frightening than the healthcare statistics reflects — tentatively, 2 — 2.5 mln Russians are drug addicts, the people thrown out of normal life. It is a significant dimension of the problem that some 20% of the drug addicts in Russia are schoolchildren, roughly 60% are aged between 16 and 30, and 20% are people over 30.

Russia's drug control agency estimates that narcotics kill around 100,000 people across the world every year. The loss of life in Russia, the country whose population makes just 2% of the world's total, accounts for roughly a third of the toll.

The plan for joint struggle against the drug threat addressed at the forum to the Western coalition occupying Afghanistan included seven points:

- Countering the threat posed by the drug production in Afghanistan should be given the same priority as maintaining peace and international security.

- At least 2 mln jobs must be created in Afghanistan considering that currently on the order of 3 mln Afghans are cultivating drug crops.

- Poppy crops in Afghanistan must be ruthlessly eradicated.

- The UN should compile a blacklist of land owners renting out fields for poppy cultivation.

- NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan must actively eradicate drug crops.

- Intelligence agencies should step up cooperation and regularly swap the pertinent data.

- Russia and the Western coalition countries should jointly train Afghan anti-drug forces.

The above may sound like a realistic agenda, but the notorious business will surely put obstacles in the way of its implementation. The revenues generated by drug supply from Afghanistan total up to \$65 bn annually (this is comparable to the GDP of such countries as Croatia and Slovenia or to the oil revenues of Libya and Iraq), and only a small fraction of the amount actually goes to Afghan farmers. At most 8% of the drug business revenues settle down in Afghanistan, and the Afghan farmers altogether get some \$500 mln, which

makes \$200 per farmer annually. This simple consideration alone should make it clear whose interests those who reject the eradication strategy are protecting in Afghanistan.

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