



POLITICS OF THE POPPY

As the Western powers prepare to leave Afghanistan, informed opinion concludes that the ten year war against opium growing has been an expensive failure.

Words: **Harry Shapiro**. Pictures: **David Guttenfelder**



A mother (in red scarf) and her children weep as Afghan policemen flatten her poppy field during a raid in north eastern Afghanistan. The woman's husband was killed by insurgents, she says, and poppies are her only income.

In October 2001, the US invaded Afghanistan in the search for Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, launching 'The War on Terror'. It effectively replaced 'The War on Drugs' as a key driver of US foreign policy. Or at least that's how the military and the intelligence services viewed the mission.

A year later, General Tommy Franks commander of the American forces in the Persian Gulf told the *New York Times* that "one area American troops will stay clear of is drug interdiction", adding that resolving the issue was up to "the Afghans and non-military agencies".

What he didn't say was that not only were the Americans not engaged with the opium trade, they were, according to one expert, actively collaborating with known traffickers, whose opposition to the Taliban and al-Qaeda was more important to the overall western strategic objective in the region than their drug trade activities. Dr Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, from the National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris, is a leading specialist in the politics of illicit drugs in Asia. He told *Druglink*: "Between 2001 and 2004, the CIA supported Afghan warlords long involved in drug trafficking in north, eastern and southern Afghanistan, something that had already been witnessed during the secret war in Laos or the anti-Soviet fighting in Afghanistan decades ago." In December 2010, the *New York Times* reported on the arrest of Hajji Juma Khan, jailed in the States under a new narco-terrorism law introduced in 2008. At the height of his power as a drug lord in 2006, the article pointed out, he was flying to the USA for secret meetings with the CIA and DEA.

But politicians on both sides of the Atlantic had a different and parallel agenda. Far from turning a blind eye to trafficking, a report prepared for Congress in October 2001 discussed policy options for counter-narcotics work, because of the link between insurgency, terror and the drugs trade. Three days earlier in his speech at the Labour Party conference about 9/11 and subsequent events, Tony Blair said of the Taliban, "it is a regime founded on fear and funded by the drugs trade. The biggest drugs hoard in the world is in Afghanistan, controlled by the Taliban. Ninety per cent of the heroin on British

streets originates in Afghanistan. The arms the Taliban are buying today are paid for with the lives of young British people, buying their drugs on British streets. That is another part of their regime that we should seek to destroy".

Ironic, then, that in the same year the Taliban were being portrayed as the world's drug pusher, they initiated a ban on opium production in the areas they controlled in the south of Afghanistan; overall opium production fell from 3,276 metric tons in 2000 to just 185 metric tons in 2001. There was probably no single reason why the Taliban enforced a ban; an attempt to curry favour with the West is plausible, an attempt to boost the price of opium after years of over-production even more likely, especially since exporting opium escaped any ban. But as draconian as their regime was, it still caused the Taliban problems in the battle for the hearts and minds of the growers who depended on the crop to provide the basics for their families. By 2002, tonnage had risen back to 3,400 metric tons and then soared to 8,200 metric tons in 2007. So with a political ambition to squash the trade and evidence that production levels were on the increase once more, the counter narcotics agenda was included in what now became not just the hunt for Osama bin Laden, but a much more ambitious programme of nation-building in Afghanistan.

Following the fall of the Taliban in December 2001, the Bonn Agreement set out the process by which the political groupings in Afghanistan would work together to create a democratic government. It was also agreed to establish the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help stabilise the country and assist the Afghans in developing their own security capabilities. This was followed in 2002 by a meeting of the western powers to apportion responsibility for re-building the beleaguered country. Given Tony Blair's personal commitment to tackling drugs, it was no surprise that our brief was to oversee counter-narcotics work. And, according to some critics, that's where it all started to go wrong.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles was for three years (2007-2010) the UK Ambassador to Afghanistan and Special

At Camp Hanson, in Marjah, a marine rests near an elder awaiting news of his son, arrested for allegedly building roadside bombs. Restoring security will depend in part on reviving a once thriving agricultural economy—one that does not depend on opium.

Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. His book *Cables from Kabul*, published earlier this year, is a trenchant critique of what he sees as the political and military spin surrounding supposed 'progress' in the region. He was and remains especially critical of the anti-drugs initiatives.

During the years of the Bush Administration, the British and the Americans took diametrically opposed views on the best approach to Afghanistan's drug riddle. The Americans favoured aerial spraying based on the model adopted in Colombia, energetically espoused by Cowper-Coles' American counterpart and former US Ambassador to Colombia, William 'Chemical Bill' Wood. By contrast, the British were minded to go for less inflammatory approaches, such as crop substitution and rural development. Cowper-Coles revealed that before he arrived, the British had resorted to a secret programme of buying up and destroying the opium crop as a way of keeping it out of the hands of the drug lords. "It was a ludicrously expensive programme that ran completely out of control and had to be stopped," says Cowper-Coles. The problem was that as soon as the farmers realised they were being effectively paid not to grow opium, they simply grew more.

