

Geopolitical drug Newsletter

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AFGHANISTAN

Drugs and the Taliban

Washington has attributed responsibility for the terrorist attacks in the United States last week to networks headed by the Saudi "billionaire" Usama Ben Laden, currently under the protection of Afghanistan's Taliban leadership. Further tarnishing these representatives of "Evil", numerous media sources claim that narcotics provide an important source of financing for their operations. The reality, however, is much more complicated. First of all, when the Taliban took power in Kabul in 1996, they merely inherited a situation that saw Afghanistan transformed since the early 1990s into the world's largest opium producer, ahead of Burma. Between 1994 and 1998, opium output totaled between annual 2,000 and 3,000 metric tons of raw material. The majority of this was turned into morphine and heroin in Turkey, and to a lesser extent in Pakistan and in certain Central Asian republics and the Caucasus. Only a fraction of the opium was transformed inside Afghanistan.

All previous records were broken in 1999 and 2000 when opium production in Afghanistan reached 4,500 and 3,200

tons respectively. Even so, experts¹ agree that taxes collected by the Taliban on opium production (the majority paid in kind), on transformation laboratories, and on the transit of morphine and heroin collectively amount to between \$50-100 million annually. This represents a derisory sum compared to Usama Ben Laden's personal fortune and to aid granted the Taliban by its principal supporters: Saudi Arabian sponsors and Pakistan (in the form of both money and arms).

On July 27, 2000, the Taliban Emir, Mullah Omar, published a decree forbidding poppy cultivation, calling it irreligious. His envoys to opium producing areas told peasants that the drought hitting the country was punishment from God for growing drugs. As a result, farmers in general abstained from sowing poppy that autumn, and with only minimal pressure from the Taliban government. A field study conducted by the UNDCP² in early 2001 in the two main opium producing provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar, as well as in other regions under Taliban control, showed that the surface area dedicated to poppy cultivation had decreased from 71,000 hectares (170,000 acres) in 2000 to only 27 hectares (65 acres) in 2001.

Mullah Omar's decree likely aimed to eliminate one of the main obstacles to recognition of the Taliban by the United Nations, while at the same time the Taliban believed it was in a position to finally defeat the forces of the Northern Alliance, led by Ahmed Shah Massud, in 2001. United Nations sanctions reinforced "hardliners" within the Taliban movement, who ordered the destruction of the giant Buddhas in Bamyán. This

move erased any benefits the Taliban hoped to gain from its crackdown on opium production. It cannot be ruled out that Pakistani and Central Asian drug mafias compensated the crackdown financially, fully or in part. With large stocks of opium accumulated during the past two years' record harvests, heroin prices threatened to collapse on the international market.

The UNDCP proved unable to evaluate the situation in regions where poppies had been cultivated on 12,000 hectares the previous year, in particular in areas controlled by the Northern Alliance (3,000 hectares). Heroin seizures in Tajikistan have failed to decline so far this autumn, though it is unknown whether the confiscated narcotics originate from "stocks", or whether they come directly from cultivated areas.

It is likely that narcotics help finance fundamentalist groups in Central Asia, such as that of Juma Namangani, one of the founders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, whose bases are located in northern Afghanistan. In 2000, after leading 750 men on an incursion into Kirghizistan the previous year in an effort to reach Uzbekistan, Namangani had to retreat, but not before inflicting heavy losses on that country's police forces. He and his men then entered Afghanistan and, changing strategies, infiltrated in small groups into northern and wes-

Cont. on p. 2

N° 1 - October 2001

MACEDONIA

Dangerous Liaisons of Albanian Insurgents **P. 2**

NEPAL

Trafficking in Cannabis Products and Maoist Rebellion **P. 5**

NIGERIA

The Fight Against Drugs : New Ambitions **P. 6**

SPAIN

Galician Traffickers Change Tack **P. 8**

1• Notably those of the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) and the authors of the Geopolitical Drug Watch (OGD) Annual Report 1998-99.

2• UNDCP Global Impact of the Ban on Opium Production in Afghanistan, July 2001 (second update).

tern Uzbekistan. According to a correspondent of the French daily *Le Monde*³, "This young warlord [Juma Namangani], whose brutality is legendary, allegedly seeks to control the prime drug transit routes in order to increase his market "area", and thereby his power." It is noted that the incursion in

2000 occurred almost exactly one year after that of 1999. Both came just after the opium harvest, as if their aim was to gain control of transit routes for the fruits of the harvest. While Ben Laden probably does not need to revert to drug money to finance his anti-Western struggle, this is not the case for those local

warlords who hope to destabilize Central Asia, still under Russian influence.

3• Sophie Shihab, "L'Onde de choc de la Guérilla islamiste s'étend en Asie centrale", September 9, 2000, p. 2, and "Uzbek Rebels Head for Ferghana" in "Intelligence", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 18, 2001.



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