

Opium Poppy Eradication in Afghanistan: An Ill-Conceived Threat to Development

Jorrit Kamminga, MA

The Senlis Council

Introduction

Opium poppy cultivation is ubiquitous throughout Afghanistan, cultivated in each of its provinces. According to the most recent figures published by the UNODC, it accounts for an estimated 52 percent of the country's GDP. The opium trade constitutes the lion's share (80 to 90 percent) of Afghanistan's massive black-market economy, an economy whose total annual opium exports are estimated at US\$2.7 billion.¹ An estimated 2 million Afghans are also indirectly or directly dependent on opium cultivation for their every-day needs.²

Although in 2005 the UNODC found that the area of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan decreased by approximately 21 percent from 2004,³ it also found that potential opium production decreased by a mere two percent owing to favourable weather conditions and an excellent harvest in 2005. Afghanistan therefore remained the world's largest supplier of opium, producing 87 percent of the global supply.⁴

Afghan farmers illegally grow opium poppy because of its “*double comparative advantage*”. First, there is its comparative advantage vis-à-vis other crops; opium poppy can be grown almost everywhere in Afghanistan and is a relatively low-weight/high-value product that is easy to transport and has a guaranteed market. Opium is non-perishable, and so farmers can stock hold this crop for many years. The second comparative advantage is related to Afghanistan's unique political and environmental conditions. A weak security environment, weak government

¹ UNODC, Afghanistan Opium Survey (Vienna 2005), iii.

² Ibid., 1. Given the fact that the illegal opium economy has a huge influence on the general economy of Afghanistan, the author's assumption is that many more Afghans are indirectly dependent on the overall opium economy.

³ Afghanistan Opium Survey, 3.

⁴ Afghanistan Opium Survey, 5.

institutions and a lack of rule of law make Afghanistan an ideal place to grow a crop that is both hardy and highly profitable.⁵

The opium crisis is the key threat to further stabilisation, reconstruction and economic and social development in Afghanistan. The new national Parliament of Afghanistan was inaugurated in December 2005, and is faced with a grave dilemma. On the one hand, President Hamid Karzai's government is trying to rid the country of illegal poppy cultivation while simultaneously decreasing Afghanistan's economic dependence on the illegal opium industry. On the other hand, many farmers, field labourers and their families are wholly dependent on the illicit cultivation and production for their daily survival.⁶ At present, there are few if any alternative livelihood options available that would grant farmers and labourers economically sustainable opportunities and hence incentives to move away from the illicit trade. Most alternative development strategies which centre on crop substitution are, by their nature, medium to long-term interventions, requiring between five to ten years before becoming sustainable. They also demand a broad-based, multi-sectoral effort over a number of years, a commitment that is difficult for aid donors to maintain.⁷ Moreover, they are dependent on a secure environment having been laid, a key element of which is an increase in the central government's effective control over its territory.

This paper will address one of the key counter-narcotic strategies currently invoked in Afghanistan: the eradication of opium poppy cultivation by the government or by farmers themselves. It will be argued that eradication should never be undertaken unless and until economically viable alternative livelihoods have been secured. This view is consistent with that of the World Bank, which observes that:

“[a]brupt shrinkage of the opium economy or falling opium prices without new means of livelihood would significantly worsen rural poverty.”⁸

This paper will also argue that aerial chemical spraying of poppy crops should be avoided at all costs. The negative effects of aerial spraying on human health, livestock, the environment, as well as on the relationship between farming communities and the government would be a grave

⁵ The World Bank, Afghanistan – State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty (Washington 2005), 113.

⁶ Jorrit Kamminga, “Agricultural aspects of Afghanistan's opium economy” in: D. Spivack (ed), Feasibility Study on Opium Licensing in Afghanistan for the Production of Morphine and Other Essential Medicines (Kabul 2005), 251.

⁷ AREU, “The Opium Economy and Livelihoods”, Daily Outlook Afghanistan (8 December 2005).

⁸ Afghanistan – State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty, 119.

setback to Afghanistan's nascent economy and government. Lastly, the paper calls on the newly-installed Parliament to introduce a law preventing the Afghan government and international community from initiating eradication and especially aerial spraying campaigns upon Afghanistan and its people. It argues that Afghanistan would suffer disproportionately if aerial spraying campaigns were imposed on impoverished rural communities that still depend fully on poppy cultivation for their survival.

1. Eradication: An assessment

Crop eradication is a strategy with four sequential main objectives which lead, in theory, to a reduction of the supply of illegal drugs and consequently of illegal drug demand. Eradication aims to:

1. Decrease the total amount of cultivated opium poppy;
2. Increase the price of raw opium as a result of reduced cultivation combined with an increased risk for farmers who grow illegal crops;⁹
3. Drive up retail prices for opium derivatives such as heroin, as a direct consequence of the lower availability of opium on the market;
4. Decrease illegal drug consumption as a result of less availability and higher prices for drug users.

