

# Perilous Afghan undercurrents

**The Washington Times**

**April 28, 2004**

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The recent combat death of former NFL football player and U.S. Army Ranger Pat Tillman refocuses attention on Afghanistan. Contrary to popular belief, al Qaeda and the Taliban are not the only problems blighting Afghanistan. Tangentially, a narco-undercurrent led by drug lords undermines and corrupts efforts to democratize and capitalize that country. This alternate element of power and money has grown concurrently with Afghanistan's cultivation of three-fourths of the world's illicit opium supplies. In 2003, a modest estimate of 61,000 hectares (150,670 acres) of opium was reported. This dark-side capitalist activity takes power and ability out of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's pocket, rendering him almost a titular figure. As he said March 31, 2004 at the Berlin Donor's Conference for Afghanistan: "Drugs ... are undermining the very existence of the Afghan state."

Current reconstruction equates to building on sand. However, with the proper combination of security, political and socio-economic strategies, Afghanistan can have a solid foundation.

The security realm must be address terrorism, poppy eradication and the overall need for protection. In the aforementioned conference, the removal of al Qaeda and Taliban elements was discussed as the primary combat mission of the 12,000 U.S. and 2,000 coalition forces.

However, these troops cannot attack terrorists in a vacuum; drug lords must be addressed also. Thus, to move in the right direction, an aggressive policy must command troops to search out and eradicate the opium fields found in 28 of the 32 provinces. Additionally, to ensure that the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) becomes an asset to the process, focus must shift from quantity to quality of the security.

Thus, the ANA must receive superior training and equipment while Coalition forces continue to eliminate miscreants and destroy their main source of funding - drugs.

Historically, Afghanistan's independent nature has prevented colonization. Some Afghans view America's activities as empire-building. Therefore, merely having U.S. troops will not only provoke resentment for infringing on this independence, but also it will hinder the democratic process the U.S. so proudly advocates. Hence, the security intervention needs political complements such as thwarting provincial and district corruption to provide legitimacy and stability.

In November 2002, President Karzai dismissed 20 senior officials and 80 minor officials for involvement in drug trafficking. Despite these attempts to create an uncorrupted national government, corruption remains pervasive locally.

Thus, internal and international political pressure must be applied. Only then, can law and order gain legitimacy and respect. The power of drug money involved, however, intimidates world leaders into avoiding this core Afghan problem. Still, it is vital to politically recognize the quandary.

Social efforts must examine alternate motives for selling narcotics, and the desperate lack of education. Drugs cripple Western societies. Accordingly, some Afghan extremists view selling drugs to the "infidels" as a furthering of the jihad. This Anti-Western mentality could be unraveled with education.

Corruption and instability is historic and endemic to any tribal based society that lacks proper education. Having a mere 37 percent literacy rate, Afghanistan cannot foster a viable democracy. Only once these basic needs are met, can ideas independent of the drug cycle emerge. Simply put, without universal education, there can be no democracy.

Economically, alternatives to the narco-economy can buttress the political and security tactics. Since drug lords and terrorists, not the actual opium farmers, reap the colossal rewards, alternate ways to support farmers and their families could end the conundrum. As the 1950s Turkish precedent exemplifies, a governmental buyout and destruction of farmers' narcotics products can provide needed money while curtailing the drug cycle. Afghani farmers are lured to opium cultivation due to its easy growth (opium requires less water, which is convenient in a dry area) and bountiful returns (opium returns are double those of farm food products ).

However, other options can emerge by buying out current products, installing irrigation systems, providing crop diversification, opening markets, subsidizing farmers and creating nonfarm jobs, among others.

In that conference aforementioned, Mr. Karzai pleaded that international authorities continue to help Afghanistan overcome its plague of terrorists and illegal drug threats. He said, "The problem is too huge to allow us to face alone."

Despite American impatience with international policies, eradicating a century old narco-embedded lifestyle has no immediate easy answer. Therefore, the U.S. and its allies must make a commitment to eliminating opium-influenced politics, society and economy if democracy and a capitalistic economy are truly desired in Afghanistan. These strategies will make Afghanistan a success so the lives of American, coalition and Afghani soldiers will not have been wasted.

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