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# Getting to market

## Trafficking takes it easy

Developments in the countries around Afghanistan have led to the expansion of less regulated 'northern' trafficking routes

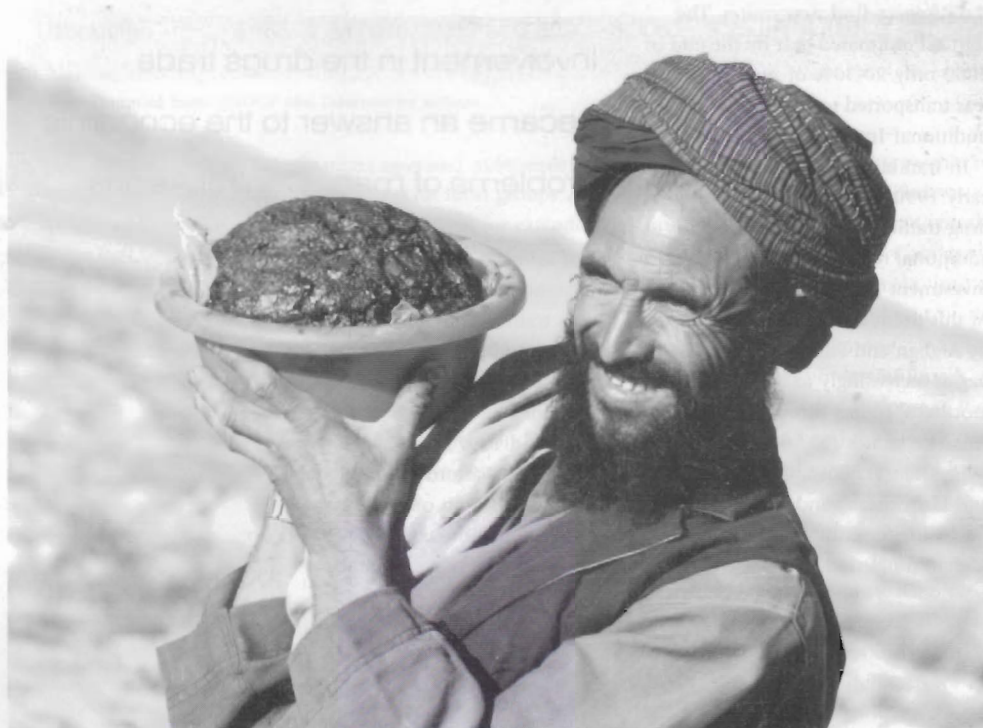
**T**he history of the international drugs trade is full of examples of law enforcers and governments being forced to catch-up with evolving activities of traffickers. In many ways this is inevitable but the policy formers and performers can even the odds if they immediately respond to evidence of changes in drug trafficking patterns.

This pre-emptive approach might have been successful with the growth of 'northern' trafficking routes over the past decade. But, despite evidence that illicit opiates from Afghanistan were increasingly passed through the republics of Central Asia and the Russian Federation, most European analysts mistakenly believed these routes would not reach them.

### Early indicators

Then, during an international conference in Hungary in 1998, Marc Pasotti of the United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention noted: 'the Central Asian CIS republics and Russia are being increasingly used as a shortcut for heroin supplies to Western Europe in place of the Balkan route.'

Three major factors were responsible for the growth of 'northern' trafficking routes: Iranian aggressive action against trafficking, increased opium production in Afghanistan,



and the post-independence environment of the former Soviet Union.

With considerable support from Western states and the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), the Iranian government embarked on a strict anti-drugs campaign in the mid-1980s. A system of channels, concrete dams, sentry points, and observation towers was constructed and over 30,000 law enforcement personnel were deployed to guard its border with Afghanistan. This disrupted the flow of illicit narcotics entering Iran.

In 1999 Iran confiscated 204.5 tons of opium, more than 80% of global seizures that year. Iran also confiscated approximately 20% of

global heroin (6 tons). The UNDCP estimated that by the end of 2000 only 20-30% of Afghan heroin was transported to Europe via the 'traditional' Iranian-Turkish route, at least 50% of heroin consumed in Europe went through Central Asia.

