

Solving Afghanistan's poppy problem

The drug war yields the wrong kinds of casualties

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LASHKAR GAH, Afghanistan — The pilot of the British army helicopter was taking me on an exceedingly fast, wildly pitching, zigzag trajectory across the sun-baked fields of Afghanistan's southern Helmand province. Even at 20 metres above the ground, the pungent aroma was impossible to ignore, a cloying tang resembling a huge pot of badly wilted geraniums.

The smell was being generated by the hundreds and hundreds of people in the patchwork fields below me, a dozen or so in each tiny half-hectare field. They were leaning over the pink, white, yellow and red flowers of the endless poppy plants, painstakingly slashing their bulbs with knives, waiting an hour as the thick syrup dripped out, scraping the dried syrup off, and repeating the task, day after day.

I had found myself in the midst of the largest opium harvest in the history of Afghanistan, possibly the largest in the history of the world. Some of it would be exported directly through Iran and Pakistan to the globe's drug dealers, some of it processed into heroin in laboratories located right beside these fields. American officials told me that between 20 and 40 per cent of the Taliban's financing comes from these opiate exports.

Last year, Afghanistan produced more than 92 per cent of the world's opium and heroin, a record crop. This year, experts say it will produce 40 per cent more than the world demand — which means that huge quantities will be stockpiled somewhere. As we passed over the harvest, the helicopter's side gunner pointed out the various drug-processing activities below me. But he didn't fire a shot or do anything to disrupt the harvest.



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In central Helmand Province, Afghanistan, a British Army helicopter gunner surveys the 2008 poppy harvest. In the fields below him, thousands of Afghans are hard at work this week extracting the largest harvest in the country's history, estimated to account for 140 per cent of the worldwide heroin and opium demand in the world each year. *(Doug Saunders/The Globe and Mail)*

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There are many people who wish he would. Presidential candidate John McCain has made a campaign promise to order aerial-herbicide spraying of the entire poppy crop. General Dan McNeill, the American who heads the North Atlantic Treaty Organization coalition fighting in Afghanistan, told me that he personally wants this to happen, too, but he respects the Afghan government's refusal to allow it. Instead, he pushes U.S.-controlled provinces to practise aggressive eradication, taking out the fields one by one with Western or Afghan soldiers.

Later in the week, I visited Nangarhar, one of the U.S.-controlled provinces that has all but eliminated its poppy crop. It's being held up as a model province, and Canadian commanders are being pressured by their American counterparts to adopt their tough poppy-ending strategy.

I attended a press briefing by Colonel Abdullah Talwar of the Afghan National Police, whom the Americans have placed in charge of stopping the poppy harvest. Midway through, he offered a little anecdote: "Last week, I saw a man sitting next to his poppy crop and crying," he said. "He told me that he'd been paid in advance for his poppy, and how can he possibly pay it back now that it's been eradicated? He told me, 'I have no choice, but I have a 14-year-old daughter who I have to give to a smuggler as payment.' "

Mr. Talwar then continued talking of quotas and goals. Finally, someone stopped him and asked what had happened to the poor farmer and his daughter. He shrugged: No idea. Like countless other failed farmers, the guy presumably had given up his daughter for chattel slavery or prostitution.

"I did my job, I fulfilled my duties and responsibilities," the big, bearded cop explained. Those duties involved only eliminating the poppy crop. "There's no place for growing poppy in our province," he said. "It is my job to stop it."

But killing a poor farmer's crop can have nasty consequences. In Nangarhar, insurgent attacks have increased sharply despite a doubling in the number of U.S. soldiers. Some people blame the drug strategy, noting that it seems to be driving desperate people into the hands of the enemy.

The problem with simply killing the poppy crop is that the farmers themselves want nothing more than to be growing something else. But it's

virtually impossible.

"Farmers made more money growing improved wheat and onions last year than they did growing opium," said a senior official with intimate knowledge of the poppy economy. Like crack dealers who are forced to live with their mothers, poppy farmers soon discover that this supposedly lucrative crop doesn't leave them with much money.

First, they must buy poppy seeds, usually from a trafficker. Then they have to promise 10 per cent to the village landlord (this is, at best, a feudal system), and 5 per cent to the arbab, a local tribal official who provides irrigation, and then a 10-per-cent tax known as an usha, paid to whoever holds power in the region — a government-appointed warlord, or, more frequently these days, the Taliban. Then they must pay for the lancing of the flowers and gathering of the opium, typically at a princely \$20 a day. Not much is left.

Most of these costs apply only to poppy crops. So why don't farmers grow wheat and onions? First, because their fields are unsustainably tiny, and subsistence-level farming doesn't leave any money for moving into new crops. You're stuck with what you're given, and if the Taliban are doing the giving, then it's opium.

But more important is the lack of any market for non-opium crops. Farmers need to get their crops to market. If the roads are impassable and dangerous — or if warlords or Taliban are charging you \$50 to drive down them without being killed — then suddenly the cost of transporting your grain to market is unaffordably high. Poppy may not pay, but it does have a buyer.

Neither the American spray-it-now approach nor the idealist switch-to-wheat-and-watermelons approach will work now — nor will the Senlis Council's idea of switching to a pharmaceutical opium crop. The farmers first need to be connected to new buyers, without heavy guys with guns in between.

That's why these British soldiers are ignoring the poppy harvest beneath them this month. It makes sense to wipe out some fields — those belonging to warlords and corrupt government officials.

But if a spiral of violence and misery is to be avoided, it's better to trust the economics: Get the warlords out of power and open the roads, and poppy fields will disappear on their own.

Opium isn't a root problem; it's a tragic side effect.

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