

# Mission

Despite the US mantra that destroying Afghanistan's opium crop is key to defeating the Taliban, the evidence on the ground tells a different story. **Max Daly** talks to a serving British soldier about why, in the current climate, an all-out poppy eradication programme would put an end to Western efforts to stabilise a country in crisis.

“We cannot fail in this mission”, announced US drugs tsar John Walters after declaring last December that Afghanistan's opium poppies will be sprayed in a bid to prevent the country becoming what he called a “narco-state”. So far, under Afghan President Hamid Karzai's US-backed government, 7,400 hectares of opium poppies have been destroyed, mainly with a mix of farm machinery and fire.

The eradication programme, some of which is being overseen by British troops acting as ‘security’ for Afghan police, was injected with fresh urgency by the recent record opium harvest whereby production rose by nearly half to 6,700 tonnes in 2006 – more than 90 per cent of the world's supply. The use of aerial or ground-based spraying would dramatically speed up the destruction of opium poppies. Yet despite America's enthusiasm to step up eradication, Karzai had remained reluctant to give his backing for crop spraying. All officials will say is that “we are thinking about the issue and looking to see how it might proceed”.

#### HEARTS AND MINDS

The reasons for Karzai's trepidation becomes evident when the relationship between the country's cash crop and the US-led ‘battle for hearts and minds’ in Afghanistan is put into sharp focus. “As anyone on the ground out there will tell you, any serious attempt at tackling the opium trade would probably turn what is predominantly a counter-insurgency by the once defeated, but revitalized, Taliban into a full scale national uprising,” 2nd Lt Paul Harris, who served with the 3rd Parachute Regiment in Helmand Province, Afghanistan over six months last year, told *Druglink*. “The citizens of the country have too much to lose by giving up their opium, which

provides them with far more income than anything else they can produce.”

Harris says the British Army, which lost 39 troops in Afghanistan last year, is left exposed to propaganda. “The Taliban have a surprisingly sophisticated psychological operations capability, something that was under-estimated by us until well into this summer. Their tactics for manipulating the local population was an intense disinformation campaign directed against our presence in the area. The average Joe over there has no access to radio or television and has absolutely no idea what we are attempting to do in the country, and thus had little reason to disbelieve the Taliban who were telling them that we were there to destroy their opium fields and thus their livelihoods. That we did not have the capability, let alone intent to do so, was of little consequence to the local populace.”

Harris says crop eradication or replacement would only be achievable once “the insurgency had been largely eliminated, which will only happen once the ‘rent-a-soldier’ tactics of the enemy begins to fail.” He says this will occur once the public sees real improvements in the quality of their lives as a result of the army's presence, which in turn will only happen “once we are able to disengage from the direct fight, often for our lives, and focus on reconstruction: a chicken and egg situation if ever there was one”.

“Any attempt to move on the opium issue now would most likely ignite the volatile situation there and only prove the Taliban disinformation campaign true in the eyes of the public.”

#### POLITICS

“You will have noticed,” continues Harris, “in the manoeuvring and avoidance of talking about the anti-narcotics drive by anyone aware of the real

# impossible?



situation in theatre, something we call 'ground truth', like Karzai or even our own senior officers, that eradication is in all likelihood an unrealistic prospect in the short term.

"No doubt there will be some people with various interests involved, not least John Walters, who will wish to push the political issue of counter-narcotics in Afghanistan, but you will find most of them back home. These people will be mostly unaware of the intricacies of the military situation that exists in most of the southern provinces, particularly Garmiser, Helmand and Kandahar.

"The task of physically destroying these crops itself is considerable and will become a huge burden on troop resources. The issue of where the extra manpower will come from for this has also been largely overlooked. Then there is the knock on issue of the extra security that will be necessary in order to achieve this task – a huge drain on our already very limited helicopter resources and combat fighting troops (who would provide overwatch, perimeter security and the like).

"This freedom of movement will only come about once the local populations have decided to get on board with us, having seen the demise once again of any local Taliban influence, and this will certainly not happen while we are crop-spraying their fields with pesticide and generally ruining what they see as their livelihoods."

**Risky business:**  
British troops will face reprisals if crop eradication is stepped up

**SS** The Taliban have a surprisingly sophisticated psychological operations capability

## LIVELIHOODS

Lt Harris's opinions and experience of opium eradication on the ground are supported by two in-depth reports released in December.

*Afghanistan's Drug Industry: Structure, Funding, Dynamics and Implications for Counter-Narcotics Policy*, a report by the World Bank and United Nations Office on Crime and Drugs, said over the past five years, the British-led counter-narcotics strategy had penalised the country's poorest farmers and strengthened networks of organised crime, consolidating the trade among a tiny elite of traffickers.

It warned: "Strategies aimed at short-term reductions in opium production in the worst affected areas could do more harm than good, fuelling discontent and strengthening the insurgency in the volatile south of the country."

*An Assessment of the Hearts and Minds Campaign in Southern Afghanistan*, published by the Senlis Council in December concluded: "The Taliban are waging a successful hearts and minds strategy in southern Afghanistan; the international community is not. As a result, the military forces on the ground are forced to fight in an increasingly hostile environment. As poppy cultivation is deeply embedded in the social, economic and political fabric of Afghanistan and provides the only sustainable means for rural livelihoods, forced poppy eradication cannot succeed while no viable economic alternatives exist.

"Eradication creates a deep conflict between the central government and the rural communities that are dependent on poppy cultivation to survive. Poppy eradication alienates rural communities from the Karzai administration and drives them into the hands of the Taliban. The failure of counter-narcotics policies have resulted in a substantial tactical advantage for Taliban groups. These policies provide them with funds and recruitment opportunities among ruined farmers whose crops have been eradicated, and who seek revenge for the destruction of their livelihoods." •

*2nd Lt Paul Harris's name has been changed to protect his identity*