

Progress in Efforts to Control Afghan Poppy Cultivation

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Foreign Press Center Briefing
Washington, DC
August 31, 2006

10:00 A.M. EST

MR. PETERSON: Good morning. Thank you for coming. We're going to also have some folks from New York who will be joining us and asking questions. I'd like to introduce Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Schweich from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. And he's here to talk this morning about Afghan poppy cultivation. And he'll make a brief opening statement, and then -- this is on the record. And please identify yourself when you ask a question. Thanks so much.

MR. SCHWEICH: Thanks for the introduction. As I said -- as he said, my name is Tom Schweich, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. There's been a lot of discussion and inquiries in our bureau over the last several days about what we expect to be very high opium cultivation statistics coming out from the United Nations this weekend.

The report has not actually been released yet but we do anticipate a very high number, significantly higher than last year, and that's raised a lot of questions about the strategy going forward, whether it's the right strategy, what modifications might have to be made to that strategy and how we envision the long-term future of Afghanistan in light of the poppy cultivation statistics. So the State Department has asked that I be made available to you all and to discuss this issue, and I'm available for 45 minutes to answer any questions you might have. Thanks.

QUESTION: (Off mike.)

MR. SCHWEICH: Sure.

QUESTION: My name is (Off mike.) -- is directly linked, is directly linked to the activities of drug warlords and also drug smugglers and traders. So as you mentioned in this brief introduction, will it continue going with the policy or maybe in the name of Taliban there are some professionals that (inaudible) they might be responsible for that? I will appreciate you kindly to throw light on this. Thank you very much.

MR. SCHWEICH: Sure. There actually are several questions inherent in what you've just said. The first, as you said, the Government of Afghanistan has stated repeatedly that they have made progress in combating poppy. It's true that actually in 2005 there was significant reduction from 2004 so there have been instances of success. It's also true that we believe when the numbers come out this weekend that it will show that in many provinces there's been sustained reduction of poppy and in some cases even a decrease.

The problem is, as you identified in the south, there will be, we think, dramatic increases which would offset, more than offset, any decreases in areas in the north and the east. So while there has been progress in certain areas -- Nandahar seems to have seen a sustained reduction, so there are areas we can look to for models for what works and what doesn't work. And we think that there is a basis to use that information and not just look at the country as a whole but individual areas where there's been success or there hasn't been success as we model how we are going to proceed forward. So there have been some instances of success, but we don't want to downplay the fact that we expect the news this weekend, on balance, to be pretty bad.

With respect to the relationship between the poppy cultivation and the insurgency and the Taliban, as you said, there has been a history of insurgencies and counter-government movements allying themselves with the drug trade. We know in Colombia the FARC is closely allied with the drug trade and has really pretty heavy tentacles into the drug trade and finances itself through the drug trade.

Initially there wasn't a lot of evidence the Taliban wasn't interested in drugs because they actually tried to eliminate them toward the end of their regime, but lately -- you're absolutely correct -- there are increasing indications of a relationship between the insurgency and the narcotraffickers because it's a quick, easy source of money. And when you need money, where do you go? The quickest, easiest source. And that would be poppy cultivation.

So one reason we think it's very urgent to take really aggressive action against poppy cultivation, even in the south, is to prevent those links from getting as strong as they are in places like Colombia because they aren't that strong yet. This is an opportunity to move quickly and make some progress over the next year or two to de-link those two things because if the relationship between the Taliban and the poppy farmers grow or opium traffickers grows to levels we've seen in some countries elsewhere in the world, it would be much harder to stamp out the insurgency and much harder to get our troops home.

So I agree with you that we have to look at that relationship, we have to focus on that relationship and we have to eliminate that relationship.

QUESTION: Thank you. If I might follow-up. In 1996 I was the Consul General of Afghanistan in Peshawar and I was discussing with my American colleagues at that time, one of them (inaudible), who is a senior political advisor in Kabul now. The Taliban were going after the drug -- the poppy cultivation eradication selectively in areas where they had no control and they would go to attack that (inaudible) eliminate the crops also. But (inaudible) Afghanistan senior Taliban commanders (inaudible). So maybe this is the case.

MR. SCHWEICH: Well, I think you've hit the nail on the head, which is you do things -- when the Taliban did things out of convenience, you know, what was best for the Taliban is what they did. So if working with narcotraffickers was good, they would do it. If they thought they could curry some favor with the West by trying to eliminate it in some areas, they would do that too.

MR. PETERSON: New York, please.