Eradication can take place in one of two ways: (1) voluntarily – by farmers themselves, or (2) forcibly – by law enforcement officials. Voluntary eradication usually involves offering farmers incentives such as subsidies, technical assistance or agricultural inputs (i.e. seeds and fertiliser), in order to persuade them to stop growing opium poppy and shift instead to legal alternatives. Even without these incentives, there is evidence of Afghan opium farmers having ceased cultivating poppy if they can be motivated to do so through religious or moral entreaties.¹⁰

In contrast, forced eradication refers to the destruction of opium poppy cultivation by police, counter narcotics teams or local government officials. This is a more problematic approach to the drug problem as it can escalate repression and social tension, as well as blur distinctions

⁹ It is not clear whether a higher farm-gate price is a real objective of eradication efforts or rather a negative side-effect. Higher prices paid to farmers create strong incentives for farmers to continue cultivating opium poppy and attract newcomers to the industry.

¹⁰ A government could, for example, declare opium poppy cultivation against the country's norms, moral behaviour or the state's religion.

between development and repression. In turn, this can create a widening of the gap between local government and farmers' communities, hindering the establishment of the rule of law.

Eradication has three main weaknesses. First, without sustainable and competitive alternatives already in place, eradication is not a feasible economic solution for those reliant on opium cultivation. Second, eradication tends to drive up farm-gate prices, which in turn creates strong incentives for farmers to continue cultivating opium poppy whilst also attracting newcomers to the industry. Third, the (short-term) success of eradication in terms of its ability to decrease quantities of opium cultivated, depends heavily on local government and other local power structures. Yet, in Afghanistan these power structures either have no real interest in eradication because of indirect or direct linkages with the illegal opium economy, or because they lack the requisite credibility, influence and control to effectively influence farmers' communities and farmers' behaviour.

Three key factors make it extremely difficult to judge the effects of eradication in the medium and longer term, even following government claims that eradication efforts have yielded short term results:

1. Yearly changes in the average yield of opium poppy per hectare;
2. "The balloon effect" – the displacement of cultivation and production to other regions and countries;
3. Opium stockholding, which causes a time lag between implementation of eradication programmes and concrete results in terms of reduced availability.

Claimed short-term reductions in cultivation can thus easily be masked by unforeseen factors. This underscores the need for a comprehensive assessment of all conditions in place before any eradication campaign is started.

2. Eradication in Afghanistan

Eradication of opium poppy in Afghanistan ostensibly began in the early 1990s, although more concerted eradication interventions commenced in 2000. In that same year, the Taliban enforced a ban on opium production, which led to an enormous decrease in both poppy cultivation and opium production in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan.¹¹ Poor indebted farmers suffered

¹¹ ODCCP, Global Illicit Drug Trends (New York 2002), 6.

extensively from the ban, as they had no credit, stocks or alternatives to fall back on. However, the near-total eradication of poppy cultivation was short-lived. The following year saw the September 11th attacks, which in turn provoked a US-led war that toppled the Taliban regime.

Following the removal of the Taliban, the interim government imposed a similar ban on cultivation, production, abuse and trafficking of drugs, and embarked in 2002 on an eradication campaign carried out on 17,500 hectares of opium poppy.¹² This eradication policy was largely based upon compensation agreements. The UK and Afghan government offered farmers between US\$ 250 and US\$ 350 for each acre (0.40 hectares) of poppy eradicated, but were faced with social protest and difficulties in satisfying the demands of the farmers' communities.¹³ Moreover, eradication policies mainly targeted the poorer and more vulnerable poppy farmers and failed to tackle cultivation by resource-rich and influential farmers.¹⁴ Overall cultivation increased to 74,000 hectares compared to 8,000 under the Taliban.¹⁵ In 2003, it was claimed that more than 21,000 hectares of poppy were eradicated. However, in the same period total cultivation actually increased by 8 percent to 80,000 hectares.¹⁶ The 2004 eradication campaign again attempted to cut opium poppy cultivation by 25,000 hectares but failed utterly; the total area under cultivation increased to a post-Taliban high of 131,000 hectares.¹⁷

The US and the UK actively support eradication. For the year 2005, Washington initially allocated funds for eradication totalling more than twice the amount earmarked for alternative livelihood creation (US\$ 313 million compared to US\$ 120 million).¹⁸ The total amount the US planned to spend on counter narcotics operations in Afghanistan in 2005 amounted to US\$ 774 million, which suggests that an astonishing 40 percent of the total budget is set aside for eradication.¹⁹

The Afghan 1384 (2005) Counter Narcotics Implementation Plan stipulates that there would be a *“credible, targeted and verified eradication campaign in 1383-84 (2004-2005) led by the new*

¹² Afghanistan – State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty, 121, 122.

¹³ Barnett R. Rubin, *Road to Ruin: Afghanistan's Booming Opium Industry* (New York 2004), 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Afghanistan Opium Survey, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Claudio Franco, “Afghanistan's anti-poppy drive off to shaky start”, *Eurasia Insight* (6 March 2004)

¹⁸ Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, *Afghanistan 2005 and Beyond. Prospects for Improved Stability Reference Document* (The Hague 2005), 64.

¹⁹ “U.S. drops Afghanistan opium spraying plans. Karzai: Aerial spraying of heroin component may harm villagers”, *The Associated Press* (25 January 2005).

