

# Taking on Trafficking

## The Central Asian Counternarcotics Initiative promises a united front against opiates

By per Concordiam Staff

On August 9, 2011, police in Tajikistan arrested three men and seized nearly 32 kilograms of heroin. The three men – a Tajik, a Russian and a Kyrgyz – formed a multiethnic gang representative of the regional spread of heroin trafficking. Almost daily, opium and its derivative heroin are smuggled out of Afghanistan into Central Asia en route to Russia and Western Europe, leaving a trail of crime and drug addiction. A month before that big arrest, the United States Department of State put forth a new plan to intensify the fight against drug trafficking in Central Asia. “The new Central Asian Counternarcotics Initiative (CACI) would establish counternarcotics task forces in the five Central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) that would collaborate with similar units that already exist in Afghanistan and Russia,” according to an article in *World Politics Review*. The U.S. State Department would pay for training of personnel and purchase much-needed equipment. Successful implementation of CACI would create a law enforcement network that, *World Politics Review* noted, “would link both the main narcotics source country, Afghanistan, with key transit countries,” allowing authorities to tackle the narcotics trafficking problem from multiple angles.





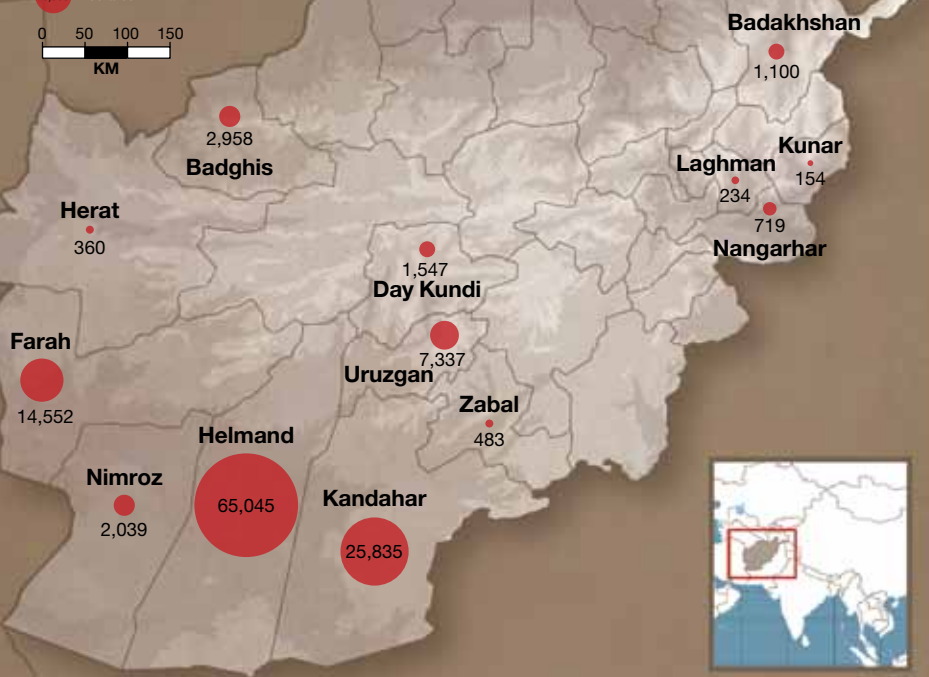
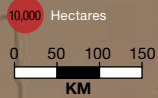
*“According to a 2010 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan produces 85 percent of the world’s heroin, and almost one-fourth of that is exported through post-Soviet Central Asia.”*



A counternarcotics specialist embedded with the U.S. Marines in Helmand province, Afghanistan, speaks with an Afghan opium poppy farmer and his sons.