QUESTION: Yes, I would like to ask -- my name is Freke Vuijst. I'm from the Netherlands. The NATO forces in the south -- that being the British, the Canadians and the Dutch -- are not allowed to directly participate in the eradication of poppy crops or to take independent action against drug producers. How do you envision an eradication program with those caveats built into the soldiers from the NATO forces in the south?

MR. SCHWEICH: That's an excellent question and it's something we've been working on extensively. The eradication effort, which is one of only -- one of eight pillars the Afghan Government has in place for eliminating poppy, is accomplished in two ways. First, there's a pre-poppy elimination program where we try to convince farmers not to plant in the first place, which of course would be the best way to eliminate poppy. That doesn't require any military activity whatsoever other than providing security for the people who go out and get the message out.

Then there's governor-led eradication, which was actually quite successful over the past ten months. So the numbers that are going to come out by the way in a week reflect planting that occurred last fall. It does not reflect any effort or progress that's been made over the last ten months, which I'd actually like to talk about a little bit. But the governor-led eradication got 13- or 14,000 hectares, close to 10 percent of the crop, over the past several months. And again, that does not require direct military involvement other than to provide the security conditions necessary for the governors to go in and eradicate.

Then there is the Afghan Eradication Force, which is basically a police type force, a central force that goes in and eradicates as well. And that has about six to eight hundred people in it working on eradication. They did work in Helmand this year, got about 2,500 hectares, then went up to Badakhshan and got a little bit more. And that's a great deterrent also and helpful in the sense the government shows it's capable of going into dangerous areas and asserting itself. So there were some advantages in that.

At no time did we ever feel it was necessary or desirable for the troops fighting the war to directly engage themselves in poppy eradication. Their job is -- and we understand it and that's part of their rules of engagement -- to create the most secure conditions possible for everyone. That helps the poppy eradication effort but it's not central to the poppy eradication effort.

So we concur with the idea that ISAF and U.S. forces should not become directly involved in eradication efforts. We feel between the governors, the poppy eradication force and the pre-poppy prevention campaign we have effective means to do more aggressive eradication. And there's evidence confirming that. In 2005 there was only 4,000 hectares eradicated. It was up to close to 16,000 over the past several months and we anticipate we can do even better in the future, and that would not require direct intervention by ISAF forces.

QUESTION: Good morning. My name is Arshad Mahmud and I'm the correspondent for the Daily Prothom Alo in Bangladesh. I have a question which is of a general nature. We have been experiencing the situation now in Afghanistan for years and the fundamentals of economics is that the people there will go for any crop that would bring them easy money unless you provide them an alternative to do this (inaudible). So what's really going on and could you please give us some kind of sense that what are the real thinking of the international community, including United States? I'm sure that all of you know, I mean, unless, as I said, you can provide them an alternative source of income, they will go for this. What's really going on for years now?

MR. SCHWEICH: Another very good question. What you have is a situation where poppy is more lucrative than any alternative that can be offered to anyone. You can make ten times as much money growing poppy as wheat, six or seven times more than from fruit trees. There is no alternative that even comes close to equaling the income from poppy.

So while we think it is essential to provide alternative livelihoods, and in fact the U.S. Government has spent over \$300 million in the past two years on alternative livelihoods, which is something we really would like recognized because sometimes people say, well, you're not offering anything else. Well, we are offering other things. It still won't replace the income so you do need to provide an alternative livelihood, particularly in rural areas rather than urban areas where there's factory work or other type of activity available. But that's one part of the equation. That's the carrot, as we say. That's saying here's something else you can do. You do have an alternative. But you'll never deter someone in their planting decision by offering something that doesn't make very much money relative to poppy unless you have a stick too, if you have something that says there's going to be severe consequences if you do grow. And that's eradication, interdiction and prosecution.

And so the strategy that's been put together -- and it's only a two-year-old strategy so I think you have to give it some time to work -- involves alternative livelihoods, public information, which is the softer side, telling people please don't do this, it's against Islam, it's hurting your reputation around the world, we're going to give you other crops you can grow, they're not as lucrative but it's an honest living, you know, that type of thing. But then you also have the credible threat that someone is going to come in and eradicate your field and give you nothing, because that really changes the equation about whether you're going to go with a less lucrative or more lucrative crop if you might actually get nothing. There has to be a prospect of being interdicted if you're a smalltime opium producer, you have to understand you might be swooped down on, your lab might be closed and you might be thrown in jail. And then of course that's the last piece, the prosecution.