*Afghan government.*²⁰ President Karzai's interim government launched its first eradication campaign in April 2002 after banning opium production in January 2002. The initial focus was on offering poppy farmers compensation for abandoning poppy cultivation, but this strategy was soon withdrawn in the face of negative and counterproductive results.²¹ Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) commented on the initial failure of eradication policy in Afghanistan by stating that eradication of poppy needed to reach a threshold of credibility in order to be effective.²²

UNODC data shows that total production (both in metric tons and in total amount of hectares under cultivation) increased substantially from 2003 to 2004 and only started to decrease from 2004 to 2005.²³ However, even the 21 percent decrease in opium poppy cultivation witnessed in 2005 cannot be fully attributed to the success of eradication; with only 5,100 hectares eradicated that year and with an overall decrease of 27,000, 81 percent of the fall in poppy cultivation is attributable to other factors.²⁴ Moreover, UNODC estimates that 72 percent of eradication took place in the provinces of Nangarhar (eastern Afghanistan) and Helmand (south), which means that these eradication efforts were not only small in size, but geographically quite concentrated.

Eradication campaigns in Afghanistan are run by a special-purpose Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). Most eradication efforts are led by provincial governors or district leaders. UNODC aided the Ministry of Afghan Counter Narcotics (MCN) in 2005 to implement a survey to verify the results of its opium poppy eradication programme.²⁵ The UN Office does not, however, play any direct role in eradication efforts in the country. Its Country Director for Afghanistan, Ms. Doris Buddenberg, claimed in an interview that:

“Eradication usually does not bring about a sustainable reduction of poppy crop, it is a one-time short-term effort. Also eradication usually pushes the prices up. As we have seen from the Taliban period, the one-year ban on opium

²⁰ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 1384 (2005) Counter Narcotics Implementation Plan. See the website of the Canadian Embassy in Afghanistan:

http://www.afghanistanembassy.ca/en/counter_narcotics/indez.php.

²¹ Jorrit Kamminga, “Agricultural aspects of Afghanistan’s opium economy”, 259.

²² IRIN, Bitter-Sweet Harvest: Afghanistan’s New War. Poppy Eradication: The issues, the players and the strategies. <http://irinnews.org/webspecials/Opium/erapop.asp>.

²³ UNODC, The Opium Situation in Afghanistan (29 August 2005), 2, 3.

²⁴ Jorrit Kamminga, “Agricultural aspects of Afghanistan’s opium economy”, 260.

²⁵ This so-called “Support to the Verification Process of Opium Poppy Eradication” verified the eradication of around 4,000 hectares of opium poppy in 2005.

poppy cultivation increased prices enormously the following year and it became extremely attractive for farmers to cultivate poppy.”²⁶

As mentioned above, in the 2004/2005 growing season, it is claimed that a total of 5,100 hectares were eradicated. This represents around five percent of the total area under poppy cultivation in 2005.²⁷ Eradication was manual and delivered both forcibly and voluntarily.

The UK is the coordinator of the drug policy dossier on behalf of the international community, and continues to assist the Afghan government in building the capacity to eradicate 20,000 hectares (or 15 percent of total poppy cultivation per annum) despite equivocal international support.²⁸ The ultimate goal is to decrease total opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan to 10,000 hectares by 2013.

3. The impact of opium poppy eradication in Afghanistan

3.1 Social tension

Given the degree of economic dependence on opium by farmers and farming communities, eradication will in the short-term destroy many livelihoods and incomes in rural areas. It is beyond doubt that the economies of many rural communities hinge on poppy cultivation. Eradication forces these communities to place the foundations of their survival economy at risk, creating a major source of social tension. In Afghanistan, that has been borne in fierce protests in past years. In the Maiwand district (southern province of Kandahar), eradication campaigns were suspended after clashes between farmers and the Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF).²⁹ The protesters blocked the main road between Kandahar and Herat and dozens of villagers reportedly threw stones and fired shots at the Eradication Force. In the district of Kama (southern province of Nangarhar), 3,000 farmers took to the streets to demonstrate against the destruction of their livelihoods.³⁰

²⁶ Interview with IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks), part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (30 November 2004).

²⁷ Afghanistan Opium Survey, 9.

²⁸ UK government, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Country dossier Afghanistan. Chapter “Counter Narcotics” (2005).

²⁹ IRIN, Afghanistan: Protest against opium eradication (14 April 2005).[online] Available at: <http://irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=46645&SelectRegion=Asia&Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN>.

³⁰ Claudio Franco, “Afghanistan’s anti-poppy drive off to shaky start”, Eurasia Insight (6 March 2004)

In general, many opium farmers claim that despite initiating eradication programmes, the Afghan government has not delivered on its promise to provide assistance, compensation and alternative livelihoods.³¹ Without this assistance, farmers cannot reasonably be expected to escape from the vicious cycle of ever-increasing indebtedness to individuals and organisations operating in the opium trade.

At the other end of the spectrum are provincial governors, district and village chiefs and local police officers who are under extreme pressure from the central government to come up with quick-fix solutions and to eradicate large amounts of hectares, either by force or by motivating farmers to voluntarily abandon poppy cultivation. In general, resource-poor farmers with small plots of land have been the targets of these programmes. Local leaders have shown themselves to be far more willing to eradicate crops belonging to small, powerless farmers rather than those belonging to powerful and wealthy farmers and landowners.

