



Transnational Institute



Drug Policy Briefing



No. 10 – January 2005

Plan Afghanistan

In the first week of November 2004, in the Khogiani and Shinwar Districts in eastern Nangarhar Province, an unidentified airplane flew back and forth spraying herbicides over opium poppy fields. The chemicals did not only destroy the poppy crop, but also ruined fruit and vegetables and affected the health of villagers and their livestock. A few days after the aerial spraying, locals informed the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) news agency that children had developed eye complaints and were suffering from diarrhoea, and some others had skin irritations. An eye witness from the village of Nakakhil in the Khogiani District told AIP two weeks later: "Children (...) still have a discharge in their eyes and have now developed white patches on their faces. The chemical has damaged wheat, tomato plants and other crops." He added, "people do not eat the surviving vegetables since they are afraid that they all might have been affected. People still do not drink water from the village wells and bring clean water on animals' backs from remote areas."¹ The Afghan Transitional Government dispatched a delegation to investigate the matter.

Dozens of villagers showed up at hospitals with skin ailments and breathing problems. Dr. Mohammed Rafi Safi of the Khogyani District Hospital said he treated 30 Afghan farmers who allege their opium crops were sprayed. Skin diseases, and eye and respiratory problems had increased. On November 29, the Public Health Minister Dr Sohaila Sediq presented a report prepared by the joint delegation of the Health Ministry and the Agriculture Ministry that confirmed the aerial spraying. The herbicides left negative effects on the environment and caused asthma and diarrhoea, and contaminated water.² The delegation returned with samples of the tiny grey pellets, the size of grains of sugar, that were sprayed on the crops, as well as soil for analysis. Attempts to identify the chemical have had no result so far, but seem to exclude glyphosate – the herbicide used by the US in Colombia to eradicate coca bush and opium poppy – as well as mycoherbicides, or fungal herbicides. Mycoherbicide technologies have been developed with support of the United Nations, the UK and US at the Institute of Genetics and Experimental Biology, a former Soviet biological warfare facility in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.³

The spraying is something of a mystery. Many pointed to the United States and the United Kingdom, the two main donors involved in efforts to combat the opium industry in Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai called in the ambassadors of Britain and the US to explain the aerial spraying in Nangarhar – one of the main opium cultivation areas of the country. Both denied any involvement. However, Haji Din Mohammed, the governor of Nangarhar, did point to the fact that "the Americans control the airspace of Afghanistan, and not even a bird can fly without them knowing."⁴ Karzai's spokes-man Jawed Ludin said: "It is not just serious for us because of some health problems, it is not just serious

1. *U.S. Aircraft Reportedly Employed Against Poppy Fields In Eastern Afghanistan*, Afghan Islamic Press (via Radio Free Afghanistan), 9 November 2004; *Chemical sprayed on Afghan poppy fields now causing "skin patches"*, Afghan Islamic Press (via BBC Monitoring Service), 26 November 2004. According to Agence France Presse (AFP) fields in Hakimabad and neighboring villages in Khogyani, Shinwar and Achin districts were sprayed. *Afghan opium farmers say crop spraying made them sick*, AFP, 27 November 2004.

2. *Afghan cabinet expresses disapproval of spraying poppy fields*, Radio Afghanistan (via BBC Monitoring), 29 November 2004.

3. See: *Chemical and Biological Warfare* at <http://www.tni.org/drugschembio-docs/chembio.htm>

4. *Afghan Poppy Farmers Say Mystery Spraying Killed Crops*, The New York Times, 5 December 2004.

for us because it harms the other crops, it is being taken very seriously because it affects the national integrity of our country.”⁵

The illicit opium industry is a major problem for Afghan authorities. Opium cultivation in 2004 in Afghanistan increased by two-thirds, reaching an unprecedented 131,000 hectares, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its 2004 Afghanistan Opium Survey that was released on November 18. Opium cultivation spread to all 32 provinces – making the illicit industry the main engine of economic growth and the strongest bond among previously quarrelsome populations. At present the opium economy is valued at \$2.8 billion, equivalent to about 60% of Afghanistan’s 2003 GDP. The opium economy involves 2.3 million people, one in 10 of the Afghan population. It is supplying 87% of the world demand for opium and heroin, which mainly ends up in Europe.

President Karzai said fighting the booming opium trade is a top priority, following the UN report, but he rejected a US proposal to spray poppies with herbicides, citing health risks and environmental safety concerns.⁶ Reports suggest, however, that discussions have taken place between Afghan and US authorities concerning the introduction of aerial eradication programmes to Afghanistan. While visiting Afghanistan, US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld pointed to the drug war in Colombia as a model for efforts in Afghanistan.⁷ Aerial eradication is a crucial component in the US strategy in Colombia. An un-dated internal presentation of the US Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) outlined a potential aerial eradication programme. “President Karzai not yet convinced of the safety of an aerial programme; will continue to work with him to overcome objections”, the memo said.

