

Progress in Afghanistan: U.S. Releases New Poppy Cultivation Data

John Walters, Director, White House Office of Drug Control Policy; Ashraf Haidari, Political Counselor for the Embassy of Afghanistan; Michele Leonhart, Acting DEA Administrator; Bill McGlynn, State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau; and Brigadier General Joseph Callahan, Joint Staff

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MODERATOR: Welcome to the Washington Foreign Press Center, and thank you for joining us this morning. Today, we have Mr. John Walters, the Director of the White House Office of Drug Control Policy, here to discuss the U.S. release of the new poppy cultivation data. Mr. Walters will start off with some opening comments, so I'll go ahead and turn it over to him.

MR. WALTERS: Thank you very much, welcome. I want to also thank those who are appearing with me here today and represented. First of all, political counselor and counternarcotics coordinator of the Embassy of Afghanistan, Ashraf Haidari, and I want to thank him and his government for their cooperation in this effort; Michele Leonhart, Acting Administrator of DEA; Bill McGlynn from State Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau; and Brigadier General Joseph Callahan of the Joint Staff.



We are very pleased to announce today that the U.S. Government estimate of poppy cultivation and opium production in Afghanistan show substantial decline. The overall cultivation has declined, by our estimate, 22 percent from last year. And the estimated potential production has declined 31 percent. Perhaps even equally or greater – of greater importance is the increase of poppy-free provinces from 15 to 18 of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan. In addition, poppy cultivation has been nearly eliminated in most of Afghan's north and east – the map that's to my right; your left – and the packets you have shows the changes and the progress that's been made. There are now 29 provinces of the 34 who are poppy-free or have low levels, less than 6,000 hectares, of poppy this year.

We remain committed to the Afghan five-pillar counternarcotics strategy involving education and public information, alternative livelihoods, eradication interdiction, and law enforcement and anticorruption efforts. These have been proven successful now in a number of places. We still have much more to do.

One example, I think, that is most striking this year by both the U.S. and the UN estimate is Nangarhar province which, as some of you know, has been the province that's had much greater traditional roots in poppy cultivation. Some of the provinces we are now dealing with in the southwest have been relatively newcomers to the cultivation. They sometimes referred to it as greed rather than need of poverty or of ways of supporting poor farmers. Nangarhar, however, has had a striking decline. The UN estimated there was no poppy this year in Nangarhar province. We estimate, and we did a very careful census of the province, less than 300 hectares.

This is eradication, alternative development, and reducing the poppy with an Afghan face. The leader, the governor of the province, the district leadership of the province has been in the forefront of these changes. That's also true in a number of the other provinces. It's also true that the Afghan face extends to the central government with measures this year and what we want to extend a good performer's fund. So not only do we go after places that are a problem, but we reward those who have eliminated or are reducing poppy significantly with additional resources that go through the governor and the national government to the projects that the people in the districts want and help them sustain the continued growth and their standard of living and the safety and security of their families and children for the future.

The insecure south of Afghanistan, though, continues to be a center, as you see, for poppy cultivation. Ninety-three percent of Afghan's opium crop is in just five provinces; over 60 percent is in one province, Helmand. But even here, President Karzai and the Afghan Government have replaced governors, sought to put in people this year who will be more dynamic and more aggressive, and that also helps move this problem forward.

The Afghan drug trade proposes – poses not only a drug threat, but obviously a security threat. More and more, I think there's been a recognition of the power, money, and resources that the poppy trade gives to the Taliban and to powerful criminal organizations. In short, though, we can't have security in Afghanistan without attacking the opium trade, and we can't without also attacking corruption. Those three things have sometimes been elusive, and they're now being more aggressively, although there is much more to do, being attacked by both the Afghan Government, the people of Afghanistan and the international community helping them.

The United States Government will continue to support, obviously, these efforts and move forward with the support of the international community of which we stand as a partner.

Finally, I'd be remiss, I think, if I didn't recognize that – I think one of the problems we've had in the past is a recognition that both terror and violence and opium are cancers on the future of Afghanistan that have to be eradicated. But I think in the past, although not always openly discussed, there was a view that they – to work on one was to undermine the other; that is, to attack counternarcotics or the opium trade made places less secure. And that to make places secure, you had to look the other way on the opium trade. I think through the leadership of not only the Afghan officials that have been on the front line, but also I want to thank our partners in our government. Secretary Gates has been an aggressive leader in trying to help to educate the

international community and to remove restrictions that, in some cases, have in the past prevented us working together on security and counternarcotics; that bodes well for the future.

We now have a fundamental and better understanding that these are not antithetical threats or threats that we have to treat only by weakening our ability to provide security or counternarcotics, but they work together and they help us combat corruption, which is the large and third threat.