In this environment, farmers are left with no alternative but to fight to defend their livelihood and (often) sole source of income. In response to opposition, local leaders tend to overstate the amount of hectares eradicated in their reporting or alternately do everything in their power to destroy poppy fields or force farmers to eradicate their own crops. These frictions serve to worsen rural poverty as well as to widen the gap between local communities and local and central government. This, in turn, undermines the establishment of the rule of law and thus any real prospects of long-term rural economic development.

Ironically, local commanders, insurgent groups and remnants of the Taliban movement could easily benefit from a post-eradication environment and even adapt their strategies to suit the new situation. It should be remembered that the Taliban movement arose in Afghanistan because of generalised instability, the lack of an effective central government and dire economic circumstances.³²

3.2 The self-fulfilling prophecy of eradication: Higher prices and higher profits for traffickers

The mere announcement of future eradication campaigns can impact the behaviour of actors involved in the Afghan opium economy. The expectation of a smaller harvest will, in turn,

³¹ Protest against opium eradication (14 April 2005).

³² Graham Farrell and John Thorne, "Where have all the flowers gone?: evaluation of the Taliban crackdown against opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, *The International Journal of Drug Policy* 16 (2005) 81-91.

generate the expectation that opium prices and expected farm-gate prices will rise. Resource-rich farmers, traders, shop-keepers and traffickers then store opium stocks and wait for the peak moment in time in which to sell it. The effect of this is twofold. First, it decreases the effectiveness of the eradication strategy in terms of decreasing future availability of opium. Second, it causes a net transfer of income from opium growers to drug traffickers who are able to profit from the increased value of opium stocks.³³ Poor farmers, on the other hand, will only benefit from the inflated farm-gate price if eradication campaigns are announced but not implemented, leaving them to harvest the normal amount of opium.

3.3 Shifting opium cultivation

A further unintended consequence of eradication is often described as the “*balloon effect*”, involving the displacement of illegal production to more remote areas, where it is more difficult to extirpate. This presents a clear danger in Afghanistan, where only three percent of the country’s irrigated land is used for opium cultivation and much of the country is suited to opium poppy cultivation.³⁴ Furthermore, large numbers of itinerant land labourers and harvesters can easily be mobilised.³⁵

The “*balloon effect*” and other unintended consequences of eradication efforts preclude the sustainable success of eradication as a supply reduction tool. Successful eradication requires a nationwide, comprehensive eradication programme, carried out for a significant number of years. It also necessitates increased control of the central government over the main opium-growing areas of Afghanistan. Given Afghanistan’s rugged terrain, poor infrastructure, limited resources and current political realities, such an operation would be extremely difficult to realise. Moreover, even if a comprehensive, long-term eradication programme could indeed be implemented, the ongoing success of such a programme would depend on parallel stability, economic growth and job creation, over a number of years. As noted at a recent meeting of experts on Afghanistan’s opium economy, aerial spraying is not only an inappropriate response, it is not even technically feasible in Afghanistan.³⁶

³³ Barnett Rubin in: Sonni Efron, “U.S. Backs Away From Afghan Aerial Spraying”, LA Times (23 January 2005).

³⁴ UNDCP, Afghanistan. Strategic Study #4. Access to Labour: The Role of Opium in the Livelihood Strategies of Itinerant Harvesters Working in Helmand Province, Afghanistan (Islamabad 1999), 26,27

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Discussion at the Century Foundation and Friedrich Ebert Foundation Roundtable Lunch “Afghanistan at a Crossroads” 7 December, 2005, New York.

3.4 Eradication as an impediment to Afghanistan's reconstruction

One of the common elements of the abovementioned problems associated with crop eradication is that they instil uncertainty and instability in farming communities. The reconstruction effort in Afghanistan relies to a large extent on the twin pillars of rural development and security. Since the opium crisis lies at the heart of this reconstruction nexus, eradication of the farmer's sole livelihood raises the possibility of further destabilising the country through social protest, political unrest, insurgency, *warlordism* and internal migration.

Thus although the illegal opium economy provides subsistence livelihoods for many Afghans, it enriches very few. For most Afghans involved in opium cultivation, opium is virtually the only means by which they can gain access to credit and land for farming. The impact of eradication is felt most acutely by those most impoverished elements in Afghan society: resource-poor farmers and labourers. Opium poppy eradication cannot therefore succeed where so many poor farmers are dependent on its cultivation and where no viable economic alternatives exist as a means for their survival.

The root problem of crop eradication interventions is that they fail to acknowledge the fact that the social, economic and political structures that create and maintain poverty in Afghanistan are the same structures that have created and maintained opium cultivation. Even where crop eradication interventions are integrated with other strategies such as the provision of alternative livelihoods, they can never create the conditions for sustained development. Recent security reports from the United Nations in Afghanistan indicate that eradication programmes are directly responsible for instability in several provinces; stakeholders in the opium economy (farmers, landowners, traders and traffickers) currently face the loss of incomes and livelihoods. The situation for some farmers is particularly serious. Aside from eradication, should they refuse to cultivate opium poppy or if they respond to the government order to destroy their poppy crops, farmers in the north of Afghanistan have been threatened with death by the remnants of the Taliban.

