

# The Drug Crime Threat to Countries Located on the ‘Silk Road’

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## **Core Problem: Drug Production in Afghanistan**

The efforts by the international community and by the Afghan government have finally resulted in some progress in the eradication of illicit opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. As an indication of effective efforts, we have seen a 21 percent decrease of areas under cultivation in 2005 compared with the previous year. However, Afghanistan still produced 4,100 metric tons of illicit opium in 2005, the year in which, due to favorable climatic conditions, the average yield increased by 7 kg and reached 39 kg per hectare. Consequently, Afghanistan in 2005 continued to be the world's largest source of illicit opium, accounting for 87 percent of global production.

The nascent progress achieved in 2005, mainly in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan can, however, be offset by possible resumption of cultivation unless the local farmers urgently receive financial assistance to avoid starvation and a humanitarian crisis. The situation may also worsen if cultivation increases further in western Afghanistan. The illicit opium economy continues to flourish in Afghanistan. Its estimated value of \$2.7 billion is equivalent today to 52 percent of the country's licit economy. As in previous years, the ‘lion's share’ (\$2.14 billion) went to the traffickers, while the combined total profit of all opium poppy growers (\$0.56 billion) was in the range of 20 percent of the volume of the Afghan illicit opium economy.<sup>1</sup>

Conversion of local opium into heroin is increasingly common in Afghanistan, mainly for the following reason. All Afghan-based drug traffic is destined today to the lucrative illicit markets in Europe where the street price of heroin is 20-fold higher than in the areas close to the Afghan borders. The abuse of opium has no tradition in Europe whereas

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, *The Opium Economy in Afghanistan*, Sales No. E.03.XI.6, January 2003, 61 – 70. See also the subsequent UN studies in 2004 – 2005.

heroin is a rather well-known commodity for the addicts in Western Europe and — increasingly — in Central and Eastern Europe.

Consignments of heroin are also less bulky and thus easier to transport. Consequently, heroin processed inside Afghanistan makes up a large portion of the overall illicit drug traffic out of the country: 500 metric tons of heroin against 970 metric tons of opium. High demand for opium exists mainly in the Islamic Republic of Iran and about 900 metric tons of Afghan opium is annually bound for the illicit deliveries to Iran, both for local consumption and for conversion into heroin, either in Iran, or Turkey, and for further trafficking of this heroin to Europe. As a result of this, opium seizures in Iran remain the world's largest and have reached 160 tons in some years.

### **Drug Trafficking along the 'Silk Road'**

For decades, the opiates were trafficked from Afghanistan to Europe either via Pakistan, or Iran. However, in early 1990s the traffickers started to use a new transit conduit for Afghan drugs to Europe via Central Asia and the Caucasus, that is, along the 'Silk Road'. Due to the inadequate border controls between the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, the 'Silk Road' route is increasingly used for the illicit drug transit from Afghanistan to Russia, Ukraine, Eastern and Central Europe, the Baltic states and the Nordic countries. Based on the seizure-reports from the countries bordering Afghanistan, it is estimated that approximately 20 percent of all Afghan opiates, mainly heroin, are trafficked to Europe through Central Asia and the Caucasus.

A considerable portion of Afghan drugs passing through the 'Silk Road' is first trafficked into Tajikistan. The Tajik Drug Control Agency and other Tajik law enforcement agencies have increased their efforts against the Afghan-based drug traffic and jointly seized close to 4 tons of heroin in 2005. However, despite the strenuous efforts by the Tajik authorities, their Russian counterparts have lately been reporting a substantial increase in the transit drug traffic to Russia via Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. This increase could be attributed to weaker counter-narcotics efforts on the Tajik-Afghan border caused by the departure of the Russian border guards in 2005.

To fill this vacuum, the Government of Tajikistan is now strengthening controls along the Tajik-Afghan border, and is cooperating with the Afghan authorities to improve cross-border cooperation, while the Tajik Drug Control Agency has established liaison offices in Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. The Russian Federal Border Service (RFBS) and the Tajik Border Guards Service have also agreed that several advisors from RFBS will remain in Tajikistan and advise the Tajik border guards on control operations.