So I want to thank him. I want to thank our international partners. And I want to thank, obviously most of all, the leadership in Afghanistan who on the front line are fighting this battle with us, with the military, with DEA, with aid workers, and with our international partners. This is truly a collaborative effort. And we're very pleased today that while we have more to do, to say, a dramatic change last year shows we can do this. And the real task is now not to find out what to do, but to follow through.

With that, I'll turn it over to my Afghan colleague.

MR. HAIDARI: Thank you so much, Director Walters, Mr. Dickmeyer, Administrator Leonhart, Mr. McGlynn. And so welcome, ladies and gentlemen. It's a great pleasure being here today to celebrate with you our shared success in the fight against narcotics in Afghanistan. We have gone from six poppy-free provinces in 2006 to 18 poppy-free provinces this year. Indeed, it is a significant achievement, which we share with our partners and express our deep gratitude to the civil and military men and women of the United States, the Great Britain, and our other partners who daily risk their lives in the deserts and mountains of Afghanistan to help stabilize my country and to make the world a safer place for the entire humanity.

The problem of narcotics has been brought upon our country by the past three decades of war, destruction, and human suffering. We know from international experience that global demand for narcotics finds supply and environments where state institutions are weak, where general instability is high, where poverty is rife, and where people are extremely vulnerable to illicit sources of livelihood for mere survival. Unfortunately, my country remains in such a dire situation today in spite of our significant achievements over the past seven years.

Eliminating drugs is a task that Afghanistan cannot do alone, but together with our allies and those who join us in the belief that narcotics is a common enemy of the international community, one that takes millions of young lives across the world every year, one that causes HIV/AIDS, one that finances urban violence and crime, and one that increasingly fuels global terrorism and funds the Taliban's brutal terrorist activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

President Hamid Karzai has said many times, and I quote him, "If we do not eliminate drugs, drugs will eliminate us." In Afghan context, we strongly believe that the best weapon against narcotics is gradual, but a steady prevention in the form of improved governance and rule of law, sustainable alternative development assistance, and increased security. We attribute our shared success in reducing cultivation by 22 percent over the course of 2007 and 2008 to the bio factors (ph). With continued international assistance, we look forward to expanding our integrated efforts into the southwest region, which now produces more than 90 percent of all narcotics in Afghanistan, with Helmand producing 60 percent alone.

The government and people of Afghanistan greatly appreciate the firm commitment of the United States to a comprehensive and integrated approach to helping us fight narcotics through a five-pillar strategy which the Director mentioned. We are grateful to the U.S. Department of State and Department of Justice for enhancing law enforcement capacity in Afghanistan. And we think very highly of DEA officers and appreciate your hard efforts to reform, equip, and build our counternarcotics police, and embed with them to mount effective interdiction operations against drug traffickers as the main drivers of opium cultivation and drug production in Afghanistan.

We equally appreciate the expansion of the Good Performance Initiative, with increased U.S. assistance to reward poppy-free provinces and to add more provinces to their number. To consolidate our shared achievements and to continue our jihad against narcotics, province by province, until the whole of Afghanistan is drug-free, we will need sustainable resources from our international partners.

At the same time, we call upon all of our six neighbors to cooperate with us and with one another to enforce law against drug traffickers. We need proactive regional cooperation to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1818 of July 2008 to curb the flow of precursor chemicals into Afghanistan and export of narcotic products out of our country onto the end markets through neighboring states.

Even though we face the challenge of very limited resources, the Government of Afghanistan will continue to do our part in the fight against drugs. Meantime, we expect all the stakeholders to do their part, based on the realization that Afghanistan's drug problem is a transnational security threat which demands a collective international response. Thank you.

MODERATOR: We will now open it up for questions. Just a reminder, when I call on you to please state your name and your news organization. And we have microphones on each side.

QUESTION: Parameswaran Ponnudurai from Agence France Presse. I just want to find out whether the official from Afghanistan could confirm the figures that are provided by the Office of the National Drug Control Policy on cultivation and production, and what are the Afghanistan estimates at present?

MR. HAIDARI: Well, of course, we confirm the figures. The figures are probably slightly different from the figures issued by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, UNODCP, I believe, in August. But I think the difference could be, I think, technical and could be explained by one of my colleagues. But nonetheless, we confirm the figures which are very close to each other.

QUESTION: Andrey Bekrenev, ITAR-TASS, Russian news wire. I'm wondering what is the role of NATO forces in Afghanistan and U.S. forces primarily in fighting narcotics there?

BGEN CALLAHAN: U.S. Central Command does indeed support Afghan forces that are doing counternarcotics operations out there. Most of the support is in terms of lift, which is critically important, but also Medivac (ph) support to them. In the event forces -- Afghan forces come under attack and extremist responses, there's a Quick Reaction Force ready to respond out there. These type of support roles are what Central Command are current doing.

MODERATOR: Any other questions?