4. Aerial spraying of opium poppy cultivation

Until recently, forced eradication by aerial spraying of chemicals was not a policy option for the Afghan government. The United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), which coordinate the drug policy dossier in Afghanistan and are at the forefront of the international community's reconstruction efforts in the country, have also not expressed official support for eradication. This is in line with the 1384 (2005) Counter Narcotics Implementation Plan, which explicitly states that "*the Afghan government has a no aerial eradication policy.*"³⁷

President Karzai has also so far condemned aerial spraying as a counter narcotic option and has instead focused on other eradication methods like slashing and burning fields.

Nevertheless, Karzai seems recently to have succumbed to heavy foreign pressure. In November 2005, he called on farmers to stop growing poppies, threatening that continued cultivation would embolden the international community to use all means available—including aerial spraying—to eradicate the drug problem at its source.³⁸ It is clear, then, that US pressure on Karzai has influenced his policy making³⁹, and that Afghan resistance to eradication has only stemmed the tide.

An analysis of US budgetary shows clearly that the US has only postponed aerial spraying. Robert Charles, State Department Assistant Secretary for the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, stated that US\$ 152 million of the total US\$313 million was earmarked for eradication in 2005, and would have been used had Karzai indicated that current counter narcotics policies had failed.⁴⁰ US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also stated that "*At this point, manual [eradication] is all we can do, but we'll see whether aerial [eradication] is needed.*"⁴¹

Beyond announcements hinting at the possibility of eradication, the US government is actively seeking personnel to work in Afghanistan on eradication. Recent job postings by the US Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs include a call for an Aviation Eradication Ops and Safety Advisor and an Aviation Maintenance Advisor

³⁷ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 1384 (2005) Counter Narcotics Implementation Plan. See the website of the Canadian Embassy in Afghanistan:

http://www.afghanistanembassy.ca/en/counter_narcotics/index.php.

³⁸ "Karzai warns Afghan poppy farmers of world backlash", Agence France Presse (29 November 2005).

³⁹ "U.S. drops Afghanistan opium spraying plans. Karzai: Aerial spraying of heroin component may harm villagers", The Associated Press (25 January 2005).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sonni Efron, "U.S. Backs Away From Afghan Aerial Spraying", LA Times (23 January 2005).

for operations in Afghanistan. The Aviation Eradication Ops and Safety Advisor is offered a contract until December 2006 and his job would be to conduct aerial spraying of poppy crops:

“The end game of the CN [Counter Narcotics] aviation program in Afghanistan is the curtailment of the supply (...) through aerial and airmobile eradication of drug crops (...). [The Aviation Eradication Ops should A]ssist the Deputy Aviation Advisor and the Senior Aviation Advisor in directing and coordinating aircraft and personnel deployments within Afghanistan for the purpose of destroying opium poppy crops through aerial eradication.”⁴²

The Aviation Maintenance Advisor’s contract states that the contract runs until December 2006 and that this position is in support of US aerial eradication. The job description also mentions that the candidate should:

“Provide general direction and guidance to the contractor and host nation aviation maintenance and logistics activities and personnel for the purpose of providing adequate assets in support of destroying opium poppy, and interdicting the flow of the finished narcotics products into the United States.”⁴³

These two job descriptions hold a clear message for the Afghan poppy farmers, the Afghan government and the international community with the UK at the helm: Aerial spraying in Afghanistan is not a distant plan but a short-term probability.

The dire results of applying this policy option in Colombia will be addressed in the following section. However, an analysis of the current social and economic situation in Afghanistan suggests potential parallels with the Colombia’s experience with eradication. In poor and isolated areas of Afghanistan, the environmental and economic damage caused by eradication—including detrimental effects on public health, degradation of the environment and the destruction of livestock and other food and cash-crops—could further destabilise rural communities and create increased tension between communities and the central government. Coupled with a growing militarised insurgency operating in many opium-poppy cultivating areas, eradication could create the necessary conditions for civil war.

⁴² US Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Solicitation Number: PSC-06-002 (INL), issued on 17 October 2005.

⁴³ US Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Solicitation Number: PSC-06-003-A (INL), issued on 22 November 2005.

5. An international example: Colombia

In Colombia, eradication campaigns, both aerial and manual, have failed to deliver a substantial structural reduction of coca cultivation. In 2004, coca cultivation decreased by 6,000 hectares (from 86,000 to 80,000 hectares), a decrease of approximately 7%.⁴⁴ However, to obtain this modest reduction, an astonishing 139,161 hectares were eradicated that year—more than the total amount of hectares devoted to opium poppy in Afghanistan in 2004. Moreover, 98% of these hectares were sprayed with chemicals⁴⁵, with the remaining 2% manually eradicated by the Colombian Army. Most significantly, however, the drop of 7% of Colombia’s coca-cultivating area was more than offset by a corresponding increase in cultivation in other parts of the Andean region—specifically, there were significant increases in area devoted to coca cultivation in Peru (14% increase) and Bolivia (17% increase), a clear example of the “balloon effect”. This casts serious doubt on the effectiveness of eradication as an anti-narcotic policy option.

The US Government Accountability Office (GAO), which supports the American Congress in meeting its Constitutional responsibilities, released a report in December 2005 that verified that Colombian eradication measures had failed to impact the supply of cocaine on the US market, the main market for Colombian cocaine.⁴⁶ The GAO went on to criticise the US government’s evaluation of the success of its Colombian counter-narcotic program and cited the fact that the number of cocaine users in the US remains stable.

