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**United States General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC 20548**

**Office of Special Investigations**

B-285539

June 21, 2000

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley  
Chairman  
Caucus on International Narcotics Control  
United States Senate

Subject: Heroin Production: Southwest Asia (Afghanistan)

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As requested, enclosed with this letter is a copy of a briefing that GAO's Office of Special Investigations gave to William Olson, Staff Director, Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control on May 17, 2000. At that time, we presented the results of our work that focused on explaining the discrepancy between estimates by the U.S. government and the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) about heroin production involving Afghanistan. Specifically, we were asked to determine the reason for the discrepancy between the two entities' production estimates of the 1999 opium poppy crop production in Southwest Asia (Afghanistan) and whether Afghanistan heroin is being shipped to the United States. We were also asked to determine whether the Netherlands is a transshipment site for other drugs destined for the United States.

To address these concerns, we contacted knowledgeable officials of the U.S. government, UNDCP, and the European Police Office.

We will make copies of this letter available to others on request. If you have any questions, please contact Assistant Director Ron Malfi at (202) 512-6722. Tom Wiley was a key contributor to this case.

Sincerely yours,

Robert H. Hast  
Assistant Comptroller General  
for Special Investigations

Enclosure

**BRIEFING PAPER**  
**Southwest Asia (Afghanistan) Heroin Production Estimates**

For the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control

◆ **OBJECTIVES**

To determine the reason for the discrepancy between the published production estimations of Southwest Asia's (Afghanistan) 1999 opium poppy crop by the U.S. government and the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP).

To determine whether Afghanistan heroin is being shipped to the United States.

To determine whether the Netherlands is a transshipment site for drugs destined for the United States.

To address these questions, we interviewed officials of the U.S. government, UNDCP, and the European Police Office (Europol).

◆ **PRODUCTION ESTIMATION DISCREPANCY**

The U.S. government and UNDCP 1999 production estimates for the Afghanistan opium poppy crop were 1,700 metric tons and 4,600 metric tons, respectively. The discrepancy in the production estimate figures occurred because the two entities use different methodologies to estimate the number of hectares<sup>1</sup> under cultivation as well as different average yield factors to compute crop cultivation per hectare.

According to UNDCP officials, UNDCP's estimation methodology involves using United Nations personnel and Afghans to annually survey Afghanistan farmers who cultivate opium poppies. The goal is to have the farmers identify the approximate number of acres of their land that are cultivated with the opium poppy crop. United Nations personnel are also required to conduct their own ground observations and provide estimates of acres under opium poppy cultivation. UNDCP then uses an average yield factor—higher than the factor used by the U.S. government—to compute the crop yield per hectare. At this time, UNDCP does not utilize scientific/advanced technological methods, such as high-resolution imagery, to develop its estimate.

According to U.S. government officials, the U.S. government uses high-resolution imagery of Afghanistan to determine the number of opium poppy-cultivated hectares. The government then estimates the crop by multiplying the number of hectares by an average yield factor. U.S. officials acknowledge that the government's average yield factor is outdated and are working with UNDCP to

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<sup>1</sup> A hectare is a metric system unit for which the approximate U.S. equivalent is 2.47 acres.

provide a more accurate estimate of Afghanistan opium poppy crops. While this effort will bring the government projection of the yield per hectare closer to the UNDCP projection, a discrepancy will remain because of the large difference in U.S. and UNDCP estimates of area under cultivation.

◆ **TRAFFICKING OF AFGHANISTAN HEROIN**

The opium poppy crop that is smuggled out of Afghanistan crosses the country's borders in all directions. Countries that have common borders with Afghanistan are Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

According to UNDCP and Europol officials, drug traffickers use many routes out of Afghanistan. Those most used are the northern route; the Karachi, Pakistan, route; and the Iran/Turkey truck route. The opium poppy crop is processed into heroin in underground laboratories in Afghanistan and its bordering countries and then shipped to Western Europe and Russia through these routes. UNDCP was unable to provide information regarding large amounts of heroin being smuggled out of Afghanistan to the United States.

UNDCP and Europol officials estimate that 50 percent of the opium produced in Afghanistan is consumed in Afghanistan and its bordering countries. UNDCP officials estimated that 50 percent of the heroin produced from the remaining opium poppy crop is exported through the northern route. According to UNDCP officials, the Karachi, Pakistan, transshipment route uses cargo containers that are shipped via air or sea. This route also uses ports in African countries as intermediate stops. Drugs shipped this way are going to Western Europe, especially the United Kingdom, and possibly to North America. The Iran/Turkey truck route has an established infrastructure to support the shipment of heroin. Therefore, the heroin can be disbursed with very little worry about seizures. From Turkey, the heroin moves into Western Europe through Italy to Hungary and Germany or through the Balkans. UNDCP officials stated that it is still a time-honored tradition for some Customs officials to accept payoffs for not inspecting the trucks.

Despite Iran's effort to curtail heroin smuggling, its border with Afghanistan remains a major transshipment point for Afghanistan opium/heroin. This is a result of established routes, numerous caves for storage, and the history of trafficking drugs through Iran. UNDCP estimates that 4 percent of Afghanistan heroin has been seized worldwide and that Iran has seized approximately 55 percent of that amount.

Enclosure I

◆ **ECSTASY**

The new synthetic drug “ecstasy” is fast becoming a major problem for the world, and the Netherlands is a major producer of the drug. According to Europol officials, the Netherlands is currently the major supplier of ecstasy to the United States.

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