

# Pakistan tackles impact of Aghan opium trade

Around a quarter of Afghanistan's opium production is shipped through Pakistan. While Islamabad has achieved some success in terms of drug interdiction and seizures, the trade is fostering criminality in Pakistan and feeding problems of drug addiction and the prevalence of HIV. Peter Chalk and C Christine Fair report.

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This article was first available online on 14 February 2005.

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According to United Nations surveys and supplemental data from the US Department of State and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2004 is likely to emerge as a record year in terms of Afghan drugs production, with farmers expected to have provided a base crop capable of yielding between 5,400 and 7,200 tonnes of opium. This would represent an increase in production of at least 47 per cent and possibly as much as 96 per cent on the previous high of 3,656 tonnes set in 1999 (see table one).

Several factors have contributed to the rapid increase. These include the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 (Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar had placed a ban on poppy cultivation in 2000); the US's alleged willingness to tolerate drug production during and immediately after Operation 'Enduring Freedom' for wider geo-strategic purposes relating to the campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda; the Afghan peasantry's overwhelming dependence on opium farming to access land, labour and credit; and the inability of the transitional (and now elected) Karzai government to exercise concerted control over major crop-growing regions in the country's Nangarhar, Helmand, Kandahar and Oruzgan provinces.

This soaring production of opium in Afghanistan carries particular significance for Pakistan. Western narcotics officials believe that on average, at least a quarter of the unrefined, refined and morphine-based opiates produced in Afghanistan pass through the country, which acts as a central



◆ More than one tonne of ephedrine, a raw material for the production of synthetic narcotics, was seized by Greek police from containers that originated in Pakistan.

conduit to both Turkey and Iran, the main hubs for the movement of narcotics to the European market. Overall, volumes have steadily increased since 2001, in line with the rapid expansion of the Afghan drug trade. A record 34 tonnes of heroin were seized in 2003 (see table two). Although preliminary data for 2004 shows a slight decline in total seizures, they remain substantial, amounting to at least 20 tonnes.

## Strategic transit route

The primary transit route through Pakistan runs via Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), where the writ of the Islamabad government is weak, and exits by means of ports on the Makran coast, international airports located in the country's major cities or overland into Iran. Available evidence suggests that illicit drugs

are now being split into smaller but more numerous consignments, which are easier to smuggle and less prone to single, large-scale seizures. Known as the scatter-gun approach, it typically involves smuggling opiate packages of between 20 kg and 50 kg, as opposed to the 100 kg shipments of several years ago. Traffickers based in Quetta and Karachi organise most of these movements, co-ordinating their activities with sub-contractors and brokers in Turkey and Iran.

The bulk of the narcotics trafficked through Pakistan is sent to Europe, reflecting the high mark-up values for heroin sales that can be secured on the streets of London, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and Rome. Remaining stocks are either couriered to secondary markets in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, or remain in the country for indigenous consumption.

Pakistan's role as an important transit

point for heroin is attributable to its geo-strategic location, contiguous to Afghanistan, and the extremely porous nature of this border – something that has also fed into more generalised commodity smuggling between the two countries. In addition, weak legal and regulatory financial systems have led to an environment that is highly conducive to organised illicit activities. For example, it enables crime syndicates to bypass official arrest and prosecution procedures, as well as corrupt the very highest levels of political and judicial power. It also facilitates the laundering of heroin profits transmitted via the official banking structure and permits the rapid and covert movement of funds through the informal hawala network. Although this latter system was restricted following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US, it remains the preferred means of transferring money among Pakistanis on account of its cheapness, convenience and efficiency.

At the moment, virtually no opium is produced or processed on Pakistani soil. A slight resurgence of poppy growth was recorded between 2003 and 2004 – 6,703 hectares (ha) and 6,694 ha respectively – but the bulk of this crop (70 to 80 per cent) has since been eradicated. In addition, officials with Islamabad's Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) remain confident that, as yet, there are no opiate refining or processing centres in the country. They do concede, however, that this positive state of affairs could change as a result of the increasing flow of narcotics passing through the NWFP and Baluchistan. The main fear is that this could work to engender a mindset among the two provinces' local populations of drugs being a source of 'easy money' – a state of affairs that is, arguably, borne out by the increased cultivation seen in 2003 and 2004.

A further problem expressed by ANF sources is that directed US and UK-backed counternarcotic missions in southern Afghanistan could well drive refiners across the Pakistani border. They also point out that the resumption of land and air links with India may, inadvertently, facilitate the illegal importation of precursor chemicals used in the opiate manufacturing process.

