

Letters: Opium policy

Our opium policy drives Afghans into the arms of the Taliban

Thursday, 1 May 2008

Sir: Your article correctly highlights the dangers Afghanistan's heroin trade poses to UK troops and British society at large ("Drugs for guns: how the Afghan heroin trade is fuelling the Taliban insurgency", 29 April). However, the current strategy used to combat escalating opium production levels – forced poppy crop eradication – has destroyed the livelihoods of entire farming communities, driving them into the hands of the Taliban and putting UK troops at further risk.

Oil on the fire for the insurgency, this disastrously futile strategy must be replaced by an effective, pragmatic approach that helps to win back the hearts and minds of the local population and drives a wedge between the farmers and the Taliban.

The medicinal use of opium poppy under a village-based, licensed "poppy for medicine" development model, in which farmers would be allowed to grow their opium and sell it as morphine, could help rural communities sever ties with the Taliban and the illegal drugs market. Such an available and immediate-term solution would allow the necessary leverage for economic diversification, while at the same time providing a much-needed supply to the 80 per cent of the world's population currently lacking access to effective pain relief.

As long as current alternative livelihood strategies are not reaching the three million Afghans currently dependent on illegal opium production, we need to turn to practical, short-term solutions that might turn the tables on the Afghan opium crisis. Sticking to the same calamitous counter-narcotics policies will prove catastrophic to both the Afghan people and the coalition troops serving there.

Jorrit Kamminga

Director of Policy Research, The Senlis Council, Paris