The spraying took place at a crucial moment in Afghanistan. While Karzai was elected as president on 5 November, some in the US administration were pressing to step up US involvement in drug control. The new approach emerged from a high-level administration review in the summer of 2004 of US operations in Afghanistan.⁸ The review acknowledged the seriousness of the drug problem and the ineffective past measures to confront it. The Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Robert Charles, presented the result of the review at a November 17 briefing. He announced the proposed new US strategy as Plan Afghanistan, a near exact copy of Plan Colombia that was introduced in 2000 to attack coca cultivation and stop the insurgency in Colombia.

The US Congress is asked to provide nearly \$780 million in anti-drug aid to Afghanistan over the next three years: \$173 million for interdiction, \$180 million for law enforcement and judicial reform, \$5 million for a public information campaign, including broadcasting anti-drug messages from supportive mullahs, \$120 million for programmes to develop alternative livelihoods for farmers, and nearly \$300 million for eradication programmes.⁹ Charles said: “We intend to be very aggressive, very pro-active.” The proposal is not yet secure and is controversial within Washington’s policy-making corridors. The first battle the drug warriors in the Bush administration – and their allies in Congress and elsewhere – have to wage is against the US military. The State Department and a number of lawmakers have been lobbying the military for more than a year to help the counter-narcotics effort, arguing that squeezing drug profits is essential to strangling the insurgency. They argued for direct US military action in efforts to control the opium industry. Afghan forces are not able to manage enforcement actions alone or ensure security for aerial spraying and other eradication efforts.

5. *Karzai grills British officials over 'illegal' poppy crop spraying*, The Independent, 1 December 2004; *British troops wage war on Afghan drugs*, The Observer, 5 December 2004

6. *Afghan president opposes aerial spraying of opium crop*, Associated Press, 19 November 2004

7. *Rumsfeld In Kabul For Drug Talks*, International Herald Tribune, 11 August 2004

8. *U.S. Plans Assault On Afghan Heroin*, The Washington Post, 15 November 15 2004; *Poppy Crackdown Could Alienate Warlords And Imperil Afghan Poll*, Say US Generals, The Financial Times, 3 January 2005.

9. *An Afghan Quandary for the U.S.*, Los Angeles Times, 2 January 2005.

Senior US commanders and Pentagon civilians, however, fear that regional warlords, who control security in large parts of Afghanistan and generate huge profits from the drug trade, could turn against the central government if poppy eradication is pushed too hard. Entangling US troops in drug eradication would alienate many Afghans – some of who have become useful intelligence sources in the battle against Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants – and also divert attention from the core US military missions of combating insurgents and aiding reconstruction. They warn that attempts at mass crop eradication in spring of 2005, during the campaign for parliamentary elections scheduled for April, will alienate rural voters.

The advanced plans by the US to halt poppy production by spraying the crops from the air are also being challenged by the UK government, the World Bank and Karzai. The confrontation threatens to expose the newly elected president's limited political control in Afghanistan and could see him challenge for the first time the US who effectively delivered him to power. It will also test US and UK co-operation in joint efforts to limit the flow of heroin that is mainly going into Europe. The UK serves as the lead coalition nation for international counter-narcotics policy and assistance in Afghanistan. Both the US and UK authorities fear that unless poppy production is urgently tackled, Afghanistan will quickly descend to the level of a corrupt narco-state where terrorism will spread. But the US and the UK governments disagree on how to tackle the issue.¹⁰

The UK favours manual eradication with offers to farmers of alternative livelihoods, to the US strategy in Colombia of spraying crops. The UK approach is labelled by US officials as naïve and insufficient. Assistant Secretary of State Robert Charles accused Britain of squeamishness during a hearing in the US Congress entitled, 'Afghanistan: are British counter-narcotics efforts going wobbly?' British diplomats were reported to be furious. Britain sees the criticism of its counter-narcotics strategy as unfair. It says the approach will be effective in the long term. Critics of widespread, immediate eradication argue that eradication in the absence of existing alternative livelihood options may contribute to the likelihood that farmers will cultivate opium poppy in the future because of increasing opium prices and the need to pay deepening opium based debts towards local warlords and traffickers. Afghanistan's National Drug Control Strategy expects that farmers with a "legacy of debt" will find that their "situation will be exacerbated by eradication efforts."