### Impact on Pakistani security

The opium trade has had a marked effect on Pakistan's internal security and social stability. In terms of public health, it has contributed to a growing drug addiction problem. According to a domestic survey undertaken in 2004, there are between 3.5 million and five million habitual (as opposed to recreational) drug takers in the country. At least 500,000 of these are hardened



◆ Geoff Hoon, UK Secretary of Defence, stands before a bonfire of confiscated drugs during a ceremony organised by Pakistan's Anti-Narcotics Force in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in October 2004.

heroin abusers. The overall prevalence, expressed in terms of the whole population, is roughly a third of one per cent – a ratio that is among the most severe anywhere in the world. It is estimated that, in general, 60 per cent of Pakistanis have been affected in some way by the drug trade, either directly

or as a result of the wider debilitating social effects it has on extended family relationships. Patterns suggest that opiate abuse accounts for a growing proportion of this population base, possibly as much as seven per cent a year, as more and more people switch from hashish, 'charas' and

**Table 1: Afghan opium statistics 1994-2003**

| YEAR | POTENTIAL HARVEST<br>(ha) | CULTIVATION<br>(ha) | POTENTIAL YIELD<br>(tonnes) |
|------|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2003 | 61,000                    | 61,000              | 2,565                       |
| 2002 | 30,750                    | 30,750              | 1,278                       |
| 2001 | 1,685                     | 1,685               | 74                          |
| 2000 | 64,510                    | 64,510              | 3,656                       |
| 1999 | 51,500                    | 51,500              | 2,861                       |
| 1998 | 41,720                    | 41,720              | 2,340                       |
| 1997 | 39,150                    | 39,150              | 2,184                       |
| 1996 | 37,950                    | 37,950              | 2,099                       |
| 1995 | 38,740                    | 38,740              | 1,250                       |
| 1994 | 29,180                    | 29,180              | 950                         |

Source: Office of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Afghanistan, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2003* (Washington D.C.: US Department of State, March 2004). Potential production estimates for 1996 to 1999 have been revised upwards from previous International Narcotics Control strategy reports, reflecting improved methodologies for estimating opium yields.

other traditional narcotic substances.

These figures are particularly alarming when one considers that Pakistan has the capacity to treat only around 7,600 drug users a year – a fraction of the republic's current addict population. On the basis of current trends, this mismatch in rehabilitation resources will increase, leaving Islamabad exposed to a disquieting pull-push dynamic that will result in growing volumes of opiates being dumped on to the country's streets.

Apart from addiction, intravenous heroin use has helped foster the spread of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the causative agent for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Officials with the National AIDS Control Program (NACP) reported in 2004 that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among drug addicts had increased to 7.6 per cent from 0.4 per cent the previous year, and was expected to rise significantly over the next few years in line with increased Afghan opiate production. The NACP revealed that 12 per cent of the country's addicts currently inject heroin – or other poly-drug cocktails – and that needle-sharing in so-called "shooting galleries" is common and increasing, especially in Lahore and Karachi.

The latter findings largely endorsed the results of two earlier baseline studies undertaken by the United Nations, which showed a rapidly rising trend of multiple intravenous drug abuse during the 1990s. International health experts have begun to pay greater attention to the worsening drug-disease nexus in the republic, warning that a run-away AIDS problem may be looming as a direct result of the growing trend of freebasing with dirty needles. Indeed, delegates at an AIDS conference in Islamabad in January 2005 specifically agreed that Pakistan now constituted a high – as opposed to a potentially high – HIV epidemic country.

The opium trade has also contributed to growing social instability, fuelling high rates of drug-related crime from both users struggling to finance their habit and traffickers and distributors striving to gain control of a greater share of the narcotics market. As highlighted in table two, law enforcement officials arrested 46,346 individuals on drug-related charges during 2003 – a 77 per cent increase on the total for 2000 (figures for 2001 and 2002 are not available). Problems have been especially serious in cities such as Karachi and Quetta, where heroin distribution gangs routinely clash as they compete for lucrative sales turfs.

Economically, the costs associated with controlling opium imports have further

◆ A Pakistani drug addict smokes heroin in Multan in June 2004. According to authorities, the number of drug addicts, especially those using syringes, is increasing in Pakistan.



weakened an already fragile fiscal base, forcing the diversion of scarce resources to counternarcotic efforts. The costs of internal drug prevention and reduction initiatives planned over the next three years are expected to exceed half a billion dollars. This represents a considerable burden for a country whose gross domestic product in 2003 amounted to only US\$295.3 billion and where unemployment runs to around eight per cent of the entire population. This is considerably higher if measured in terms of under-employment.

Finally, money from illicit heroin sales has contributed to political instability by encouraging corruption in the official government sector. According to a 2004 report by Transparency International (TI), law enforcement personnel and members of the judiciary are among the most corrupt elements of the Pakistani establishment. Police and judges have been repeatedly singled out for their willingness to establish

mutually beneficial working relationships with drug dealers (as well as other criminal syndicates) to offset inadequate pay, insufficient pension and public service provision and the growing demands of families that have traditionally been large but are now becoming increasingly nuclearised.

### The Anti-Narcotics Force

The ANF is at the forefront of Pakistan's anti-narcotic efforts. Set up in 1995, the unit currently consists of 1,607 soldiers scattered across the country's four provincial regions. Air and ground mobility is provided by two MI 17 helicopters (two more have been ordered from the US) and a fleet of 4x4 rough-terrain vehicles.

