

The New York Times[®]
Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



March 20, 2010

U.S. Turns a Blind Eye to Opium in Afghan Town

By [ROD NORDLAND](#)

KABUL, Afghanistan — The effort to win over Afghans on former [Taliban](#) turf in Marja has put American and [NATO](#) commanders in the unusual position of arguing against [opium](#) eradication, pitting them against some Afghan officials who are pushing to destroy the harvest.

From Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#) on down, the military's position is clear: "U.S. forces no longer eradicate," as one NATO official put it. Opium is the main livelihood of 60 to 70 percent of the farmers in Marja, which was seized from Taliban rebels in a major offensive last month. American [Marines](#) occupying the area are under orders to leave the farmers' fields alone.

"Marja is a special case right now," said Cmdr. Jeffrey Eggers, a member of the general's Strategic Advisory Group, his top advisory body. "We don't trample the livelihood of those we're trying to win over."

[United Nations](#) drug officials agree with the Americans, though they acknowledge the conundrum. Pictures of NATO and other allied soldiers "walking next to the opium fields won't go well with domestic audiences, but the approach of postponing eradicating in this particular case is a sensible one," said Jean-Luc Lemahieu, who is in charge of [the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) here.

Afghan officials, however, are divided. Though some support the American position, others, citing a constitutional ban on opium cultivation, want to plow the fields under before the harvest, which has already begun in parts of Helmand Province.

"How can we allow the world to see lawful forces in charge of Marja next to fields full of opium, which one way or another will be harvested and turned into a poison that kills people all over the world?" said Zulmai Afzali, the spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Counternarcotics.

"The Taliban are the ones who profit from opium, so you are letting your enemy get financed by

this so he can turn around and kill you back,” he added, referring to how the Taliban squeeze farmers for money to run their operations.

The argument may strike some as a jarring reversal; in the years right after the 2001 invasion, tensions rose as some Afghan officials vehemently resisted all-out American pressure to stop opium production.

Though the United States government’s official position is still to support opium crop eradication in general, some American civilian officials say that the internal debate over Marja is far from over within parts of the State Department and the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#).

A spokesman for the United States Embassy in Kabul, Brendan J. O’Brien, said officials would decline to comment while the matter was under review.

At the heart of the debate with Afghan officials is an important question of cause-and-effect: is poor security in Marja the reason there is so much opium, or is so much opium the reason there has been poor security?

“Every province in [Afghanistan](#) where you find opium cultivation, you have insecurity as a result,” Mr. Afzali said.

American military officials and United Nations drug officials see it the other way around. Opium cultivation has been largely wiped out in 20 provinces where security has been improved, and in the seven most insecure provinces, poppy is still farmed.

“Nothing can compete with opium in an insecure environment,” Mr. Lemahieu said. “A secure environment is the precondition for governance and a long-term solution.”

Although the International Security Assistance Force, the NATO force that General McChrystal commands, no longer carries out eradication programs itself, its official position is that it supports the Afghan government’s efforts to eradicate, and lends backup and protection to the provincial officials, who are responsible for carrying out the eradication program.

The ardently anti-opium governor of Helmand Province, Gulab Mangal, has a record of success, cutting back cultivation by 33 percent last year. But he, too, is willing to make an exception for the current harvest in Marja — for the moment.

“In general I’ve been told by my higher-ups that this year you will not eradicate there, because people have suffered a lot of hardships because of the fighting,” Mr. Mangal said. “We may do it next year.”

Mr. Afzali, however, said the Counternarcotics Ministry still hoped to prevail in time to eradicate the current crop in Marja.

Mr. Mangal said, "If they order me, I will start the destruction of Marja's opium the same day."

The problem of Marja's opium harvest is being discussed intensely by General McChrystal's advisers, but none of the proposed solutions have proved satisfactory. One idea was to buy up and destroy the opium harvest, but opponents of that proposal feared that it would only encourage more opium cultivation — and might be illegal under United States law, turning American troops into de facto drug financiers.

Another idea was to give incentives to farmers to change to legal crops next year, while this year concentrating on interdiction of smugglers and the laboratories they use to make opium or heroin from the poppy paste. That would institute a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" policy toward the cultivators and would present a thorny question: where would troops interdict the opium — just outside the farm gate, on the lane leading from the farm, on the road to town?

"How do you support the rule of law while providing a proper penalty and disincentive so they switch crops next year?" Commander Eggers said. "We are in a real dilemma."

There is little time left to find an answer: two-thirds of Marja's fields are now blooming with tall red poppies, and the forthcoming harvest would provide work for thousands of Afghans from outside the area because it is so labor intensive.

Helmand produces more than half of Afghanistan's opium harvest, with 22 percent of its arable land devoted to poppies, even after Governor Mangal's forces eradicated a third of the crop last year. His province was awarded a \$10 million [Good Performer's Initiative grant](#) by the American Embassy for that effort.

Afghanistan now produces 90 percent of the world's opium. And one way or another the opium trade supports an estimated 1.4 million households in the country, which has a population of 25 million to 30 million. It also provides enormous amounts of money to the Taliban, with a recent [United Nations study](#) estimating the insurgents had earned as much as \$600 million in taxes from farmers and traffickers just from 2005 to 2008.

The farmers themselves do not get rich on the harvest.

Hajji Said Gul, a 51-year-old farmer with nine acres of poppies in Marja, said that after he paid back loans to buy seeds, and gave the Taliban their 10 percent of the profits, he earned \$500 an acre with each harvest. He is not worried about eradication. "The Taliban have already promised us that they will keep fighting the government and foreign forces until we collect our

harvest from the fields,” he said. “All my hopes are related to the poppy harvest.”

Muhammad Nabi, 52, a tribal elder, said: “It’s better if they don’t destroy the crops this year. Next year, if they provide better security, reconstruction and work programs, then we guarantee they will not grow poppy.”

Opium prices now are at historic lows, after years of over-production in Afghanistan. A few years ago, farmers could earn 37 times as much from opium as from wheat, the favored substitution crop recently; now it is more like two or three times as much, United Nations officials say.

Mr. Lemahieu said he thought that provided an opportunity to persuade the farmers that if they changed to legal crops, the government would provide them with services like schools and clinics, and then they might be willing to accept lower profits.

“Between yesterday’s opium income and tomorrow’s legal income, today requires an increase in quality of life for the farmer and his family,” he said. Destroy his crop this year, Western officials say, and he won’t see anything but red.

Taimoor Shah contributed reporting from Marja, Afghanistan, and an Afghan employee of The New York Times from Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan.