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Marie Cocco

U.S. lets Afghanistan traffic in opium

May 18, 2004

In the new Afghanistan, women are free to go to school. Refugees are free to return home. Regional chieftains are free to run in upcoming elections. And farmers are free to grow opium poppies for the international heroin trade.

This last freedom has expanded unchecked since U.S. military intervention unseated the repressive Taliban regime, which tamped down the illicit crop as contrary to Islam. Now this freedom to farm threatens all others.

The poppies grow under our noses. The robust narco-economy is the source of half of Afghanistan's economic output. As the underground economy grows, so does the power of regional warlords - including the resurgent Taliban. Eighty-four percent of poppy production, said Larry Goodson, an Afghan expert at the U.S. Army War College, takes place in provinces now controlled by the Taliban and two other factions opposed to the U.S.-backed government of Hamid Karzai.

"It's coming out of those areas, it's helping to fund their resurgence," said Goodson, who has served as an observer of Afghan elections.

Afghanistan was the source of more than three-quarters of the world's illicit opium last year, according to the United Nations - a bumper crop that farmers intend to surpass this year. Fully 69 percent of farmers told United Nations officials that they intend to increase poppy cultivation in 2004.

The math is simple. The average net income for a farmer who grew poppies last year was \$2,520, according to the UN. A farmer growing only legitimate crops earned \$670.

In provinces where the United States has turned over security to warlords - that is, in most of the country outside the capital of Kabul - the warlords pay farmers high prices for poppies and extend them credit. The chieftains' profits finance weaponry for regional militias, potential rivals of any central Afghan army. They provide a wellspring of cash for terrorist groups, including al-Qaida. With an international squeeze on the flow of terrorist money through financial institutions, what better conduit than the untraceable economy of the drug trade?

"The marriage between the drug traffickers and the terrorists has taken place," said Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-Queens), the ranking Democrat on the House International Affairs Committee.

Afghanistan now is seen as a potential Colombia, both dependent upon and corrupted by drug trafficking. There is agreement, even, on how this has come to pass.

The U.S. invasion unseated the Taliban but cleared the way for regional fiefdoms and militias to control the provinces. The warlords were kept in place by explicit plan - they were to secure the regions so we would not have to do it ourselves.

There would be no Soviet-style occupation of Afghanistan to complicate the American mission of hunting down al-Qaida. The U.S. military presence was deliberately kept small and focused on tracking terrorists. Only recently was it enlarged in an effort to dislodge the reconstituted Taliban, Goodson said.

Nor, despite official pronouncements, would there really be a "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan. Development aid has been scarce and slow in reaching the country. Lack of security outside Kabul has made it difficult for aid workers. Security is so poor that elections originally scheduled for June have been pushed into September.

Turning a haven for terrorists into a haven for drug traffickers was not in the plan. It isn't what the American people supported when they were called, after 9/11, to rise to the moment. They sent their sons and daughters to battle and their pennies and quarters to the Afghan children for a cause nobler than this.

There is nothing noble in abandoning a nation to gangsters. We say we will not do that in Iraq, yet we are following this road to perdition in Afghanistan.

We knew that rebuilding Afghanistan was an enormous and expensive task. Now we shirk a responsibility we created for ourselves. Failure to meet it now will only bring consequences later.

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