Instead of the expected rise in cocaine prices, consumer prices of cocaine have experienced a downward trend following eradication.⁴⁷ While crop eradication is measured on its success in decreasing the supply and purity level of illegal drugs on the market, availability and purity levels of cocaine have remained stable.

Apart from the manifest failure of eradication as a counter narcotic measure, aerial spraying in Colombia has had several devastating environmental, social, and political drawbacks. It is clear that aerial spraying has affected far more than just coca plantings.⁴⁸ Herbicides are sprayed over

⁴⁴ UNODC, World Drug Report 2005 (Vienna 2005), 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 62.

⁴⁶ “Contraloría del Congreso de Estados Unidos cuestiona informe sobre éxito del Plan Colombia”, El Tiempo (9 December 2005).

⁴⁷ WOLA, Special report on Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy (Washington 2004), 1

⁴⁸ Eduardo Cifuentes, the Colombian ombudsman stated in 2002 that he had received more than 6,500 complaints of aerial spraying planes fumigating food crops, leaving farmers without a livelihood, seriously harming the people’s—especially children’s—health and causing serious damage to the already

nearby food crops, fishing ponds and in national parks (where coca is widely grown).⁴⁹ Reports have documented the damage caused by spraying to the subsistence crops and livelihoods of poor farmers.⁵⁰ When corresponding adequate alternative livelihood programs were not in place, evidence shows that aerial spraying directly led to an increase in social unrest, instability and violence.⁵¹

6. A domestic case-study: The province of Nangarhar

In 2004, President Karzai was deeply concerned about reports from the eastern province of Nangarhar which included reports that aerial spraying had been carried out in several areas by special planes.⁵² At least four districts in Nangarhar have produced corroborating reports detailing spraying of opium poppy crops prior to the harvest season: The Shewar district (northwestern Nangarhar), Shinwar (east), Khogyani (southwest) and the Achin district (south). Most reports stem from the Khogyani district and while evidence is scarce, an analysis of the reports suggests that spraying was most probably carried out at a low intensity as test runs to gauge the impact of future spraying campaigns in Afghanistan.

Witness reports collected by the author dating from April 2004 to the present include descriptions of the effects, intended and unintended, of spraying in rural areas. The following six reports detail various accounts of suspected aerial eradication measures taken in Afghanistan. Although it is not clear to what extent these reports can be validated,



the frequency and the undeniable similarities of the reports command attention and require further investigation.

sensitive eco-system of the Amazon region. Jeremy McDermott, “Colombia drug spraying ‘hits weakest’”, BBC News (10 October 2002).

⁴⁹ Yadira Ferrer, “Colombia: Anti-Drug Herbicide to Be Sprayed Again in Nature Reserve”, International Press Service, (20 May 2005).

⁵⁰ Elinor Shields, “US weighs costs of Plan Colombia”, BBC News (5 July 2005).

⁵¹ WOLA, *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of US Policy* (2004). Executive Summary, p.12.

⁵² “Karzai: Don’t Spray Our Poppies”, AP (19 November 2004).

In the village of Nakakhil in Khogyani district, aerial spraying was allegedly carried out in early 2004, causing children to suffer from eye problems, diarrhoea and other skin irritations.⁵³ Symptoms included white skin patches on the faces of children. The chemicals reportedly damaged wheat, tomato plants and other crops. Villagers refused to eat the remaining vegetables and did not drink from the village wells, afraid of becoming ill. Livestock was reported to have been affected even two weeks after spraying. The Afghan Islamic Press Agency (AIP) reported that the chemicals were in the form of small black granules and resembled fertiliser.

In Kuz Kunar district (northwestern Nangarhar, known locally as the Shewar district) in the spring of 2004, farmers saw planes arrive around midnight and spray a yellow type of chemical resembling dew over their fields. This dew remained in a layer on all affected crops for approximately 10 hours. It destroyed the farmers' wheat, vegetables and tomatoes. In this case, no one became ill, but chickens and cattle died.

In April 2004, in the area around the Shekhmarkhell village in the Achin district, farmers reported that the earth had been barren for a year, suggesting that spraying took place prior to the opium harvest of 2003. Farmers also stated that several fields had been sprayed at night by what eyewitnesses described as "black aeroplanes" that could barely be seen against the night sky.

Alleged spraying took place in Hakimabad and its neighbouring villages (in the Khogyani district) in early November 2004. Dr. Mohammed Rafi Safi told AFP that he personally treated 30 Afghan farmers with illnesses such as eye and respiratory problems and aching body parts.⁵⁴ Farmers from Hakimabad village reportedly became ill after touching the chemicals or affected vegetables. Opium poppy crops were destroyed, along with food crops such as onions, spinach and wheat. The chemicals used were described as a snow-like, sticky substance, slightly lighter in colour than the earth around seedlings.⁵⁵ The former Nangarhar provincial governor Haji Din Mohammed, now governor of Kabul, stated that there was no doubt that aerial spraying had taken place.⁵⁶ In a second village, Nimla, it was alleged that "dark planes" sprayed chemicals on houses, orchards and fields, resulting in the yellowing of poppy seedlings.⁵⁷

⁵³ Report of the Afghan Islamic Press news agency, "Chemicals sprayed on Afghan poppy fields now causing "skin patches" (4 November 2004). Reproduced by the BBC Monitoring Service via COMTEX.