Turkmenistan also continues to be actively used by the traffickers for the transit of Afghan drugs to Europe as the country's extensive borders with Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are inadequately controlled. Afghan opiates are not only smuggled by land (in trucks and cars), but also by sea (on vessels passing through the Caspian Sea) and by air (on cargo planes bound for Azerbaijan and Turkey). In 2004, the volume of drugs seized in Turkmenistan reached 1.3 tons, almost tripling the figure for the year before. The seizures of heroin (266 kg) and opium (656 kg) reported by the local authorities, each represented a fourfold increase over the figures for 2003.

Uzbekistan is another transit country for consignments of Afghan opiates destined for Europe. Afghan drugs are smuggled into Uzbekistan mainly from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. According to the information provided by the Uzbek officials, the volume of heroin seized in Uzbekistan increased by almost 100 percent, from 336 kg in 2003 to 670 kg in 2004.

A rapidly increasing problem is the trafficking along the 'Silk Road' of precursor chemicals, but in the opposite direction. The traffickers are diverting precursors from the chemical enterprises or from licit trade in some countries with an advanced chemical industry, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, and China, for use in the conversion of opium into heroin inside Afghanistan. The problem is aggravated by the establishment of numerous clandestine laboratories in the northern parts of Afghanistan, closer to the border with Central Asia, to facilitate both the export of drugs and the acquisition of precursors. The 'Silk Road' is also increasingly used for the trafficking of amphetamines and other synthetic drugs from the industrialized countries to Central and West Asia where these drugs are relatively 'new' for the drug users.

### **Local Use and Impact along Smuggling Route**

So far, the domestic sales of Afghan opiates in Central Asia amount to no more than \$30 million compared to profit from their 're-export' to Russia and the rest of Europe which is estimated at \$2.2 billion, including the \$1.8 billion net profit of local organized traffickers' groups.

The above proportion may however change since drug abuse is rapidly growing in Central Asia due to the 'spill-over' effect of the transit traffic. A similar phenomenon was observed two decades ago in Pakistan. Here, the transit route for heroin from the Northwest Frontier Province to the southern ports of the country for further deliveries by sea to international markets resulted in 1.5 million local addicts to heroin, a drug of infrequent use in Pakistan up to that point in time. The incessant flow

of Afghan opiates to the Islamic Republic of Iran has also significantly increased the level of domestic drug abuse.

A similar phenomenon is being observed in Central Asia as part of the heroin smuggling route where the main drug of abuse has shifted from cannabis and opium to heroin. It is estimated that close to 1 million people in Central Asia currently use Afghan heroin. The growth in Central Asia of heroin abuse through injection has already contributed to the spread of the HIV/AIDS infection. Needle-sharing remains the main mode of transmission of HIV in the Central Asian countries, with Kazakhstan being worst affected. In 2004, over 70 percent of new HIV/AIDS cases in Kazakhstan were injecting drug users. In the case of Tajikistan, in response to the HIV/AIDS threat, the government in April 2005 endorsed a five year national program to prevent drug abuse and the related HIV/AIDS epidemic among injecting drug users.

The 'Silk Road' routes for the trafficking of Afghan heroin, *inter alia*, via Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia and the associated implications, are also affecting the South Caucasus where borders are still porous. Recent epidemiological surveys conducted in Azerbaijan and Georgia revealed a significant increase in drug abuse in these two countries. Although the volume of drug seizures remains low in countries of the South Caucasus, drug abuse is increasingly becoming a problem. In 2003, there were over 17,000 registered drug abusers in Azerbaijan, with opiates being the main drugs of abuse. About half of the persons infected with HIV/AIDS in Azerbaijan are injecting drug users. In Georgia, official estimates indicate that there were 275,000 drug users in the country in 2004, an increase of 80 percent compared with the figure for 2003.

In general, the countries located along the 'Silk Road' in Central Asia and the South Caucasus continue to experience economic and social difficulties associated with the post-Soviet transition: chronic budgetary deficits, galloping inflation, slow industrial growth, and high unemployment rates. As a result of this downward spiral in economic and social development, people have increasingly relied on drugs as a refuge from reality or as a source of financial survival.