Since this poppy crop was planted, the one that we're going to hear about in a few days, it was planted last fall. You know the counternarcotics tribunal has gone up and running now in Kabul and has over a hundred cases in it, and so there is a credible threat of prosecution now too, which we hope will also deter people from planting and from trafficking in poppy.

My overall answer to your question therefore is the international community recognizes it's got to be a balanced, comprehensive, sustained perseverance. You can't expect the result in a year or year and a half. The first year things got off with fits and starts, there was more success this year, but because the first year was so bad you're seeing these big numbers now. We think they'll be less next year and we're hoping they can go down even lower after that. But it's got to be a combination of public information, interdiction, prosecution, alternative livelihoods, eradication. Regional cooperation is an important area to prevent transit to other countries. It's a comprehensive approach. We feel the basic policy is going to succeed. It will take time, it will take sharpening and it will take refinement.

MR. PETERSON: New York do you have another question?

MR. PETERSON: Go ahead please.

QUESTION (Freke Vuijst/Vrij Nederland): Yes. I had another question which I didn't want to add to my previous one because it's something entirely different. Because the problem is so complex some people, like a British think tank, has proposed a totally out-of-the-box idea, which is not that unusual because both in Turkey and in India it's done. And that is to have in effect legal cultivation of poppy for the medical production of opium and codeine. Does the State Department -- what does the State Department think about this and would this be an idea you would be willing to study as a possible solution to this very intractable problem?

MR. SCHWEICH: Not only would we be willing to study it but we have studied it and, unfortunately, the numbers just don't add up for buy out or legalization. There's two theories that we hear: One, just buy out the whole crop and therefore the farmers will have, you know, a livelihood. And then the other is to legalize it and sort of have an open market where it could be put to licit use for making things as you said like codeine and other needed painkillers.

The reason it doesn't hold up is, first of all, let me talk about the buy-out idea. The narco-economy right now is about \$2.8 billion, or a third of the total Afghan economy. The Counter-Narcotics Trust Fund has only \$80 million in it right now. If you were to buy out the crop, as some have proposed, you'd need \$2.8 billion to do it -- or the whole industry -- you'd need \$2.8 billion to do it and no one has that kind of money. Not only that but only 8 or 9 percent of the population is involved in poppy cultivation right now. If you buy it all out, well, everybody's going to go where the money is as we talked about earlier. It's not going to be 8 or 9 percent, it could be 80 or 90 percent and you'd need 10 or 20 or 30 billion dollars to buy it out. So the numbers don't add up at all in the buy-out idea. It would simply make the problem worse and get everybody into the game.

With respect to simply legalization, allowing market forces to work, we've studied that too. And again, it sounds nice on the surface but it just doesn't withstand even the most modest analytic scrutiny. You'd have a situation where huge amounts of this poppy would be then legalized. In these countries you mentioned earlier like Turkey -- it's heavily regulated, it's small plots that they control very carefully to make sure it doesn't go off into the black market. Afghanistan doesn't have anything close to the infrastructure necessary for a legalization regime nor do the countries that would receive all this new opium have anything in place to receive it legally and distribute it legally as painkillers, so it would take years and years to do anything like that.

But even most important, even if you could overcome all these problems I just mentioned, you still have the problem with 150, 160 -- however many thousand hectares it ends up being this year, we don't know the exact number -- huge amounts, thousands of tons of opium on the market would cause the price to plummet. And what would the farmers do? They'd go back to the illegal market where they can get a lot more money. So it just wouldn't solve the problem.

QUESTION: Hi, my name is Andrei Sitov. I'm with the Russian news agency TASS, so obviously I'm mostly interested in the aspect of the problem that you mentioned -- the transit, the interdiction of the flow regionally.

My first question is: The Russians have complained that the local authorities the -- basically they complained about the NATO forces, but you just referred to the fact that the NATO itself cannot really directly participate. But they were complaining that NATO would not cooperate fully with the local security structure which is the CSTO, Collective Security Treaty Organization. Can you tell me now whether the United States is willing to cooperate with that, or if not then why not?

MR. SCHWEICH: Well, I was in Moscow less than two months ago on exactly that issue -- on Afghan drug transit -- meeting with officials in Russia and expressing the level of concern we have. You know, most of this opium goes to Russia and Europe and countries surrounding Afghanistan; almost none of it comes to the United States. So it's a problem that we recognize is affecting our friends and our allies around the world and we're very concerned about it. And I was there and we pledged not only cooperation from law enforcement agency to law enforcement agency -- and there's new cooperation agreements between the Russians and the Americans on this issue -- we also pledged money for states that are sort of intermediary states. We have programs now in Kyrgyzstan and in Turkmenistan and in several -- Pakistan -- several countries that are the transit countries to try to stop that from getting to Russia.