⁵⁴ "Afghan opium farmers say crops spraying made them sick", AFP (27 November 2004).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Carlotta Gall, "Afghan Poppy Farmers Say Mystery Spraying Killed Crops", New York Times (5 December 2004).

In October 2005, farmers in Khogyani claimed that spraying had taken place the previous February, prior to the 2005 harvest. These farmers also recalled hearing aeroplanes at night. The day after the alleged spraying, one farmer noticed a thin film of a red substance on the windscreen of his car, which he compared to a layer of seed-like or fertiliser-like pellets. Farmers in the area reported that the sprayed chemicals were very fast-working. In the gullies and valleys (which are relatively cold and do not receive much direct sunlight), all of the poppy crops died within one day. On the open grounds of the plateaus, however, it took about two days before the effects of the chemicals became visible. Most food and cash-crops were destroyed (including wheat, tomatoes, marrows and other fruits). The farmers described the fruits as looking burnt on the outside. Only potatoes, growing underground, were reportedly unaffected. Chickens that ate from the ground died almost immediately and within two to three days, villagers—especially children and elders—developed flu-like symptoms including running noses, coughs, burning eyes and sore throats.

These and other reports detailing similar incidents in the Khogyani district led President Karzai to publicly condemn aerial eradication in no uncertain terms. The Afghan Chief of State then summoned both the US and UK ambassador to provide an explanation for the alleged sprayings, but both countries denied any involvement.⁵⁸ A government delegation was then dispatched by the Ministry of Agriculture to the Khogyani and Sherzad districts to confirm whether non-poppy crops such as wheat had been affected and to investigate the effect of spraying on humans and livestock.⁵⁹ Samples of the chemicals used were also taken to Kabul and subsequently the head of the delegation, Mr. Nasrollah Bakhtiana, told the Bakhtar Information Agency that the delegation had concluded that herbicide had been sprayed.⁶⁰ Analyses of the different types of chemicals reportedly used suggest that the sprayings constituted several different test runs carried out in an attempt to identify the herbicide best suited to poppy eradication in Afghanistan.

At the end of November 2004 a final Afghan government report on the Khogyani and Shinwar district sprayings was drafted, jointly prepared by the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Agriculture.⁶¹ The report concluded that the spraying of herbicides had had profound negative effects on the environment, had contaminated water and had caused asthma

⁵⁸ “Afghan Poppy Farmers Say Mystery Spraying Killed Crops”.

⁵⁹ Report of the Afghan Islamic Press news agency, “Afghan government delegation to probe aerial spraying of opium poppy crops” (4 November 2004). Reproduced by the BBC Monitoring Service via COMTEX.

⁶⁰ Report of Radio Afghanistan, “Afghan delegation confirms use of chemical spray to destroy poppy crops” (21 November 2004). Reproduced by the BBC Monitoring Service via COMTEX.

⁶¹ Report of Radio Afghanistan, “Afghan cabinet expresses disapproval of spraying poppy fields (29 November 2004), Reproduced by the BBC Monitoring Service via COMTEX.

and diarrhoea with villagers. A Declaration of the National Unity and Development Association of Kogianies (NUDAK) subsequently prepared a report on the sprayings, which alleged that the spraying had resulted in the deaths of children. A translated version of the “NUDAK Declaration” can be found in Appendix I.

The NUDAK Declaration’s allegations were later corroborated in meetings with the Afghanistan Human Rights Organisation (AHRO), which confirmed that five children had been killed by chemical spraying.⁶² An AHRO document delivered to the author states that:

“In the Holy month of Ramadan 1383 (2004), the spraying with the help of aeroplanes not only destroyed poppy plants but also destroyed other crops like wheat and other vegetables and killed one boy in the Aziz Khel village of Khogyani and killed two others also. It similarly killed hundreds of livestock and in some villages of the Shirzad and Khogyani districts, it caused dysentery, vomiting, nausea, sore throats and allergies in human beings.”⁶³

In all of the reports cited in this paper, farmers were never informed beforehand of upcoming spraying campaigns, nor were they compensated afterwards. As well, spraying only took place under cover of darkness. Importantly, communities affected by eradication believed that President Karzai’s government had approved the action under instruction from the US.

Although no government has claimed responsibility for the sprayings or the deaths and devastation that they caused, numerous Afghan farmers, government officials, and international personnel hold the belief that since the US controls the entire airspace of Afghanistan, it is highly improbable that aerial spraying took place without the consent or involvement of US forces.

⁶² Meetings held between The Senlis Council and the Afghanistan Human Rights Organization (AHRO) in December 2005.

⁶³ AHRO document addressed to and translated by The Senlis Council (10 December 2005). Available on request.

Conclusion – A first parliamentary challenge

This conclusion will summarise the three key lessons that should guide the Afghan government and the international community's consideration of future counter narcotics policies in Afghanistan, specifically with regard to eradication. The **first** key lesson of this paper can be summarised by quoting The World Bank:

“[E]radication alone will not work and is likely to be counterproductive, resulting in perverse incentives for farmers to grow more drugs (...), displacement of production to more remote areas, and fuelling of violence and insecurity (...), which in several cases forced the eradication policy to be reversed and led to adverse political assistance work (...). [W]ithout alternative livelihoods already in place, premature eradication damages the environment for rural development.”⁶⁴

Eradication interventions in Afghanistan will not be successful in the short or medium-term because of the lack of sustainable alternatives to opium cultivation. Moreover, as has been shown in Colombia, eradication has the potential to devastate a country both socially and environmentally, and can lead to serious consequences for those dependent on drug crops for their livelihoods.