The growing spread of drug trafficking, abuse, and crime has significantly worsened the problems faced by the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, such as institutional decay, political instability and corruption. Specifically, drug-related activities impede the establishment of sound economies and nascent democracies in the following ways:

- Illicit drug supply and the related abuse endanger the health of populations. For instance, the health costs of a drug addict appear to be some 80 percent higher than those of an average citizen;<sup>2</sup>
- The health costs to the society have tremendously increased with the current HIV/AIDS epidemic in Central Asia and the Caucasus due to the spread in early 2000s of heroin abuse through injection;
- Drug crime has serious negative implications for legal, political, economic, and social stability and the process of democratic reform. Connections between drug traffickers and organized crime and huge profits from illicit activities enable them to promote corruption, reduce the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts, and de-stabilize the process of creating democratic 'law-governed' states.
- Drug-related crime in countries located along the 'Silk Road' undermines the positive results of economic and political change, spawns extraordinary levels of violence, causes general public political and economic insecurities. Drug dealers attempt to penetrate and influence vulnerable economies, national politics, and, in some cases, foment nationalist strife and ethnic tensions, which was what happened in the Ferghana Valley. The drug traffickers, through their illicitly acquired profits, are able to nourish separatist ambitions and armed conflicts where they deem it advantageous to do so. Many commodities, including firearms, are bartered for drugs, particularly in Tajikistan and the South Caucasus countries, which are affected by military confrontation and instability;
- Societies in Central Asia and the Caucasus, in which drug trafficking and drug abuse are getting widespread, tend to be less productive economies with higher levels of violence, and distorted economies and political systems. As more resources are allocated to deal with drug-related problems, less are available for building a modern economic infrastructure and for addressing other social problems;
- The boundaries between legal business and criminal activity in Central Asia and the Caucasus are often very hazy. The mushrooming of private banks and the emergence of uncontrolled commercial enterprises provide many opportunities for drug dealers to launder money. Not only does this have significant implications for the local economies, it also undermines efforts for greater regularization and domestic controls of the commercial and banking sectors;

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<sup>2</sup> UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, 38<sup>th</sup> Session, document E/CN-7/1995/3.

- The outcome of international assistance to countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus is also being challenged by organized drug crime. This creates constant obstacles for launching modern market-oriented economies, reduces the effectiveness of the newly-established social welfare systems and increasingly infiltrates the economic, social and political texture of these societies. All in all, this has a negative impact on development and reduces the efficiency of international assistance to countries located along the 'Silk Road';
- Drug trafficking usually flourishes where state capacity is weakened—therefore, the traffickers have a vested interest in ensuring that the state remains weak. The result is the growth of corruption, which undermines the public's trust in government and breeds a loss of faith in democracy and the national economy. Drug trafficking can also hinder progress to democracy by providing justification for the maintenance of authoritarian forms of government, as a means to provide security;
- Uncontrolled profits from drug crime create a new segment of newly-rich citizens who combine ostentatious wealth with undue power. They are becoming so powerful that they can undermine state authority and legitimacy.

There exists a distinct linkage between drug crime and socio-economic problems, particularly the economic, social and political consequences of drug-related crime for the process of healthy reform, transformation and social cohesion. In short, organized drug crime in Central Asia and the South Caucasus — whether indigenous or imported — poses threats to democratic values and public institutions, to the national economy, to financial institutions, to development, and to the international community at large.

### **Strategy Against the Drug Trade**

Counter measures against the drug problem at the national level, should include the development of new institutions and also the strengthening of existing ones. Emphasis is to be placed on the strengthening of drug control capacities through:

- Promotion of operational contacts against illicit drug trafficking activities;
- Support for the national inter-ministerial drug control coordinating bodies;

- Creation of national drug intelligence units and national mechanisms for control of drugs used for licit medical purposes and for control of precursor chemicals;
- Improvement of national forensic laboratory services;
- Development of modern training techniques and other initiatives to strengthen law enforcement capabilities to interdict illicit drug traffic;
- Organization of regional workshops to promote drug control cooperation with neighboring countries;
- Elaboration of modern approaches to prevention of drug abuse.

