

## War takes time out for opium windfall

**In Afghanistan, spring brings calm as farmers harvest their poppies only to see renewed fighting fuelled by narco cash in summer**

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FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

MAY 13, 2008 AT 4:36 AM EDT

NEAR BAZAR-E-PANJWAI and KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — The swollen green poppy bulbs are being plucked from the fields as the annual spring harvest is under way in Afghanistan's volatile and dangerous Panjwai district.

"Fifteen days," an Afghan farmer told a Canadian soldier yesterday, when asked about how long he expected it will take to clear his field. As the farmer talked, he carefully cut open a bulb the size of a walnut and scooped out the oozing sap.

In nearby fields, the harvest could be finished as early as Friday.

Canadian soldiers patrolling areas southwest of Kandahar are closely watching the calendar, as they prepare for a renewed Taliban offensive after the fields are cleared.



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A farmer, watched by an Afghan soldier, plucks swollen green poppy bulbs Monday in Panjwai district. *(Katherine O'Neill/The Globe and Mail)*

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In nearby Kandahar, the annual start of the fighting season has become as regular as the harvest season. When the bulbs ripen on the poppy stalks, farmers hire armies of young men to work the fields. For a few weeks in late April and early May, it's difficult to find a taxi or a construction

worker in the city, as every available labourer goes into the countryside. Many shops are shuttered, and the city takes on an air of sleepy anticipation.

The level of violence in Kandahar province has dropped sharply during this period of calm that comes with the harvest, as it always does in late spring. Village elders say this is partly because the young men are farming instead of fighting, but also because the Taliban feel social pressure from ordinary people who need a good opium crop to pay for the year's expenses; the insurgents would lose support if they disrupt the harvest.

As the last remnants of dark tar get scraped off the plants, however, the tension grows. City residents ask people who recently returned from the fields when the harvest will finish, trying to guess when the fighting will start.

Military officials usually describe the annual outbreak of fighting in purely economic terms, saying the end of the harvest leaves thousands of unemployed young men who don't have any financial alternative except selling themselves as hired guns to the insurgency. At the same time, however, many poor labourers find themselves flush with more money than they've seen all year, after making inflated wages four or five times higher than their salary rate in slower seasons. Some observers say it's the influx of cash into the countryside that brings a fresh supply of ammunition and supplies to the insurgents; others say it's only the summer heat that brings war, as the nights are warm enough for a band of fighters to sleep in the fields without blankets.

Whatever the reason, the escalating violence of each summer is sickeningly predictable - so predictable, in fact, that pharmacists in Kandahar city are stocking extra medicines in anticipation of higher casualties and increased sales.

Haji Agha Raheemdin, head of Pharmaceuticals Services Union of Kandahar, said he usually sells about \$100,000 worth of supplies a month, but anticipates sales of \$200,000 to \$300,000 in the month after the harvest's end. That estimate does not include the medicine his group will donate to the city's main hospital, he said.

"This problem can't be solved by fighting," Mr. Raheemdin said. "But the fighters don't know this. Every year, the fight is bigger."

As the fighting has escalated every year, fears spread in Afghanistan last spring that the 2007 season would include a so-called "spring offensive" by the Taliban, possibly a frontal attack on a major town or city. Such an attack never happened, and NATO officials trumpeted this as a successful thwarting of a Taliban offensive.

But the insurgents claimed their new strategy called for more numerous attacks by smaller groups of fighters, and the statistics from last year's fighting season did record a spike in violence that some analysts have described as an offensive.

"We totally disagree with those who assert that the 'spring offensive' did not happen," concludes a year-end report by the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, describing a fourfold increase in attacks from February to July, 2007. "The numbers do not lie," the report said.

This year's numbers look similar, but worse. Data collected by security consultant Sami Kovanen, of Vigilant Strategic Services Afghanistan, show a steady increase in insurgent attacks in the first 14 weeks of 2008, with every week except one recording a higher volume of incidents than the same week in the previous year. Then, in the 15th to 18th weeks, the number of attacks dips down in a lull similar to the calm before previous fighting seasons. Over all, however, VSSA had counted 226 insurgent attacks in Kandahar this year, as of May 4, compared with 167 during the

same period last year, leading some analysts to predict that this fighting season will bring more violence than the last.

Military officials privately acknowledge that their own statistics reflect a similar increase in the number of insurgent attacks, but they draw different conclusions from the data. The fact that insurgents are not massing in the large battle groups seen in 2006 shows that NATO and Afghan troops are forcing them to scatter, increasing the number of incidents but lowering the insurgents' effectiveness, officials say.

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