QUESTION: I would like to ask you --

MODERATOR: Wait for the microphone.

QUESTION: Director Walters, my name is Gregorio Meraz. I'm a reporter from Televisa Mexico. First of all, I would like to know if you have seen any connections with the -- between the Afghan producers of heroin and Mexican or Colombian organizations and where the Afghan trafficking is going to what markets. It reaches always the U.S. or Europe or where it goes? Another thing I would like to ask you what do you think about the capture of the

brother of Mayo Zambada and the nephew and the fact that they were protected by members of CAFI and the Federal Preventive Police?

MR. WALTERS: Well, first of all, the bringing to justice of major traffickers, mafia terrorists is always good news. So I congratulate Mexican forces and the efforts to continue the fight, the brutal fight, as you know, in Mexico, and we congratulate them on the success.

In terms of the Afghan opium and heroin and its distribution, I'll ask Michelle to come talk a little bit more about what we know about it. I will say in terms of our domestic demand, Afghan heroin is not currently seen as a major source of heroin in the United States. We -- heroin is a smaller problem, thank God, in the United States. And we have not -- we have some, and I think we are vigilant, however, because in the past Southwest Asian heroin has been a bigger part of the U.S. market 10 or 15, 20 years ago. So this is a global market. We can be victimized by it as are other countries. But right now, it's not a major part of our market. But why don't I ask her to respond to the part of your question about where it goes and whether it's -- we show connections with other traffickers.

MS. LEONHART: Thank you. Director Walters is correct. There's very little Afghan heroin that actually makes it to the United States. But we know from our history at one time, Afghanistan was the primary source of all the heroin that flooded our country. So learning from that history, we put -- right after September 11th, we put measures in place, one being a 19-country operation, called Operation Containment. And it was to put the security belt around that region, making sure that it was harder for heroin to go out, harder for chemicals to go into Afghanistan. That standing up of that multi-country operation is one of the reasons why I can stand here today to say there's been very little change with Southwest Asian heroin distribution in the United States. However, we have identified organizations primarily run by major traffickers in Afghanistan that did target markets here in the United States. And we very successfully with our Afghan partners have been able to arrest and disrupt and dismantle those organizations.

As far as where is that heroin going, it's countries such as Russia, it's China, and it's the Central Asian countries who are most affected by Afghan heroin, and to include Iran.

As far as connections with Mexican drug cartels, obviously that would be a major worry for us. I can't tell you that that has happened because the number two source of supply for heroin in the United States is Mexico, so they would actually be competitors. But as we look at South America, we become very concerned about the drug lords and the insurgents and the money that fuels the insurgents, letting there be this connection that forms with our South American cartels.

QUESTION: I would like to ask you, Ms. Leonhart, as well, recently there was some notices in regards with a boy from Las Vegas that was kidnapped by a person -- drug smugglers from Mexico. Have you investigated the grandfather? We understand that he has been stealing money from these cartels and maybe this was a sort of revenge. Do you have some information about it?

MS. LEONHART: From the minute that child was kidnapped, DEA was involved. We have been working with Las Vegas Metro as well as some Southern California law enforcement agencies. Because that is still ongoing, I'm not going to be able to comment much, other than to say because there were initial reports of a drug connection, DEA did become involved. We continue to be involved. We've done some follow-up search warrants. And I would say it's in the middle of investigation.

QUESTION: (Inaudible), Mr. Walters and Ms. Leonhart, Mexico have been denying for a long time that they -- it's not been Colombianized, but however, now we are seeing Colombian groups operating in Mexico, and we have seen narco-terror attacks of -- narco organizations. Do you have any concerns that maybe Mexico is going to leave some more violence as happened before in Colombia before they can eradicate completely the drug cartels?

MR. WALTERS: Well, I think it's obvious that Mexico and Colombia are two different places, and we have dealt with them as separate situations and obviously, separate governments. They have both different constellations of strength and institutional strength and different threats to them. It is true that Colombian traffickers have, for a long time, used routes through Mexico and collaborated with criminals in Mexico and the United States as well as in other parts of the hemisphere, indeed other parts of the world.

So there has been some criminal activity linking the Colombian and Mexican criminal organizations for several decades now, so that's not new. The level of violence, obviously, is new and part of this is obviously horrifying to us as it is to Mexican citizens. I was in Mexico last week. I met with President Calderon and other government officials. And we're working now with the Merida agreement, their resources, and the collaboration that President Calderon has really pushed to historic levels to try to help attack these structures as rapidly as possible, both by assisting Mexican authorities in appropriate ways that respect sovereignty, but also by attacking the sources of money and guns in the United States more aggressively.