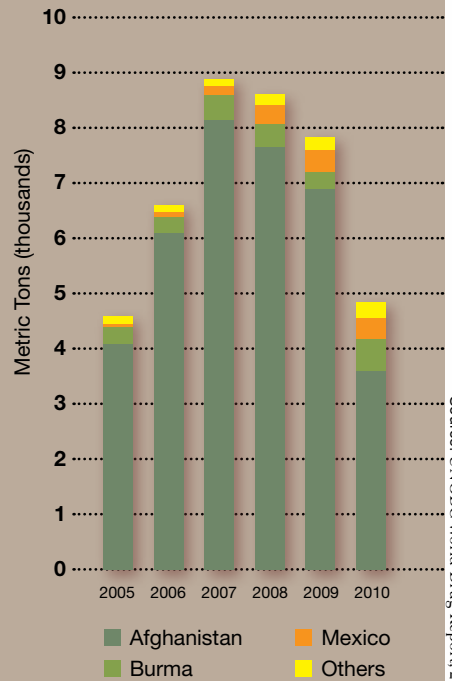
# Afghanistan

Opium Cultivation by Province



## GLOBAL OPIUM PRODUCTION\* 2005-2010

\* For Mexico, in the absence of data for 2010, the estimate for 2009 was used.



Source: UNODC World Drug Report, 2011

## A GROWING PROBLEM

According to a 2010 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan produces 85 percent of the world's heroin, and almost one-fourth of that is exported through post-Soviet Central Asia. There are concerns in the region that the impending drawdown of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan could be a boon for traffickers, leading to an increase in the exportation of opiates.

Russia, struggling with an epidemic of heroin addiction, is especially concerned. According to UNODC estimates, 1.6 million to 1.7 million Russians use illegal opiates, representing 1.68 percent of the population. Viktor Ivanov, director of Russia's Federal Service for Narcotics Traffic Control, thinks the numbers could be even higher. More than 30,000 Russians die from drug abuse every year, mostly from heroin. Ivanov told *The Independent* in 2009 that the heroin addiction epidemic is "a threat to our national security, our society, and our civilization itself." For Central Asian countries, heroin addiction has often been viewed as a problem for Russians and Europeans. But while the problem hasn't reached the same crisis level as in Russia, Central Asian countries are also experiencing rising rates of drug use and addiction.

Russia has consistently expressed dissatisfaction with ISAF efforts to curb the cultivation of Afghan opium poppies, a concern that potentially complicates the "reset" of relations between the U.S.-led Alliance and Russia. Ivanov claimed

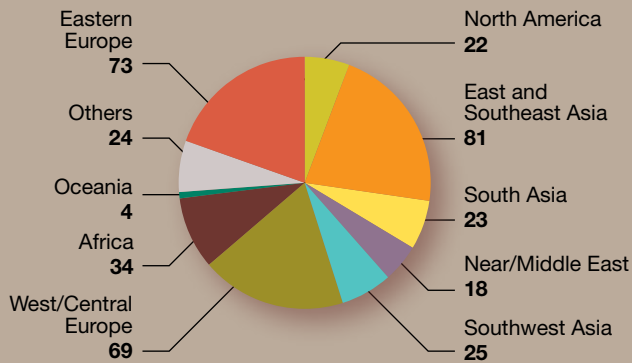
that 2009 poppy production was 44 times higher than before NATO deposed the Taliban in 2001, though that total was cut in half in 2010, mostly thanks to an opium crop disease. Health activists and Western drug treatment experts say Russian policies are partly to blame, pointing to insufficient and largely ineffective drug treatment programs and a culture that shuns treatment. Vanda Felbab-Brown, an expert on the Afghan drug trade at the Brookings Institute, noted that Russia, as successor to the Soviet Union, bears some blame for policies enacted during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. "The Russians destroyed rural Afghanistan," she told *The Washington Post*. "Traditional cultivation was destroyed, and poppies, which need no fertilizer and little rain, thrived."

Now, Russia would like to see an opium eradication program in place in Afghanistan, but the U.S., formerly a supporter, now views eradication as a counterproductive policy that serves only to alienate the local population.