These efforts have not completely eliminated drug trafficking through Iran (the government estimates that it only seizes 20% of drugs entering its territory). Even so by the early 1990s these interventions placed drug trafficking operations under considerable pressure.

To diversify their risks, traffickers were forced to find additional routes to transport shipments of illicit opiates from Afghanistan.



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According to statistics from the UNDCP, production of opium in Afghanistan increased 100% between 1988 and 1991. Between 1991 and 1999 production expanded from an estimated 2,000 tons to a record 4,600 tons. By the end of 1999 Afghanistan was said to produce 75% of the global supply of opium, from which 80% of global heroin was produced.

#### Favourable environment

For Afghan opium production to be a profitable enterprise the narcotics have to be transported to external markets. Therefore, increased production in Afghanistan drove traffickers to find new routes. The UNDCP estimated that by the end of 2000 only 20-30% of Afghan heroin was transported to Europe via the traditional Iranian-Turkish route.

In Iran and Afghanistan by the early 1990s evidence suggested that drug traffickers were searching for additional routes to ensure that their investment potential was maximised. At this point traffickers – dominated by Afghan and Pakistani traders – began increasingly to look at ‘northern’ routes through the Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and Russia. It took little time for criminal groups in the Afghan drugs trade to realise that, for

many reasons, the former Soviet republics offered a favourable trafficking environment.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union borders between newly independent states instantaneously became extremely porous. For example, national border guards and customs services in Central Asia were not established until 1993-4. They remain ill-equipped, under-funded and under-trained in counter-narcotics operations. Thus where borders are manned security personnel are unlikely to detect shipments. If they do they can often be convinced to turn a blind eye.

Some regional analysts estimate

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that as many as 50% of law enforcement and customs officials cooperate with traffickers in some way.

A second factor that helped attract traffickers to the ‘northern’ routes was the civil war in Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997. The war gave rise to numerous warlords with personal militias. With no other access to money, the militias used trafficking to raise funds to purchase arms.

As part of the peace settlement many of these individuals were integrated into the Tajik government. Given the lucrative nature of the trade, they did not sever their criminal ties.

The continued involvement of Tajik officials in trafficking narcotics was revealed in May 2000 when two cars from the Tajik embassy were stopped outside Almaty, Kazakhstan. On the spot authorities confiscated 63kg of heroin, US\$54,000 in cash, and a banker’s cheque for £1.26 million. An additional 24kg of heroin was later found in the flat of the Tajik embassy trade representative, later discovered to have ties with a drug ring based in Kazakhstan.

#### Rogue warlords

Apart from government collusion in Tajikistan, which also exists in the other Central Asian republics, several warlords discovered that more profits were to be gained if they remained separate from the state. Many of these ‘rogue’ warlords have subsequently established themselves in the Pamir region, near the Afghan border. In this area the government has no control and ‘rogue’ warlords have maintained political instability to ensure their criminal operations are not interrupted.

These traffickers regularly conduct kidnappings and assassinations and skirmish with Tajik government forces. In this environment, most trafficking routes from Afghanistan pass through Tajik territory.

#### Poverty

Another attraction of Central Asia as a major transshipment area for Afghan drugs has been the deteriorating regional socio-economic situation. All states have been faced with high unemployment and low/unpaid wages. The United Nations Human Development Report has concluded that approximately 80% of Tajikistan and 30% of Kazakhstan citizens live below the poverty line.

Involvement in the drugs trade became an answer to the economic problems of many Central Asians. Apart from farmers willing to turn to growing drugs to subsidise their incomes, many citizens are willing to traffic small amounts of narcotics across the borders to Russia.



A recent trend in the region is the employment of youths and women as drug couriers. Since 1996 women's involvement in trafficking is believed to have increased from 3% to over 12%.

The dire socio-economic situation in Central Asia, and other countries in the former Soviet Union, made it relatively easy for criminal groups to establish and consolidate their hold over 'northern' trafficking routes.

