

AFGHAN, TALIBAN AND DRUGS

The Taliban can only be defeated if the US and the UK give up the War on Drugs and accept Afghanistan's opium economy, says DEEPAK LAL

After some dithering, US President Barack Obama has accepted the advice of his generals to add to the number of US troops in Afghanistan to drive the Taliban out of Helmand province. Once secured, the troops would maintain a presence whilst the police and development agencies moved in to restore the authority of the Afghan government, and provide the means for the economic reconstruction of the region. As a third part of the strategy, "moderate" elements of the Taliban would be co-opted into the Afghan government. This strategy echoes the path taken by Gen Petraeus to pacify Iraq as a preliminary to US withdrawal from the country. But there are grave doubts whether this strategy will succeed.

First, the desire to co-opt the Taliban is worrying. Unlike Iraq, where the insurgents were a minority and the majority could be empowered to create a relatively credible government, in Afghanistan, the insurgents are the major tribe in the region: the Pashtuns. Co-opting a Taliban committed to Wahabism will turn Afghanistan into a *de facto* Islamist state. This will provide a new base for the "jihadis", threatening its neighbours, particularly India. The Chinese, who fear Islamists destabilising Xinjiang, have rightly protested at this aspect of US policy.

Second, attempts to resurrect the traditional economy of the region, devastated by years of civil war, face insurmountable obstacles in the new narco-economy which has developed. In 2007, the southern provinces of Afghanistan provided 92 per cent of the world's opium, with a farm gate value of US\$1 billion. This opium economy provides the Taliban the money for arms, and control over the opium growing provinces by offering farmers protection from the poppy eradication programmes spearheaded by the US as part of its War on Drugs.

Third, attempts to persuade farmers to switch to legal crops from poppies will be stymied by the relative profitability of growing illegal poppies. An evaluation by the UNODC of its Alternative Development project between 1997 and 2000 in three districts of Kandahar found that though the project succeeded in raising yields of legal crops (like wheat, cumin, beans, onions and fruit) by about 90 per cent, these improvements would not have

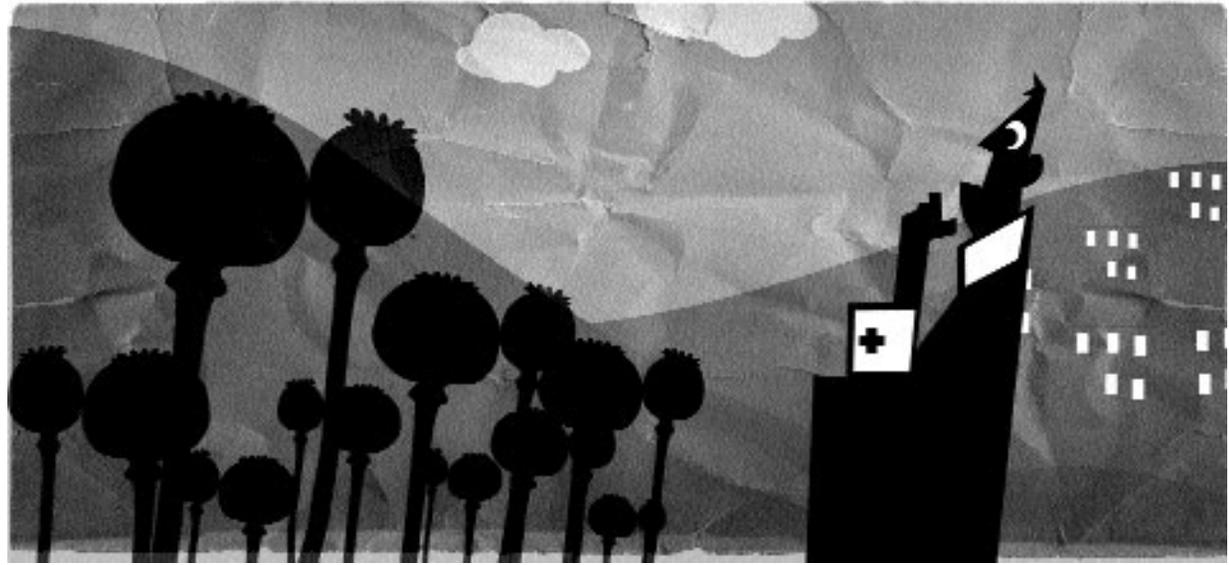


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

been sufficient to make legal crops more profitable than opium poppy. The poppy crop can also be harvested earlier than wheat, allowing farmers to double crop, growing maize after harvesting the poppies. Poppies being weather-resistant are also a more reliable crop than wheat. Opium is also easy to store, transport and sell, providing poor farmers a simple means to smooth income and thence inter-temporal consumption, in the absence of any formal credit markets. The income per hectare from opium poppy in 2000 was an average of \$16,000. As the UNDOC report on *The Opium Economy* ruefully concluded, "at these gross income levels, no other crop which could be planted on a large scale would be competitive vis-a-vis opium poppy in Afghanistan" (see my "Endangering the War on Terror by the War on Drugs", *World Economics*, 2008).

Fourth, a large illicit economy has developed after the Russian withdrawal and the civil war amongst the many Mujahedin factions, providing the infrastructure for transport, communications, arms and protection required by the various factions to retain their areas of control. The poppy economy continued to flourish under the Taliban. Though they banned the production of cannabis as it was consumed by Afghans and Muslims, they allowed that of opium which was

mainly consumed by *kaffirs* in the West! Their ban on opium in 2000 to resist international pressure on human rights was also prompted by financial motives. With the ban the price of opium in Afghanistan jumped from \$44/kg to \$350-400/kg. Before the ban, 60 per cent of the opium stock had been stored for future sales. Owners of the stocks made a killing. A substantial portion was held by Osama bin Laden and his followers, who also served as middlemen for Afghan opium producers, using this income to finance terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. (Lal, *op cit.*, n.8).

With the overthrow of the Taliban and the discontinuance of the ban, opium production soon reached the level of 2000. For the warlords, who still continue to rule much of Afghanistan, the narco-economy continues to provide a rich source of takings. In these circumstances, the Afghan war can only be won by breaking the narco-economy whilst taking on the Taliban. A rational response would be for Nato's development agencies to use the money they are currently spending on their failed economic development efforts in Afghanistan, as well as that on poppy eradication, to purchase the opium poppy crop directly from the farmers, in competition with the Taliban and drug lords. The farmers could be required to put the 10 per cent tax on income from

poppy cultivation that they currently pay to the Taliban into development funds, located and managed by locals to refurbish the destroyed agricultural infrastructure, which in time might be able to raise the productivity of alternative crops sufficiently to allow farmers to switch to non-poppy crops.

The opium purchased directly from the farmers could be used by the western development agencies to provide morphine for easing the pain associated with various terminal illnesses, including AIDS, in many parts of the Third World, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. WHO reports that 4.8 million people a year with moderate to severe cancer pain receive no appropriate treatment. Nor do another 1.4 million with late-stage AIDS. For other causes of lingering pain there are no estimates, but WHO believes millions go untreated. The vast majority are in developing countries. (Lal, *op.cit.*, n. 16). Any surplus of opium could be stored for future use for both medicinal purposes and to control the markets for opiates. But such rational solutions to defeating the Taliban, by accepting the opium economy in Afghanistan and using it to win rather than endanger the War on Terror, can only be achieved if the US and the UK give up their decades-old War on Drugs. This is the subject of my next column.