A September 2004 British government report argues that "if not targeted properly, eradication can have the reverse effect and encourage farmers to cultivate more poppy to pay off increased debts." Experts in the field said, that traders welcomed U.S. calls for crop eradication. After three massive harvests, prices had fallen from \$600 to \$90 per kilo, but after announcement of eradication they jumped to \$400. Prices settled back to \$300 for current sales, but futures prices went to \$400 for delivery in two months and \$500 for three months. Traders are confident that by April 2005 the price will reach \$1,000 per kilo. Then they will sell. The higher price will signal that it is profitable to grow opium in remote areas with lower yields, leading to the migration, not elimination, of the crop.¹¹

The US State Department also demanded UNODC support for an aggressive opium eradication policy for Afghanistan. The release of the UN opium survey was originally scheduled on 4 November and seemed to be calling for a careful approach. However, the head of the UNODC, Antonio Maria Costa was summoned to Washington on 10 November and the report was delayed. The UN report was now only released after Assistant Secretary of State Charles announced the Colombia-style US\$ 780 million Plan Afghanistan on 17 November. One day later Costa presented the UNODC survey. He stated "in Afghanistan, drugs are now a clear and present danger," and talked about "the strong links between drugs and terrorism." He also called on NATO and US-led coalition forces to engage in counter-narcotic initiatives and on president Karzai to start "a significant eradication campaign." In response to the US pressure Karzai has started a quite devastating eradi-

10. *Afghans try to curb drugs trade*, The Guardian (UK), 6 October 2004; *British troops wage war on Afghan drugs*, The Observer, 5 December 2004

11. *A War on Drugs, or a War on Farmers?* Wall Street Journal, 11 January 2005.

cation and enforcement of the opium ban that was issued in January 2002. This already led to shoot outs with government troops who were destroying opium poppy crops. A repetition of 2002 seems likely, when farmers barricaded the major highway linking Pakistan and Afghanistan, and armed clashes between opium farmers and Afghan eradication teams killed 16 people. Eradication teams employed by provincial authorities routinely faced small arms fire and mined poppy fields.

The future of the drug war in Afghanistan will depend on ongoing policy battles in Washington, and the ability of the State Department to convince its international allies in Afghanistan – the UK in particular – and President Karzai. Since the announcement of Plan Afghanistan, under pressure from Mr. Karzai, US allies, and the US military, the US administration is considering reallocating the US\$ 152 million already programmed for the near term aerial eradication in the spring of 2005. That would be a change in the right direction, if the administration adds these funds to the US\$ 120 million it had allocated to alternative livelihoods for rural communities, a mere 15% of a total program of US\$ 780 million. Assistant Secretary Robert Charles knows that an aggressive aerial eradication campaign is only conceivable with sufficient air support that exceeds current U.S. capabilities in the region. It seems that the State Department had to back off at least for the time being. However, Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice left the door open to spraying. "At this point, manual [eradication] is all we can do, but we'll see whether aerial is needed," she said.¹²

The Colombia-style Plan Afghanistan should also consider that the Plan Colombia spray programme by one key measure of success – the price, purity and availability of cocaine in the US – has failed utterly. If the aerial spraying were in fact making the product scarcer, according to the law of supply and demand cocaine would be more expensive on the streets. That has not happened. Citing data from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the Washington Office on Latin America has documented declining cocaine prices and steady cocaine purity levels since the mid-1990s. In 1997, the year significant spraying got underway, the average price of a gram of cocaine on US streets was US\$ 145. By mid-2003, it had fallen to US\$ 106.¹³

While the spray program appears to have significantly reduced the measured area of coca cultivation in Colombia, from 169,800 hectares in 2001 to 113,850 hectares by the end of 2003, the amount of spraying required to achieve that reduction – 11 hectares sprayed for each hectare reduced in 2003 – is enormous.¹⁴ Aerial herbicide spraying in Colombia has failed and there is no reason to believe it will work in Afghanistan. It would alienate a large segment of the Afghan population from the positive changes towards democracy and reconstruction. As the chancellor of Kabul University, former finance minister Ashraf Ghani, recently wrote, "Today, many Afghans believe that it is not drugs, but an ill-conceived war on drugs that threatens their economy and nascent democracy."¹⁵

12. *U.S. Backs Away From Afghan Aerial Spraying*, Los Angeles Times, 22 January 2005.

13. *Are We There Yet? Measuring Progress in the U.S. War on Drugs in Latin America*, WOLA Drug War Monitor, December 2004.

14. *Colombia, Drugs and Security: On the problems of confusing drug policy and security policy*, TNI Drugs Policy Briefing nr. 9, January 2005.

15. *A War on Drugs, or a War on Farmers?* Wall Street Journal, 11 January 2005.