It is little surprise that the areas through which trafficking routes pass suffer the worst unemployment and standards of living. Disproportionately young populations and large families in need of financial support compound this. One of the central transshipment points for drugs in Central Asia is the Ferghana valley (where Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan meet) - here an estimated 80% are unemployed.

Apart from exploiting the socio-economic situation to recruit people for production, refining, and trafficking of drugs, criminal groups in the drugs trade also faced an expanding market for drugs throughout the former Soviet Union.

#### Criminal opportunities

By 1998 there were 500,000 registered addicts in Moscow, 250,000 in St Petersburg, and over 500,000 in Ukraine - the 'real' number of addicts was estimated to be approximately 10 times higher. Responding to consumer demand it made economic sense to reroute trafficking 'north'.

Dealers from Afghanistan and Pakistan initially controlled drugs flowing through Central Asia. But it did not take long before regional drug mafias - with well-established relationships with government, law enforcement and military officials - took control of a steady flow of drugs from the south.

Local criminal organisations in the Central Asian republics were not the only ones to take advantage of the criminally conducive environment. More powerful criminal groups from Russia and the Caucasus were also quick to emerge on the scene, as they became aware of the opportunities from increased Afghan opiate production and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. These

<b>Drugs siezed in kilos</b>	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Kazakhstan	12,000	11,000	10,400	12,975	31,521	13,368	23,000	30,000 (Jan to Oct)
Kyrgyzstan	1,733	1,747	1,255	2,118	2,428	1,774	3,555	5,370
Tajikistan	113	321	1,750	3,565	4,533	2,951	2,000 (heroin, opium only)	7,128
Turkmenistan	n/a	n/a	n/a	14,109	41,109	24,157	39,555	n/a
Uzbekistan	6,165	3,504	3,017	7,822	3,308	3,260	4,210	3,000 (estimate)

Data compiled from UNDCP and Government sources

organisations operated independently and in alliance with local groups and were largely responsible for extending the 'northern' routes from Central Asia through Russia and the Caucasus further west.

A host of other factors have proven useful for traffickers, but those described demonstrate how by the mid-1990s it was strongly indicated that 'northern' routes deserved careful consideration.

Intricate systems of 'northern' trafficking routes have been estab-

lished to use two main routes: Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan to the Russian Federation: or through the eastern Central Asian republics across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan or Armenia, into Russia or the Ukraine and on to central and eastern Europe.

At the western borders of Russia evidence suggests that the port of Riga in Latvia, Poland and the Slovak republic are used to move drugs into Europe.

The importance of identifying these transshipment points is clear - Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece and Italy have raised concerns over increased amounts of heroin. These countries have traditionally been supplied from southwest Asia but a number of Central Asian smugglers have been identified operating in them, which suggests trends are changing.

#### Mounting concerns

In Germany mounting concerns over the role of Central Asia as a major drug distribution centre have been voiced. German government officials admit that they fear their large Central Asian community could provide a network for drug smuggling in Europe. As a result the German government announced in March that they were tightening visa restrictions for citizens of Central Asian republics.

Anecdotal evidence from government officials and individuals

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lished to ship narcotics into the former Soviet Union and further west. It is almost impossible to determine exact routes. Groups operating in Central Asia have been extremely adaptable - using new combinations of routes.

As a general trend, the division and control of routes is largely determined by the origin of the trafficking group. Central Asian and Russian groups prefer to move shipments into Kyrgyzstan via Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, then take them through Kazakhstan to destinations in Russia and further west in the Baltic states and Europe.

Groups from the Caucasus appear

associated with the drugs trade, along with increasing confiscation rates in Central Asia and in Russia, lead to the conclusion that 'northern' routes are increasingly preferred over their 'southern' counterparts.

The exact amount of drugs entering Russia from Central Asia is not known. Recent statistics from the Russian Interior Ministry note that approximately 80% of heroin seized in Russia is delivered from points in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Unconfirmed estimates suggest that in 2000 this 80% equalled 700kg – in the previous year 700kg of heroin was seized in all of Russia.

