



Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006

Thomas A. Schweich, Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs

Remarks at United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Press Event
Brussels, Belgium
September 12, 2006

The United States appreciates the opportunity to speak at this important gathering of countries so dramatically harmed by Afghan heroin. I would like to thank the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the European Union, for asking the United States to participate here today. In particular, we thank Under Secretary General Costa for his incisive and direct remarks. Director Costa, your organization not only provides the world authoritative statistics, surveys, and analysis of the Afghan opium problem, but it also does important work in the field to build a justice system that will help defeat this problem. The world is grateful for your efforts and perseverance. And we would also like to thank the government of Afghanistan for its participation here today. Minister Qaderi, we look forward to continuing and improving our unbreakable partnership.

The news today is bad news for all of us. But it contains important lessons from which we must learn and move forward. When we get bad news, the tendency is to declare failure, demand that old strategies be abandoned, politicize the problem, and embrace supposed miracle solutions that do not really withstand serious scrutiny. We must avoid these temptations, and instead replace them with serious, reasoned analysis followed by refined and sharpened execution of our counterdrug policies. Here is the analysis of the United States.

First, the statistics that we have heard definitized today are for poppy that was planted last fall--almost a year ago. The high cultivation rates--of which we were generally aware even at the London Conference last January--reflect problems with the implementation of the drug strategy by the Afghan government and the international community as it was executed in 2005--the first real year of its existence. During 2005, there was very little eradication--4% or 5% of the crop. There were low interdiction rates--less than 1% of all heroin produced--and there was no counternarcotics law or tribunal to bring traffickers to justice. Also during 2005, alternative livelihoods were in the early stages of implementation and only reached a limited number of geographic areas. As a result there was very little to deter farmers from planting poppy last fall, and there was little in the way of encouragement for those who wanted to plant something else. So when fall of 2005 came around, with promises of Taliban credit and protection, farmers planted poppy.

Second, the numbers we have heard here today do not reflect that, over the past 10 months, there have been some notable improvements in the execution of the counternarcotics strategy that may in fact deter planting this fall. The counternarcotics law is in effect. The counternarcotics tribunal has over 100 active cases. Eradication almost quadrupled to nearly 16,000 hectares--introducing a higher degree of risk for farmers deciding whether to plant this fall. For the first time ever, this spring the Afghan National Army and Police provided a secure environment for eradication forces in the South of the country, and promises of Taliban protection, for the most part, failed to materialize. Also, over the past several months the international community delivered alternative livelihoods in a more coordinated manner. And interdiction rates have doubled. So, while the statistics we have heard here today are discouraging, they are the delayed results of failures in the execution of our strategy in 2005; they do not reflect the progress we have made in 2006. Next year will show us whether these improvements have the positive effects we are hoping for.

Third, the current strategy is only in its second year. In countries like Thailand and Pakistan, which have seen sustained reductions in poppy planting, the strategy was in effect for several years before it really took hold. Perseverance is a critical component of any successful strategy.

That said, and this is the fourth point, we must do much better going forward. While the existing multi-pillar strategy--which includes public information, alternative livelihoods, eradication, interdiction, and prosecution--is a sound one, we must sharpen and refine our execution of the program. The government of Afghanistan and the international community must set poppy elimination targets for each province and each district within each province. We must hold officials accountable for achieving these reductions. Those who succeed should see substantial rewards in terms of development assistance; those who fail should suffer serious consequences with no excuses. The removal and prosecution of corrupt officials in large numbers is essential; punishment for those who collude with narco-criminals must be swift and unwavering.

Fifth, and finally, we must not embrace "silver bullet theories"--those theories that hold we should abandon a balance approach of incentives and disincentives in favor of some simplistic approach that some say will solve all of our problems. These theories sound nice; but they are dangerous mirages.

Some say, for example, that we should stop eradicating crops and just give out a lot more in the way of alternative livelihoods. This is a theory that, if adopted, would be extremely harmful--even the suggestion of it will give encouragement to the narcotraffickers, narcofarmers, and the terrorists. Over 50% of the cultivation in 2005--some 54,000 hectares by British estimates--occurred in areas where there is development and where there are alternatives available. The farmers in these areas plant because they can make more money growing poppy than they can by growing any of the many alternative crops available to them. As UN surveys have indicated, the threat of eradication is the only serious deterrent to their planting decision. By even suggesting that we will not eradicate, we are sending a signal that you can plant at will with no potential adverse consequences. A criminal's dream; and a gift to the terrorists who are profiting more and more from their relationships with narcofarmers.

Others say we must do more interdiction--targeting the traffickers--instead of eradication. The fact is that it is very difficult to interdict heroin and opium paste. The labs are hard to find and frequently move; their product moves as hidden cargo over porous borders and rough, desolate terrain. If we doubled our rate of interdiction, it would still account for less than 5% of the opium produced. While we agree that we must improve our interdiction capacity, the simple truth is that eradication is much easier. The fields are easy to find--just take a helicopter ride 2 minutes outside the well-developed areas of Lashkar Gah and it is poppy fields as far as the eye can see. The poppy field is the true and literal root of the problem and we must go after it aggressively.

To those who say that eradication destabilizes, we question the evidence, but conclude either way that failure to eradicate will cause even more instability. Right now the relationship between the farmers, the traffickers and the terrorists is growing but still relatively rudimentary. This year we eradicated in the south of Helmand and the promises by the Taliban of a fight and protection for poppy farmers barely materialized. If we wait to attack this problem, the ties between the narcotics community and the insurgency will grow stronger. We need only to look at Colombia to see what happens when the international community allows the relationship between an insurgency and a narcotics trade to develop over a period of years. You get a well-financed, tenacious, and resilient insurgency, and you lose even more lives trying to stamp it out at this late stage than you would have had you attacked the problem in its early stages. We must hit hard and hit now, or we will prolong our efforts both in terms of time and lives lost.

Then there are those who say we should abandon coercive methods entirely and either buy out or legalize the crop. This argument does not withstand even modest analytic scrutiny. The value of the narco-economy in Afghanistan is over \$3 billion annually, with over \$600 million going to farmers. The counternarcotics trust fund has less than \$80 million in it. Where is this buy out money going to come from? And remember that only 12% of the population is involved in the opium trade. Once you agree to buy it out, everyone will jump in and it would cost billions and billions of dollars every year for the foreseeable future. Rewarding this criminality is simply not an approach based in reality.

As for legalization, there is no infrastructure to control, process, and regulate the huge opium trade in Afghanistan--nor is there a medical infrastructure to receive licit opium in the developing world. It would take decades and many billions of dollars to develop such a system. More important, even if you could do it, the effect of dumping

thousands of metric tons of opium on to the licit market would cause the price for licit opium to drop below its already low level. What would the farmers and traffickers do? Sell it on the black market for heroin and we would be right back where we are now, having wasted billions of dollars and many years on a complete folly of an experiment.

There is no silver bullet. We need a refined and sharpened education campaign, better delivery of alternative crops, development, aggressive eradication, improved interdiction, and the prosecution of anyone who is involved in the trade. We need more contributions to the counternarcotics trust fund. We need to hit all parts of the strategy with the same level of ruthless precision that the narco-community is attempting to achieve. We need execution and accountability.

If we show the same level of tenacity that the criminals do, we will meet here next year under much better circumstances. We will see a sustainable decline in poppy cultivation and heroin production. We will see less tragedy on the streets of Europe, Moscow, Iran, Pakistan, and other countries where addiction rates are on the rise. I look forward to celebrating that day with you. Thank you.

Released on September 12, 2006

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.