

# DEADLY HARVEST

## The Increased Threat from Afghan Poppy Cultivation

Four years after the events of September 11, 2001, Canadian troops are working within the framework of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to provide security and stability to Afghanistan's new government. Operation ATHENA continues to be a success for the Canadian Forces, albeit marked at times by tragic loss, giving Afghanistan society its first real chance at peace and stability in almost 25 years. On the front lines against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, however, a new threat is emerging which could potentially undermine the excellent work accomplished thus far.

Increases in the amount of heroin produced from South West Asia poppy cultivation has caught the attention of law enforcement agencies in western Europe and North America. A recent spike in seizures related directly back to South West Asia indicates, not only the abundance of cheap heroin manufactured from poppy cultivation in the region, but equally the profits gained for criminal and terrorist networks. Afghanistan poppy crops have increasingly displaced the South East Asian poppy harvest for production of heroin and both North American and European markets. Canadian troops and law enforcement are having to focus attention on the descent of Afghanistan toward becoming a narco-state. As the harvest season ends in

the poppy fields of Afghanistan, Canadian heroin addicts continue to be supplied on the streets of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

### DRUG PROFITEERING

It is not simply the scourge of drug production in Afghanistan and the heroin abuse on streets in North America and western Europe that has prompted the attention of authorities. Equally, profits reaped from production present a dangerous development. Afghanistan has been devastated by war, civil strife and drought over the past 25 years, turning a self-sustaining agrarian economy into a starving failed state where both terrorism and narcotics trade took root. ISAF's efforts at stabiliz-

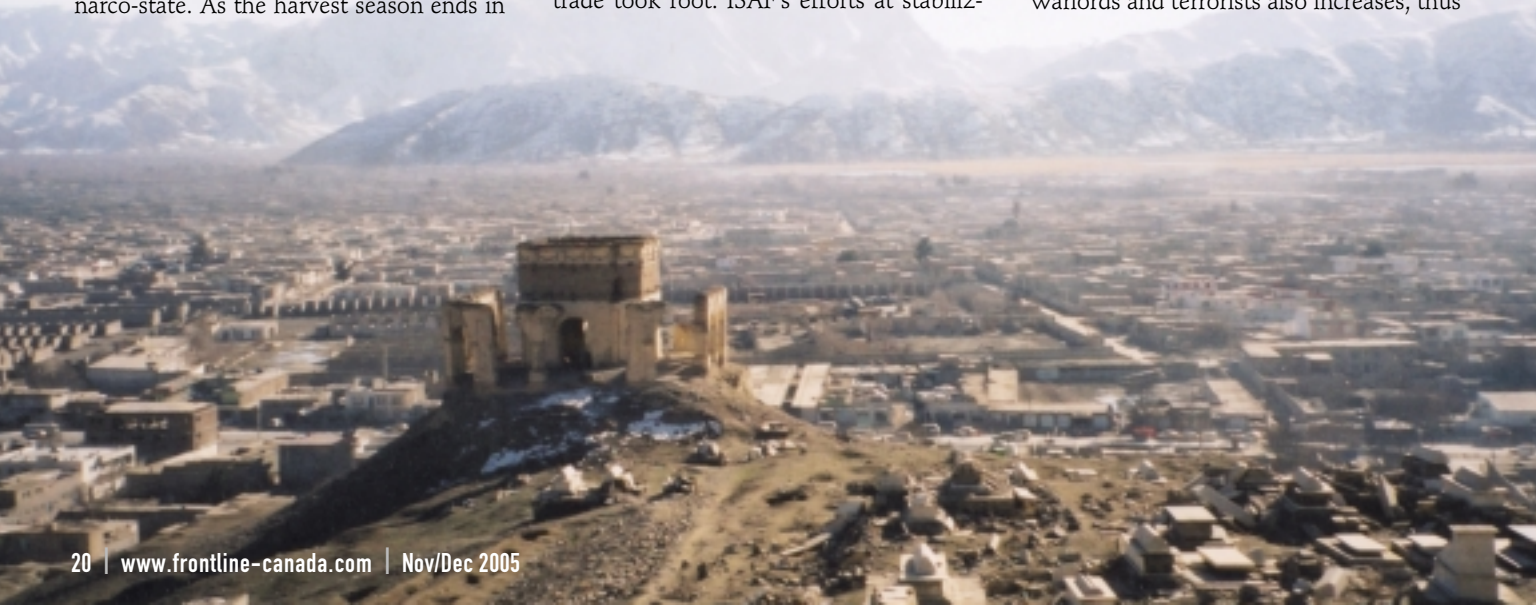
ing the country have slowly begun to reverse the terrible burden of war and drought on the Afghan people.

The Afghan poppy harvest, however, has recently been increasing, with taxes levied against the meager amounts collected by farmers as a key source of income. All sides in the Afghan civil war profit from poppy production, including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, regional warlords, corrupt government officials and organized crime networks. Under the Taliban, the production of opiate from poppies was tolerated and, at one point, production of purer forms of heroin was encouraged by Osama Bin-Laden as a further means of attacking the west.

Despite the thin veneer of theological opposition by the Taliban to drug production, including a very visible one-year ban on harvesting where stockpiled opiate was sold, the volumes of heroin flowing from South West Asia have increased. With the fall of the Taliban and their Al-Qaeda allies in 2001, the rate at which poppy crops are being grown and turned into opiate has substantially increased – creating a significant challenge to stability in the region.