Under the auspices of the Paris Pact — a consultative mechanism for countries affected by trafficking in opiates from Afghanistan — several round table meetings of experts were held between 2004 and 2005. These meetings brought together representatives of donor countries, assistance agencies and government representatives and focused on border controls, drugs and precursors and on the countries most affected by the Afghan-based transit drug traffic.

Russia hosted the Paris Pact Expert Round Table in June 2004. Followed by Pakistan in March 2005, and Iran in September 2005. Turkey hosted the Round Table in Istanbul in October 2005, and presented proposals for the “Istanbul platform”, which contained, *inter alia*, the creation of a regional coordination and analysis unit for Turkey and its neighbors and also the setting up of a regular dialogue between drug and police liaison officers from several countries stationed in Turkey, other Balkan countries and in some countries of the South Caucasus.

Under the auspices of the Paris Pact, the Central Asian countries and donors organized several coordination meetings to improve provision of data on drug seizures and the local drug situation. New regional initiatives have started in Central Asia with international support. These include regional cooperation to intensify laboratory development and forensic analysis, controlled deliveries, regional law enforcement training, and improved control of precursor chemicals. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have already initiated new cross-border cooperation action.

The countries located on the ‘Silk Road’ have also focused on stronger national and regional measures to combat the growing threat of illicit opium poppy cultivation and opium production in Afghanistan. The legal basis for concerted counter-narcotics action by the Central Asian countries was first established with the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Subregional Drug Control Cooperation signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on May 4 1996 in Tashkent. Russia and the Aga Khan Development

Network (AKDN) committed itself to the MOU in January 1998, and were followed by Azerbaijan in September 2001.

During the last 10 years, the MOU has been very instrumental for launching various cross-border and other cooperation measures by the Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan and Russia. The MOU has also promoted policy-level cooperation in countering the drug-related problems in the 'Silk Road' countries. According to the MOU, the parties periodically host, on a rotational basis, high-level meetings to review the evolving drug situation in Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Russia and in identifying priorities for coordinated responses.

The Afghan-based drug crime threat to the 'Silk Road' countries as well as the need for an effective response was the main subject reviewed at the sixth high-level meeting of parties to the Memorandum hosted by Russia in Moscow in December 2004. The participants jointly discussed measures to strengthen drug control security belts around Afghanistan and to suppress the supply of precursor chemicals used for the heroin production inside Afghanistan. They also reached an agreement on the creation of the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC) and on strengthening joint activities against the illicit trafficking of precursors through their territories to Afghanistan. Following these agreements, the creation of CARICC is well underway in Central Asia and a meeting of the Central Asian Support Group for Precursors Control, established under the ongoing UN technical assistance project addressing all five Central Asian countries, was held in 2005.

The Central Asian countries also plan to create a Regional Resource and Training Centre on drug demand reduction and HIV/AIDS prevention and care among injecting and other drug users, based on the significant progress already achieved in Kazakhstan. This Centre will facilitate the exchange of expertise, experience and scientific knowledge on drug abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention among professionals from the Central Asian countries, Russia and Azerbaijan.

The emerging evidence on the links between organized crime and terrorist groups in Central Asia has led to a renewed effort in counter-terrorism at the regional level. A workshop on the national legislation of the Central Asian countries, Russia and Azerbaijan was arranged in relation to the legal provisions of the 12 universal conventions and protocols against international terrorism, as well as Security Council Resolution 1373. The workshop also provided training for national judicial and law enforcement practitioners from agencies involved in extradition and money laundering casework. The workshop resulted in recommendations for new assistance requirements in counter-terrorism areas.

## **Conclusions**

There is still a large gap between design and implementation of the drug control programs in most of the countries located along the 'Silk Road', partly because of the continued weaknesses in the legislative framework, but even more because of lack of resources. The main requirement, therefore, is to close the gaps between the declaratory and operational levels and between needs and capabilities, through the provision of further resources. The drug problem needs to be given a much higher priority in all countries affected by the Afghan-based traffic along the 'Silk Road'.

All in all, the real success of the remedial measures taken, or to be taken, in the 'Silk Road' countries will largely depend on the full recognition, both at the domestic and international levels, of the severity of the problem, including its implications for economic and social stability, as well as on the political will to act by the governments of the Central Asian and the Caucasus countries.