

Imperato Calls It Again: Poppy Productions Surges To New Highs Despite Calls for Reform

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New York – September 4, 2007 - Last Week the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that opium-poppy cultivation in Afghanistan increased "dramatically" in 2007.

The annual survey estimates the increase in production of opium as more than one-third, confirming Afghanistan as the major world problem in narcotics terms.

"The really bad news is that we have an increase in the number of hectares [sown with opium poppy], we have a 17 percent increase in terms of hectares in Afghanistan, and what is perhaps even more worrying for other countries is the increase in terms of tons -- we have a 34 percent increase in opium [production] in Afghanistan," UNODC researcher Tomas Pietschmann told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service.

The director of UNODC, Antonio Maria Costa, says the southern Afghan province of Helmand is becoming the world's largest drug supplier, with production bigger than that of entire countries, including Colombia.

Speaking in Kabul, Costa said the high growth in opium production represents a "failure" for all concerned.

"I am afraid the situation of today is a demonstration of failures by everybody," Costa said. "It is a failure on the part of the [Afghan] national administration in many respects. It is a failure on the part of foreign troops, who control the situation to increase security in the south."

Costa said the presence of the Taliban creates the right conditions for the drug trade to flourish.

"We have clearly identified the link between drug trafficking -- in general, the drug processing and the drug economy in the south -- and the behavior and the presence of insurgents," Costa said.

The writ of the Afghan government in Kabul hardly extends to the south, and what authority it has is undermined by corruption among officials and police, many of whom are complicit in the poppy growing.

Donor countries have spent millions of dollars in an attempt to dissuade farmers voluntarily from growing the poppy.

However, this shocking report was not a surprise to many including the man who has been calling for poppy eradication for the past two years, 2008 US Independent Libertarian Presidential Candidate, Daniel Imperato.

In Imperato's January 2006 release, he pointed to Bin Laden for the reemergence of poppy and commented, "Once again that the greatest threat is for al-Qaeda to regain its financial strength which is directly related to Uncle Poppy. I have addressed this situation in the past and I call on the United States and its people to demand immediate action pertaining to the war chest of Osama Bin Laden's poppy fields."

"The Taliban is the same government that supported Osama Bin Laden for many years. Now they are helping him rebuild back his strength by rebuilding the poppy plant that the Coalition forces destroyed. America should have stayed in Afghanistan long enough to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban and Bin Laden followers. But instead we went off to Iraq, because we knew we could not find Bin Laden, and we needed a decoy, a \$400 billion decoy," stated Imperato.

"Afghanistan was supposed to be our example. It was supposed to prove to the world that democracy can prevail over an authoritarian regime like the Taliban. Now we have created a state that produces 92% of the world's opium supply because we

didn't finish the job. We have spent billions of dollars in Afghanistan, along with the millions poured in by other nations and private donors. Where's the accountability? Did we properly train the Afghan law enforcement agencies? Did we identify the major growing regions and plan covert operations to destroy their crop? The answer to these questions is no, and now we have an Afghanistan that is ill prepared to deal with the power of 35% of its GDP, the poppy."

The United States had sought sterner methods, namely spraying of crops to destroy them totally. But that idea was quietly shelved because of objections from the government of President Hamid Karzai, which feared the farmers would then side with the Taliban.

Imperato stated, "When we first went into Afghanistan, we had control over the country and had successfully eliminated the Taliban from control. When we left, and let the poppy crops return to prominence we allowed the Taliban to come back better than ever. With the strength of the Taliban at this point, it may be too late to successfully diminish their power in the region."

Members of the international community have asserted that because of the strength of the poppy crop, Taliban insurgency would rise in Afghanistan. They have insisted that crop elimination be part of a broader plan of economic rejuvenation.

To that point, Imperato stated the following, "I agree, there must be economic development in Afghanistan. We must encourage investment and small business ownership. But if we wait any longer to destroy the poppy crop, we will have a situation in Afghanistan that is far worse than the Taliban was before 9/11."

Excerpts from this release are taken from "UN Report Shows Afghan Opium Production at Record Level", RFE/RL: August 27, 2007. (www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/08/4250228f-b058-4901-...)

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