Reports that in Turkey heroin seizure rates decreased 22% between 1998 and 1999 adds

engaged in a common commercial marketing strategy – passing out free samples to increase domestic usage.

As drugs became readily available local prices dropped significantly, making them affordable to most of the population. Central Asia is a region where the traditional use of opiates has changed into recreational use.

Increased addiction rates have placed additional strains on national economies. Governments are unable to deal with associated medical costs and are faced with HIV epidemics if resources to control intravenous drug use are not available.

Closely associated with the rise in addiction is a rise in drug-related crime. Since 1991 it is

into this category. There is significant evidence to suggest that the incursions diverted the attention of regional security forces and governments from large shipments of drugs being transported through the region.

As the drug trade becomes enmeshed in the region a host of other organised criminal activities expand, including corruption. This creates a common feeling among citizens that their governments are incapable of providing individual or national security. There is also a fear that, should the drug trade continue to use 'northern' routes, the extreme repercussion would be the 'Colombianisation' of Central Asia.

It is difficult to ignore evidence that 'northern' trafficking routes play a major role in the international drugs trade. A significant percentage of Afghan drugs that pass through Central Asia are destined for a growing market in the former Soviet Union. But it would be naive to conclude that Afghan opiates are not shipped beyond Russia.

#### Poor resources

Given the relative ease with which 'northern' routes have been established they may replace their 'southern' counterparts as the dominant routes into the European market.

For this reason it is imperative for Europe to help Central Asia to counter their drug problem.

As Rustam Nazarov, head of the Tajik anti-drugs agency, stated during a television debate in February: 'Today, unfortunately, the law-enforcement agencies are, to put it mildly, insufficiently equipped to carry out the fight against drug-related crimes in comparison with the requirements. Even our agency, which is set up with the assistance of the UN, is, regrettably, neither financed nor equipped with efficient technical and communications equipment. And these problems affect the level of the fight against drug-trafficking.'

#### EU membership

The European Union must also carefully consider the consequences of granting eastern and central European states full membership.

How these states respond to the trafficking of narcotics requires as much attention as political and economic reforms.

The EU has limited influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States of the former Soviet Union and in Central Asia, but it can exert influence on the governments of eastern and central European states – using membership as an incentive.

The international drugs trade responds to the environment it operates in. Vladimir Fenopetov of the UNDCP was perceptive in stating: 'Drugs are like water. They always find the path of least resistance.' ■

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legitimacy to the claim that 'northern' routes have expanded.

In Latin America and south-east Asia, drugs undermine weak states. It appears that the impact of drugs on Central Asia has been significantly underestimated given the escalation of trafficking over the past few years. These shifting trends have impacted the region in many ways.

#### Regional implications

One of the most immediate results of the expanding drug trade in Central Asia is that all five republics have witnessed a steady rise in addiction rates. The registered number of addicts in Kazakhstan in 2000 was 19 times higher than in 1991. In Kyrgyzstan registered addicts increased by a factor of four between 1992 and 2000. Over the past decade the number of registered drug users in Russia increased 2000% and shows no signs of declining.

These increases are partially due to the dire socio-economic situation. Once traffickers began moving shipments through the region they are reported to have

estimated that crimes associated with drugs have increased by 65% throughout Central Asia. These include crimes committed by addicts to support their habit (such as theft) and violence linked with organised crime. For example, bombs set off in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 1999 and 2000 have been linked to gang disputes.

Another trend associated with 'northern' trafficking routes is instability through militant activity. This has occurred in two situations: clashes between traffickers and border guards, and military style operations to secure routes for large drug shipments.

The first is most common on the Tajik-Afghan border, where traffickers distract Russian and Tajik troops from couriers.

#### Trafficker armies

Drug profits have also been used to help traffickers raise 'armies' to protect their position in the drugs trade. In many respects the incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, in the summers of 1999 and 2000, fall

Kyrgyz government building