Despite its small size and inventory, the ANF has recorded important accomplishments, particularly over the last five years. It has not only been instrumental in retaining Pakistan's poppy-free status, first declared in

2001, but has also achieved a notable track record in drug interdiction. In 2003, Pakistan ranked as the world's number one state in terms of narcotics seizures. Conviction rates currently stand at 88 per cent and the amount of money frozen from drug traffickers' accounts between 1995 and 2004 is roughly \$65 million.

However, the ANF is both under-staffed and under-resourced. It is some 300 personnel below its authorised strength of 1,900; air mobility is largely devoid of assets capable of providing rapid, time-sensitive deployment; and there are no surveillance aircraft or "quick-scamble" scout helicopters available to it on a dedicated basis. This is a major gap, given the human intelligence resources of drug lords, who are frequently able to provide early notice of pending raids. Furthermore, the ANF is currently unable to intercept satellite transmissions and lacks a secure tactical communications network for talking to other important operational partners in Pakistan, such as the Frontier Corps.

A number of factors account for these difficulties. First, attracting and retaining recruits has proven problematic due to poor pay. An ANF soldier receives a monthly salary that is roughly half of that paid to a highway trooper. Another factor is the rigors of the job. Nearly half of the 338 people recruited to the force over the last three years have left.

This situation has been compounded by the overriding focus on counterterrorism, particularly during 2004 when the Pakistani military launched its drive into South Waziristan to round up jihadists said to have been associated with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. This emphasis on tribal counterterrorist operations - which has mainly resulted in the capture or elimination of lower-ranking Central Asian commanders, a few Chinese Uighurs and some Afghan Arabs - has sidelined the importance given to the national drug mission, diverting resources originally intended for the ANF to other Ministry of Interior bodies such as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA).

Notable in this regard are the five Huey II helicopters and three fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft that were supplied to head up the MI's newly created air wing. These aircraft, which were initially scheduled for drug surveillance and interdiction, have systematically been re-tasked over the last 12 months to assist with insurgency sweeps in the semi-autonomous tribal agencies of the Northwest Frontier Province.

Beyond these considerations, Pakistan has had to compete with Afghanistan for US counternarcotics assistance. Although the US provided Islamabad with support of around

**Table 2: Opiate seizures and drug-related arrests in Pakistan 1996-2003**

| YEAR | OPIUM (tonnes) | HEROIN (tonnes) | ARRESTS |
|------|----------------|-----------------|---------|
| 2003 | 5.4            | 34              | 46,346  |
| 2002 | 2.4            | 8.9             | n/a     |
| 2001 | 5.2            | 6.0             | n/a     |
| 2000 | 7.84           | 7.41            | 35,969  |
| 1999 | 16.32          | 4.98            | 45,175  |
| 1998 | 5.02           | 3.33            | 37,745  |
| 1997 | 8.54           | 5.07            | 50,565  |
| 1996 | 8.08           | 4.05            | 51,119  |

Source: Adapted from the Office of Narcotics and International Law Enforcement Affairs, Pakistan, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2003.

\$31 million in 2004, the bulk of Washington's investment in terms of South Asian drug and law enforcement is currently being directed at building the nascent capacities of Afghan agencies. A total of \$780 million has already been earmarked for this purpose, with the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Directorate (CND) and Counter-Narcotics Police Agency (CNPA) expected to be the major recipients of the allocated funds.

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A combination of national and international attention is required to meet these challenges. Nationally, moves need to be made to increase the size of the ANF, at least to its authorised strength and, preferably, to 3,100 staff. Overhauling existing pay scales to make them commensurate with the demands of the job and equitable to those offered to other members of the law enforcement community would be an especially useful measure for the government to take up. In addition, protocols should be developed to govern the use of aircraft in the Ministry of Interior's air wing, particularly in terms of ensuring that the ANF has regularised access to these assets.

On the international front, the US, together with other interested parties in Europe and North America - such as Britain, France, Germany, Canada and the EU - need to make certain sufficient funds are made available to the ANF and that these

resources are channelled in the right direction. Senior ANF officials have identified priority areas where the global community could play an especially beneficial role. These include expanding aerial mobility and enhancing aviation surveillance through the provision of scout helicopters; increasing heli-lift capabilities; augmenting technological options for intercepting GSM, mobile, wireless and triangular telephonic transmissions and ensuring secure tactical communications between the ANF and its operational partners; developing more concerted human intelligence skills, especially in terms of spotting and running informers; and helping to maintain an effective fleet of all-terrain ground vehicles.

Ensuring that the ANF is able to fulfil its mandated functions effectively is critical given Pakistan's central importance as a transit and containment state for Afghan heroin. While the central government in Islamabad must take a certain degree of responsibility for underwriting the ANF's future operational effectiveness, it is imperative that the international community also steps up to the breach in terms of the ANF's undoubted resource and equipment needs.

As one senior ANF official remarked: "The government of Pakistan simply does not have the purse strings to [systematically] support the ANF.

"Whenever international support has dropped off, the effectiveness of the [unit] has declined commensurately. Now is simply not the time to risk [such an outcome] given the major surge of opium that is presently coming out of Afghanistan." ●

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