So I would say that if you spoke to senior Russian counter-narcotic officials, I think they would -- I would hope they would agree that we really made a lot of efforts to work closely with Russia in preventing the drug from getting in there and its transit -- and stopping the transit problem. The problem, as you know, is the terrain is so rough and the borders are so porous and the forces are so thin, it's very hard to interdict the stuff coming across. We do interdict a lot. Interdiction was up significantly last year over the previous year, but it still only represented two percent or so of the total amount. So we've got a long way to go, but we recognize the problem of transit.

We've been meeting -- I personally have been meeting with Russian officials on this issue and we plan to do everything we can to keep it out of your country.

QUESTION: What about the CSTO?

MR. SCHWEICH: I don't know the answer to that specific question. I'd have to look into it and get back to you. We'll take that and get back to you.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) do you have -- thank you, Barbara. Actually I wanted to ask if you could elaborate on these new agreements that you said that are signed between our two nations.

MR. SCHWEICH: Oh, yeah, I wouldn't -- I don't know if I would say they're signed agreements. They're getting -- it's law enforcement agencies getting together: our DEA and your equivalent of that and talking about how we can increase our cooperation, increase the exchange of information. You know, CARICC (Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center) is going to be involved in all this too. It's going to be headed I think in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan; I can't remember. That will be information exchange and we will help out with that too.

What we've done is had a lot of meetings at all levels, high levels and mid-level and low level to encourage the exchange of information. And I suspect that will lead probably to more formalized arrangements but it's going very well.

QUESTION: And actually that's what I wanted also to ask; it's a technical issue. The Russians wanted to send then is the Russian equivalent to DEA, wanted to send a representative to Washington. Do you know if it has happened or --

MR. SCHWEICH: They've already been here before and I know we're trying to come up with a date for them to --

QUESTION: No, a permanent office?

MR. SCHWEICH: Oh, a permanent office, I don't know the answer to that, no.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. SCHWEICH: Sure.

QUESTION: A follow-up to his question, sir. Sorry. It's a fact that by and large the people of --

MR. PETERSON: Would you say your name again?

QUESTION: Sayed Shah from Voice of America. By and large the people of Afghanistan are not extremists and they have no hostility toward the West, but the economic hardships and the promises made before by Mr. Karzai following the collapse of Taliban regime are -- people were very much optimistic. But now when they see this huge gulf between the very rich and the very poor, and people in Kabul, their lifestyle compared to the extreme poverty you have in the provinces that might be also contributing to this. And another -- it's not a comment, it's a question. Do you think that this spreading of corruption at governmental level, NGO's level, private sector level, among the police officers is also instrumental factors in not elevating this problem rather than further fermenting trouble?

MR. SCHWEICH: Let me answer your -- really your first question is more of a policy question. I think I've said as much as I should. The second question, I can go back on the record about corruption. The reason the narcotics trade has to be attacked and defeated is three-fold. One, you will not have security without -- as we talked about earlier, the insurgents have greater and greater ties, and you won't have security without it. And that's very, very important.

Second, you won't have the economic development that you're looking for if so much of the money is in the narcotics trade. The alternatives won't be available, so you won't be able to have a secure economy. And that's a very critical piece of it also.

But the third piece, and this relates to your question, is you also can't have a viable political system if it's tainted through pervasive narco-corruption. So all three essential elements for stability in Afghanistan are tied to this, defeating this narcotics problem. And there is no doubt that there are a large number of government officials that are involved in the narcotics trade there. But there is also no doubt there are a greater number of honest, hard working officials that are looking for means to remove and prosecute and eliminate the corrupt officials. And because the justice system has taken a while to develop, now we have the counternarcotics tribunal, we have the jurisdiction in Kabul for all major narcotics crimes. It's taken a while, but I think now you will see, and this will be heartening to the people who are saying why aren't we -- why are we seeing some people get rich and we're not. Because some of these people who are getting rich are getting rich through corrupt means.

I think you're going to see a dramatic increase in the amount of prosecutions of corrupt officials, removal of officials who are incompetent, and prosecution of officials who are corrupt. And I think that will help hearten those who are a little dispirited by the disparities in wealth they see.

Thank you.



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