Voices

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The war on poppies

By Peter Bergen and Sameer Lalwani

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Stepping onto the balcony of the governor's mansion in Uruzgan in southern Afghanistan, you quickly grasp the scale of the drug problem gripping the country. Beginning at the walls of the mansion and stretching as far as the eye can see are hundreds of acres of poppy fields ready for harvesting for opium sap, pretty much the only way to earn a living in poverty-stricken Uruzgan.

In late April, at the height of poppy-growing season, a team of more than 200 police officers from Kabul led by contractors working for the American company DynCorp International arrived in Uruzgan to undertake the first eradication efforts in the province. After some tense negotiations with local officials, the teams went out to begin destroying the poppy fields. For two days, nothing much happened, mostly because of a dispute about which fields were to be eradicated. But on the third day,

when the work was getting underway in earnest, a Taliban-led force bearing small arms, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars appeared from nowhere and attacked the eradication teams as they destroyed the fields. Four Afghan police officers were seriously injured.

The Uruzgan attack demonstrated, for those who hadn't yet figured it out, just how the Taliban is seeking to exploit popular resentment against eradication efforts. All across the country, Afghan support for poppy cultivation is on the upswing; 40% of Afghans now consider it acceptable if there is no other way to earn a living, and in the southwest, where much of the poppy crop is grown, two out of three people say it is acceptable. In Uruzgan's neighboring province, Helmand -- which supplies about half the world's opium, the raw material for heroin -- favorable ratings for the Taliban now run as high as 27% (compared with 10% in the whole of Afghanistan).

Instead of taking such findings to heart, the Bush administration's counter-narcotics policy over the last three years has placed eradication at its center, even though it has been met with growing Afghan skepticism and, in some cases, violence, and has coincided with a general decline in public support for the U.S. and NATO mission in Afghanistan. Why is the policy so unpopular? Consider that Afghanistan's farmers will produce an estimated 9,000 tons of opium this year from 477,000 acres, according to a United Nations report released last week, and that the total farm value of the crop will be about $1 billion. Most farmers who cultivate poppies do so because few other options -- either alternative crops or alternative livelihoods -- exist in their

part of the world. You simply cannot eviscerate the livelihoods of the estimated 3 million Afghans who grow poppies and not expect a backlash.

What's more, our policy is not effective. Though the U.S. spends about the same amount on counter-narcotics activities in Afghanistan annually as all Afghan poppy farmers combined take home in a year, our policies have not prevented record-setting poppy crops from springing up with every succeeding year, nor have they prevented Afghanistan from becoming a quasi-narcostate where corruption is rampant. Last week's U.N. report said Afghanistan continues to be the center of the world's heroin trade, accounting for 93% of global opium production. It noted a 17% spike in poppy cultivation in the last year, on the heels of a record 59% rise the year before.

The U.S. government, in short, is deeply committed to an unsuccessful drug policy that helps its enemies. The Taliban derives not only substantial financial benefits from the opium trade, according to U.S. military officials in Afghanistan, but wins political benefits from its supportive stance on poppy growing, masterfully exploiting situations in which U.S.-sponsored eradication forces are pitted against poor farmers.

Eradication has also become a wedge in the fragile relationship of the NATO countries that are part of the coalition in Afghanistan. Many European countries, including the Dutch, who have forces stationed in Uruzgan, oppose the American eradication policy. The U.S. needs its NATO partners to maintain the legitimacy of the multinational force in Afghanistan. Holding to a failed eradication policy threatens those relationships.

In early August, the U.S. State Department presented its updated counter-narcotics strategy for Afghanistan. For the most part, the proposal offered few new initiatives other than a welcome emphasis on cracking down on drug kingpins. At its center, the strategy still depends on eradication efforts, along with veiled hints that the U.S. government may also pursue aerial chemical spraying, a tactic that many fear will further alienate the Afghan population. The increased funds set aside in the new plan to help farmers find alternative livelihoods -- $50 million to $60 million -- are woefully inadequate and constitute a paltry 6% of American counter-narcotics spending in Afghanistan for 2007. Eradication continues to receive the largest share of the budget.

The State Department strategy misses the forest for the trees. The priority of the United States and NATO should be first to thwart the Taliban insurgency while bettering the lives of typical Afghans through significant economic and reconstruction efforts to win hearts and minds. Doing nothing on the poppy front would do more to achieve this goal than the counterproductive eradication path the U.S. currently pursues. The U.S. should adopt a “first do no harm” policy that temporarily suspends eradication while implementing a promising portfolio of new initiatives to build up alternatives for farmers.

To begin with, the U.S. needs to invest in building up the legitimate Afghan economy. Though poppy fetches much higher prices than most other crops, subsidies, price supports and seeds for alternative crops should be offered to offset that price gap. Because other crops often face pitfalls such as the absence of distributors, domestic demand or consistent prices abroad, the international community should help Kabul set up an agency, modeled on the Canadian Wheat Board, that would purchase crops from farmers at consistent prices, and market and distribute them internationally. The U.S. and other NATO countries should open their markets and extend trade preferences to Afghan agricultural products and handicrafts.

Currently, the U.S. funds alternative livelihoods at one-third the rate of eradication efforts -- and the money is still not making its way into the pockets of farmers. Because of bureaucratic inefficiencies, only 1% of the $100 million in funds for alternative livelihoods had been disbursed as of March, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. One reason for this is that the Afghan narcotics ministry lacks the staff and skills to quickly and effectively disburse funds. So the task should be outsourced -- in the same manner the U.S. outsources its eradication efforts to

private companies like DynCorp -- until the Afghan government develops the capacity to get the job done.

The U.S. and NATO should also endorse a pilot project proposed by the Senlis Council, an international nongovernmental organization with offices in southern Afghanistan, to harness poppy cultivation for the production of legal medicinal opiates such as morphine for sale to countries, such as Brazil, that are in short supply of cheap pain drugs for patients.

The U.S. must stop targeting poor farmers and focus on the traffickers who make the bulk of the profits from heroin. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents on the ground should step up efforts to interrupt money-laundering networks and interdict labs and shipments. The DEA should also turn Afghanistan's shame-based culture to its advantage by making public the list of top Afghan drug suspects, including government officials, as it did in the 1990s, when it publicized the names of Colombia's drug kingpins.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office and the Council on Foreign Relations estimate that the elimination of narcotics from the Afghan economy will take well over a decade. Given that time frame, our counter-narcotics policy needs to be guided by a clear strategic purpose -- providing security and defeating the Taliban. These are not simple drug dealers but narcoterrorists with a political agenda. A "first do no harm" approach would ensure that battling the drug trade does not compromise the fight against the terrorists.

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