The **second** key lesson is that opium production in Afghanistan can only be reduced in the long run by also reducing poverty and creating jobs and providing alternative livelihood programs in rural areas. The government and the international community must deliver when it comes to providing these incentives before forcing the eradication of a crop that provides income to millions of Afghans.

The **third** key lesson is that aerial eradication in general, and chemical spraying in particular, will result in social unrest and increased rural poverty. Further, it will damage the stability and legitimacy of the Afghan government by creating a deep conflict between the farming communities that depend on opium crops to survive and a government that is—or appears to be—intent on destroying these crops and as a result, the livelihoods of the people the government claims to represent.

⁶⁴ Afghanistan – State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty, 120.

The international community, the Afghan government and especially the newly-formed national Parliament have to face up to the huge challenge of confronting the opium production crisis, without prioritising short-term quick-fix solutions that could ruin the very fabric of Afghan society and its economy. Eradication is a drug policy tool that should only be applied in countries that are sufficiently stable, uphold the rule of law, and have a central government powerful enough to absorb the fallout from the destruction of livelihoods that is caused by eradication policies. In Afghanistan, the use of eradication as a drug policy option constitutes a dangerous gamble that could doom the country for decades to come. Eradication will further widen the gulf between the central government and rural communities, cause widespread social unrest, increase the power of insurgents, and contribute to a further breakdown in the rule of law.

In short, eradication as a policy option could destroy the nascent democratic state of Afghanistan and cause it to slide back into the violence and lawlessness from which it has only recently emerged. The opium problem lies at the heart of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, which are based on the twin pillars of economic development and stability. The solutions to Afghanistan's opium problem cannot be divorced from this reality.

Appendix to Part One

Declaration of the National Unity and Development Association of Khogianies (NUDAK)⁶⁵

Declaration and demands by NUDAK about the aerial spray of the poppy fields in Khogiani and Shinwar area (5 December 2004)

In a situation where the Afghan oppressed nation, after two and a half decades of fighting and conflicts, has been able to elect a national leader for its destroyed country and besides this had decided to work shoulder to shoulder with brothers and sisters and prevent anything which would be deleterious to this country and nation, we should with sadness state that poisonous aerial spraying was performed against this committed nation in our districts which not only eliminated and destroyed poppy but also killed human beings and animals, and destroyed fruit trees and other plants. [This has been done], while the people of this area are busy finding ways of elimination opium poppy with the help of their leaders and [already] have started eradication [of poppies] in some areas.

Based on the above facts, (NUDAK) wants to inform the related authorities of the Afghanistan Transitional Islamic State, and the national and international relief organizations.

1. We request the Public Health Ministry of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan and the health sector organisations to come to our area and diagnose the illnesses caused to the human beings and the livestock and treat and prevent them. Because the catastrophes of diarrhoea, dysentery, vomiting and skin diseases are increasing day by day in the areas sprayed, [it is important] that illnesses and deaths are prevented in other human beings, animals and plants and also [it is necessary] to prevent further contamination. According to the information furnished by the people of the region, till date, more than five persons and tens of animals have lost their lives.
2. The Ministry of Agriculture of the Transitional Islamic state of Afghanistan and the related organisations are requested to go to these areas and help the cultivators in the process of rehabilitation of their fields.

⁶⁵ Translated from Pashto into English by The Senlis Council. The accuracy is the sole responsibility of The Senlis Council.

3. Though it is not possible to compensate human injuries and deaths, the damages to the animals and plants should be paid to the people affected, by those, who were the committers of this act.

4. Such unilateral acts should be prevented in the future and the elimination of poppy should be done [only] after consultations with the elders, [district] councils and the government authorities. This will in addition to eradication of poppy create the support of the people and will bring security and stability to this region.

Thank you,

National Unity and Development Association of Khogianies (NUDAK)

Glossary

Aerial spraying: The spraying of pesticides on agricultural land by aeroplanes in order to destroy opium poppy crops.

Alternative livelihoods: Legal on-farm, off-farm and non-farm activities that are promoted as sustainable alternatives to illegal opium poppy cultivation, such as the cultivation and production of wheat, raisins, fruits, rose oil, nuts and saffron.

Central Poppy Eradication Force (CPEF): The CPEF, created in 2004, is supported by the US State Department through funding, personnel and equipment. The Force, divided in several teams across Afghanistan, is responsible for the physical eradication of poppies in selected areas. At the beginning of 2005, the CPEF employed 700 officers. By the end of that year, the CPEF would grow to 2,300 officers.

Counter Narcotics Police: Specialised counter narcotic branch of the Afghan National Police (ANP), involved in interdiction and eradication efforts.

Eradication: All activities, regardless of scale or manner of delivery, aimed at the partial or complete destruction of opium poppy crops.

Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN): The Ministry of Counter Narcotics takes the lead role in the development, monitoring and evaluation of the Afghan Government's counter narcotics strategy. The institutional development of MCN is supported by the UK, the US and UNODC.

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