At the same time, The US started an equally secret spraying programme which aimed to render the plants infertile. "This didn't work either," says Cowper-Coles, "and we got the blame for that. Why? Because however flawed our plans were, we knew that spraying was absolutely the wrong approach. It would have turned an insurgency into an insurrection". In fact, says Cowper-Coles, when the British went into Helmand Province in 2006, not only did they make it clear to the locals that they weren't there to eradicate poppies, but they actually gave back confiscated opium. In the second volume of his diaries, former Labour MP and minister Chris Mullin, recounts that in May 2007, Norine MacDonald, founder of the International Council on Security and Development (formerly the Senlis Council who campaigned for the legalisation of opium for medical purposes), told him that a few weeks before, the Brits dropped leaflets saying, 'We're not the ones who

are destroying your crops'. According to Mullin it "led to a dust-up with the Americans resulting in our having to apologise".

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Mullin also wrote that he attended a meeting in 2007 with Tony Blair and Tobias Ellwood, a Conservative MP and former Army captain who became interested in terrorism following the death of his brother in the Bali bombing of 2002. Ellwood had a plan for phasing out opium cultivation slowly over a number of years while phasing in alternative crops. Apart from wheat, he says "in the 1970s, Helmand grew more peanuts than California and there was a substantial income to be made from pomegranates". But it became clear that while the PM was warm to the idea, he actually had very little influence amid the competing agendas within the plethora of international community interests operating in the region.

Writing about becoming Ambassador in 2007, Cowper-Coles wrote: "In London, and in Kabul, we assembled vast, multi-disciplinary teams of officials and agents and officers charged with working with the Americans and the Afghans on somehow collapsing the Afghan drug economy. In my first year

in Kabul, I spent more time and effort on this subject than any other, almost all of it wasted. The energy and enthusiasms of our teams of young advisors knew no bounds. The funds were received from London seemed almost limitless. But in truth, we made little headway in interfering with market forces far more powerful than the governments trying to counteract them."

Until then, the idea that the Taliban and al-Qaeda earned most of their money from drugs went unchallenged. Internationally, the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) was especially vocal in this respect and kept up the political pressure on the Coalition forces for robust targeting of cultivation and trafficking. As recently as 2009, in its report *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency*, the UNODC claimed that the Taliban were at the centre of a "perfect storm of drugs and terrorism".

The arrival of President Obama in 2009 initiated a policy shift away from crop eradication and towards alternative rural development, as the White House became more convinced that eradication simply pushed farmers into the arms of the Taliban. There was also increasing evidence that the Taliban were earning far more money from sources other than opium, while al-Qaeda's drug-derived income was apparently relatively limited. Even in the small print of their 2009 report, the UNODC admitted that reducing opium production would have only "minimum impact on the insurgency threat". Most damning was a report published in June 2010 by Representative John Tierney, Chair of the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, which detailed how the Taliban were earning far more through extracting money from US contractors trying to transport aid and military supplies through Afghanistan, than they were earning from opium.

There was an unprecedented spike in opium output through the mid 2000s, since when levels have fallen back to late 90s levels at 3-4000 metric tons. Although the US is no longer funding the Afghan eradication programme in Kabul, some provincial governors have enforced a ban on cultivation – and the 2010 crop was hit by poppy blight, although this is likely to be a temporary setback. So while



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the amount cultivated has fallen back to previous levels, this is still more than enough to provide over 90 per cent the global heroin demand.

Most experts agree that it is impossible to deal with opium cultivation in isolation. Instead, the way forward for the future of Afghanistan as a whole, is described by Cowper-Coles as a 'double-decker' solution: "The top deck is a meeting of all the players in the region who all have a major stake in dealing with Afghanistan's drug problem; Iran for example, has lost thousands of border guards in battles with drug traffickers." Along with Russia and Iran, Afghanistan has one of the highest rates of addiction in the world. Pakistan has serious drug problems while Turkey is only too aware that its ability to deal with the traffic is critical for its application to join the

EU. "Unfortunately," says Cowper-Coles, "only the US could broker such a meeting and currently shows no enthusiasm for the idea."

But what about the 'bottom deck' – the future of Afghanistan itself? Vanda Felbab-Brown from the Brookings Institute is a prolific writer on Afghanistan. Her prognosis, with major troop withdrawals on the horizon, can only be described as bleak. "Under the most auspicious circumstances, with a very determined and systematic process towards security, the rule of law and economic development, it [dealing with the opium problem] is still a two decade project. As things stand, the country could go on growing opium for ever."

***Cables from Kabul* by Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles is published by Harper Press**