In December, 2004, President Karzai declared a jihad on poppy and opiate production as an affront to Islam and a dishonor to Afghanistan. The government introduced its 2005 Counter-Narcotics implementation plan. Mirroring similar strategies by the international community and western governments (including Canada), it is based on a seven-point plan of information, alternative livelihoods, interdiction, criminal justice, eradication, institution-building, and demand reduction.

As drug profits increase, the flow of money and arms into the hands of regional warlords and terrorists also increases, thus



undermining the hard-won legitimacy and stability of the central government in Kabul. The economic strength of the poppy crop, in comparison to alternatives, combined with an unstable regional security environment, means Afghanistan will continue its descent into a narco-state.

## REGIONAL INSTABILITY

Inasmuch as poppy and opiate production is an increasing security challenge in Afghanistan, the serious threat posed by the burgeoning drug trade in the region is not solely limited to farmers, traffickers and addicts on the streets of Canada. The three major routes through which drugs flow from Afghanistan are also axes for instability in south and central Asia. The primary transportation routes are through Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and Belochistan; the Iranian border area; and the old Silk Road route in Central Asia through Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Criminal networks facilitate heroin production by using precursor chemicals which are combined with harvested opium to produce heroin for export and sale to waiting markets, and this is accompanied by violence and exploitation where the drugs are moved. In a region marked by poverty, criminal networking and drug distribution have encouraged many living in bordering areas to become addicts and couriers, who undermine central authority and law enforcement with corruption. These lawless regions are increasing unstable, as the burden on fragile infrastructures increases.

In addition to funneling money to terrorists within Afghanistan, the drug trade has also been exploited by violent separatist movements in the Punjab and Jammu-Kashmir. In summary, continued cultivation and harvest of the Afghan poppy crop will continue to promote instability both within Afghanistan's borders and among neighboring areas.

## INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

As the increasing problem has been recognized as an increasing threat, international organizations and governments have been working to develop strategies to counter the growth of the narcotics trade in Afghanistan. The most visible sign of Canada's commitment in the region is

promoting stability and central authority through the CF commitment to ISAF. As the commitment to security shifts from Kabul to the regions, Canadian troops will be on the front lines in regions where poppy cultivation is often the primary source of income. In addition to having RCMP working in Afghanistan with the United Nations, Canada has also committed over \$16 million dollars through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to help fund counter-narcotic capacity building through the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. These funds will assist in planning and rebuilding agrarian infrastructure and planning alternative livelihoods. As the problem of narcotics increasingly occupies the security agenda in Afghanistan, there will be increased calls for assistance on infrastructure and capacity building for Afghan law enforcement, justice systems and correctional services.

The US and UK governments have been expending greater amounts of money and resources to combat the problem of poppy cultivation, and Canadian law enforcement expertise is being sought to contribute resources for training the newly established counter-narcotics police. Expanding Canadian commitment in this region and tackling poppy cultivation, however, creates further complexities which could impact on the situation as a whole. Eradication of crops and interdiction of drugs requires a careful balance to avoid tipping the fragile balance of power and population in Afghanistan.

## THE STRATEGY OF CAREFUL BALANCE

Targeting crops for eradication is a controversial strategy and one which has to be administered carefully. Bearing in mind that, for many rural Afghans, poppies represent the only means of making a living, wholesale crop eradication will result in an angry, armed, and starving populace. Furthermore, it is very difficult to distinguish between those crops grown for need and those simply grown for greed. Given the powerful economics of growing poppies and producing heroin, simple encouragement to grow alternative crops is not enough. A free market economy will allow farmers to sell agricultural products if subsidized agricultural development can be carried out effectively. In

other parts of Asia, for example, alternative crops alongside drug crops allowed farmers to increase their livelihood, by narrowing the scope of the drug crop for more profitable ventures. This is a long term process, however, often taking ten years to yield results. In addition to patience on the part of the international community, the focus of drug interdiction should be on seizing opiate and heroin, rather than wholesale crop eradication.

In this respect, the west and international organizations have a role to play by increasing the capacity of the newly formed counter narcotics police. Equally, capacity building within the criminal justice system is another means of fighting the narcotics trade. Anti-corruption training and providing mentors are important contributions which the west can provide.

Additionally, criminal intelligence on production and distribution networks, along with intelligence on pre-cursor chemical movement to clandestine laboratories, are critically important to encouraging Afghan society away from narcotics production. As ISAF moves operations from Kabul to regions and provinces, the poppy harvest will be a major consideration in building security and stability throughout the country.

## CONCLUSION

As Canada's strategy towards Afghanistan continues to evolve (like other western governments and international organizations), aid, security, drug interdiction and economic development must be synchronized to achieve balance. Emphasis of one measure over others could result in further instability and threaten the fragile position of the central government. As Canadian soldiers, diplomats, aid workers and law enforcement officers are increasingly faced with the realities of poppy harvest and drug production in Afghanistan, the strategy employed on behalf of Canadians will balance the interests of security and development. ■



*Inspector Paul Richards works in the RCMP's National Security Branch in Ottawa. He recently returned from Afghanistan where he toured with Canadian Forces Public Affairs, viewing all CF units involved in Op Athena.*