

Threats to stability in Afghanistan

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By F. Andy Messing Jr

In an era of touted, pseudo- and narco-democracies, Afghanistan stands ahead of the rest. Few can dispute that Vladimir Putin's Russia, other Central Asian and many former Soviet Bloc countries calling themselves "democracies" are shams. Still, many Bush administration officials try to foster the illusion Afghanistan has merit as a democracy, despite remaining fundamental threats to the state's stability.

The Afghan people are poorly educated and have few legitimate economic opportunities. Both factors strongly indicate democratic instability. The greatest threat to President Hamid Karzai's government, however, is the persistent opium trade. As a result, the government has little chance to effectively rule the powerful drug/warlords who control the countryside. Accordingly, the dark-side capitalist economy of opium production is its own negative phenomenon antithetical to an Afghan attempt at a real democracy.

History shows it is difficult for a state to enjoy a stable and functioning democracy without an educated electorate and with scant economic opportunity. Afghanistan fails both tests.

With an adult literacy rate of just 36 percent (51 percent for men, 21 percent for women), it will prove extremely difficult for Afghans to select their future leaders when the vast majority cannot read the ballots or fathom politicians' agendas.

Lack of education and few other economic opportunities require most Afghans to depend on agriculture for survival. But subsistence crop farming is secondary to opium cultivation because the poppy yields the greatest per-acre return.

The CIA estimates this year a third of Afghanistan's gross domestic product will derive from the opium trade. The actual figure is likely much higher. The Afghan opium production is a global problem: As much as three-quarters of the world's opium supply is grown in Afghanistan. Eighty to 90 percent of the heroin sold in Europe and Russia is Afghan opium. In this regard, Russia has one of the fastest-growing rates of HIV/AIDS, due mostly to intravenous use of drugs from the Afghan region.

The wealth generated by the opium trade greatly profits the drug/warlords. Their sway in the countryside means Mr. Karzai's supposedly legitimate government has no real traction there.

A striking display of the drug/warlords' power recently came to light. Beginning May 11, thousands protested in anti-American rallies in Jalalabad and across Afghanistan over

what proved to be false allegations about Koran desecration. At least 17 died and scores were injured. There can be little doubt the drug/warlords, who want to cripple the American antidrug influence in their country, were behind the protests.

Ironically, the Allied Forces enlisted these very same drug/warlords to help topple the Taliban in 2002. The drug lords gladly did so because they stood to profit once the oppressive Taliban, who opposed the opium trade, were out of power. Now the drug/warlords want Americans out so they can continue their lucrative opium production unfettered.

There are some ironic similarities to the Soviet experience -- primarily in the 1980s -- with these malevolent drug forces pulling strings in Afghanistan's background.

Afghan hopes for democratic stability are slim. However, the Coalition can help better educate the younger Afghans. In the meantime, providing them an alternative to opium is the only way to ensure long-term stability. If the Coalition simply eradicated the opium fields, we would hinder production for a season. Teaching the farmers to grow other crops promises to achieve a more enduring success.

Mr. Karzai's recent tour of American farmland was a good first step. It showed him a profitable, legitimate agri-business.

But reducing opium is the stumbling block. A possibility is a one-time opium buy-back. Such a program helped Turkey curtail its opium production in the 1950s, helping increase state stability. That can also work in Afghanistan, if farmers are paid a fair market price for their illicit crops and receive replacement seed and support. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has already identified several high-yield cash crops that can replace opium plants. The replacement crops, coupled with new micro-industry, will give future generations of Afghans opportunities for employment besides drug production.

The European Union, Russia and the United States, among others, should work with the Afghan government to achieve an educated and detoxified society. This would help ensure a stable and democratic Afghanistan, which is in the best interests of all and vital to winning the global War on Terrorism.

F. Andy Messing Jr, a retired U.S. Army Special forces major, is executive director of the National Defense Council Foundation. Matt Adams is NDCF senior research assistant.