## SUCCESS THROUGH COOPERATION

Still, Russia and the U.S. have continued to talk and cooperate. Despite disagreements on strategy, both governments view Afghan heroin trafficking as a serious problem. Five joint counternarcotics raids in Afghanistan from October 2010 to February 2011 netted more than 2,600 kilograms of heroin and opium and destroyed several heroin labs. The raids, conducted by U.S. military, Afghan police and Russian counternarcotics agents, were a positive example of the power of cooperation. Ivanov told Interfax in April

## DISTRIBUTION OF HEROIN CONSUMPTION BY REGION, 2009 (375 METRIC TONS)



Source: UNODC World Drug Report, 2011

2011 that there would be more joint operations between Russia, the United States, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

In September 2011, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told ITAR-TASS that he would like to see even greater cooperation between NATO and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes all of the former Soviet Central Asian states except Turkmenistan. “The Alliance currently operates in Afghanistan, and the CSTO has the appropriate force on the outer Afghan border,” said Lavrov. “Interaction in real time could improve the effectiveness of efforts to intercept the flow of narcotics.” The CSTO has conducted regular drug interdiction campaigns, dubbed “Kanal,” in Central Asia.

Tajikistan, the poorest country in the region, shares a 1,300-kilometer border with Afghanistan, much of it in the rugged Pamir Mountains. It is also the most used path for Afghan-grown drugs moving along the northern route to the markets of Russia and the rest of Europe. The Tajik government insists it lacks resources to patrol the border adequately. To a lesser extent, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan’s Central Asian neighbors that also border Afghanistan, have also struggled to impede narcotics trafficking.

The U.S. proposed CACI would help provide those missing resources. According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the seven anti-drugs agencies “would share sensitive information, improve coordination on joint and cross-border operations, and help build cases against wanted or arrested traffickers.” In June and July 2011, William Brownfield, U.S. assistant secretary for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, visited Central Asia and Russia to discuss the initiative with regional leaders and counternarcotics officials.

CACI also envisions a leading role for the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC), a regional law enforcement center based in Almaty, Kazakhstan. CARICC was formed by regional governments and the UNODC to facilitate information exchange and coordinate operational activities of various regional law enforcement agencies, primarily against narcotics trafficking.

CARICC maintains liaison relations with Interpol, Europol and the World Customs Organization.

### WILL IT WORK?

Some question whether another initiative and millions of dollars of additional aid will make a significant impact on the narcotics trade in Central Asia. Writing for the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University, professor George Gavriliis asserts that previous initiatives have resulted in only modest returns. Gavriliis blames this on “Central Asian governments’ resilient resistance to cooperating with one another even in the face of mutual security threats.” He’s also critical of claims that the international community is indifferent to Central Asia’s narcotics problems and their need for additional money to fight drugs. “The United States, European Union, and UN have extended counter-narcotics assistance to Central Asian republics that cumulatively totals in the hundreds of millions of dollars,” he notes. “Diverging interests” – not money shortages – have stymied cooperation among Central Asian governments, Gavriliis said.

Russia advocates more cooperation, but has expressed skepticism about CACI. According to *World Politics Review*, many Russians dislike the U.S. taking a prominent role in an area where the CSTO and UNODC have usually taken the lead. Russia considers the former Soviet republics to be within its privileged area of interest and opposes even the smallest U.S. military presence in the area. Russia prefers the U.S. focus on building law enforcement and counternarcotics capacity in Afghanistan. Brownfield told Radio Free Europe that the U.S. and Russia share an interest in curtailing drugs and CACI “does not require a massive presence by either the United States or the Russian Federation.”

### NO SMALL MATTER

There is plenty at stake in the battle against Afghan narcotics trafficking. Ivanov estimates that Afghan heroin is responsible for more than 1 million deaths worldwide since 2001. Opiates are a major public health problem and injecting those drugs contributes to the spread of HIV, hepatitis and other diseases. Opium cultivation also supports international organized crime syndicates and finances terrorist groups. According to the UN, narcotics trafficking is the largest source of revenue for organized crime, and the Afghan opium crop yields tens of billions of dollars in profits for drug dealers. Drugs also contribute to official corruption, damaging public institutions, degrading public services and undermining the population’s trust in public institutions.

To reduce the flow of deadly Afghan narcotics, cooperation is needed from all involved parties, regional and international. CACI provides the means to combine the unique talents and experience of security and law enforcement agencies from Afghanistan, Russia and the Central Asian republics, reinforced with advanced training and equipment, to produce the cooperation necessary to reduce the global scourge of opiate trafficking. □