I was -- just came from a meeting of federal, state and local law enforcement that span the entire Southwest border, and our goal is to bring them together in a more systematic way to attack southbound flow and the tentacles of these organizations. Their power, their ability to conduct these kinds of mafia terrorist activities depends on the money and the firearms that come from the United States. We know that and we're working with the Mexican Government to push that down. We want the -- unfortunately, when you challenge these groups -- we've seen this in the cities of the United States in the past, we've seen that, as you mentioned, in Colombia and in other places -- their response is violence and terror.

The goal is to make that period of violence and terror as short as possible and to choke it down as rapidly as possible. We're trying to work to do that. We think the additional resources in Merida and additional cooperation -- but I will tell you, in my meetings with Mexican officials, they are, of course, very eager to start saving lives and to stop the horrible carnage as we are. And we're working at appropriate ways to stop them. Michele*, do you have any comments?

MS. LEONHART: Justan added reference to Mexico and Colombia, that the connection between the Colombian traffickers and Mexican traffickers is not new. It's been -- it's been fueling cocaine availability in the United States for quite some time. But I will say that the commitment both on behalf of the United States, Colombia, and Mexico working together -- our three countries together -- is definitely making a difference in our very courageous Mexican partners.

We can only look to Colombia as the example of the violence that has dropped and the many things that came out of Colombia actually attacking those cartels and those kingpins. So we are very hopeful that Mexico will see those very same results that Colombia is seeing.

QUESTION: Do you think you are too far away from seeing the end of some of the executions?

MS. LEONHART: Well, I have to repeat what Mexican Attorney General Medina Mora says, and they -- they are steadfast that they will continue in this, and he says it may get worse before it gets better. But our continued -- with our three countries attacking and going after those cartels, we are seeing and reaping the results of our collaboration because there is a difference in the drug market here in the United States as a result: harder to get cocaine, price is up, purity is down, and the same goes with methamphetamine.

QUESTION: Mr. Walters, you mentioned one --

MODERATOR: Can you let someone else ask?

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. WALTERS: Well, I will answer your question.

QUESTION: Sorry, just one question for both the U.S. and Afghanistan officials. The -- Mr. Ashraf said that the -- one of the reasons for fueling production and supplies international demand -- how have countries that are the source of these drugs cooperated with Afghanistan or not cooperated with Afghanistan in overcoming the problem? And to the U.S. officials, if Operation Containment had been going on, say, for the last seven years, what are the loopholes there that have resulted in increases in production only until last two years, and whether Russia, China, and the Central Asian Republics and Iran are part of this 18-member containment strategy?

MS. LEONHART: I'll answer as to Operation Containment. Each year, with our strategy and with the countries working together, Iran is not one of those countries as a part of Operation Containment. We have seen successes and that those successes are not just in increases in chemical seizures, opium seizures, heroin seizures, but also in money, the money that is the result of this drug trafficking.

And the big -- the big, I think, bang for the buck on our end has been the high-value targets that our countries collectively have been able to take out. And we have a number of those high-value targets that have been prosecuted very recently in the United States. And that will continue and that is just one of the benefits of Operation Containment being stood up very early and working with our Afghanistan partners, working together to go after the high-value targets, those most responsible for the drug trade. And those same organizations are what's fueling the insurgency.

MR. HAIDARI: Of course, we are a land-locked country, and as I pointed out, six countries surround us. And as we get precursor chemicals, it, you know, inevitably comes from one of those countries, particularly in Pakistan or maybe, in some cases, Central Asian states or Iran. And of course, these countries are realizing that it is also undermining governance, rule of law, and security in those countries, especially in Pakistan where -- through which most of drugs or precursor chemicals come in and drugs get out.

And that's where Central Asian states -- and I think within various frameworks, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other such multilateral regional organizations, now there are mechanisms -- have been established in order to further announce regional cooperation, of course, amongst our neighbors in the region, and as well as the Afghan Government and our key allies, including the United States, and Great Britain, and they are involved in helping us fight narcotics in Afghanistan. So I think regional cooperation is very important and, as I pointed out, recognized by the Security Council Resolution 1818 that we need more cooperation. As much as there has been cooperation, we have had achievements, but certainly there is more that we demand the Afghan Government and demand in order for the entire region to be stabilized.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. WALTERS: I think we'd also be remiss if we didn't say that there are a number of countries I've met with -- for example, Russian officials, who have faced rising abuse and addiction and the consequences who have launched major prevention campaigns, who are trying to expand treatment, others in Europe that are seeking to expand some of the tools that we ourselves have gone to in public health -- screening in the healthcare system so that when you come in for regular medical care, you're asked a series of screening questions -- do you drink, do you use drugs -- and you can do a brief intervention, and educational intervention if somebody's not addicted, or get them into treatment, as we do with testing people's blood pressure to find out whether they have hypertension or, as a part of a physical, deciding whether they have diabetes.

A lot of this is preventable if we intervene early and we provide the medical advice we now know we can give and that we now know that addiction is a disease of the brain. Also some places -- Great Britain even, we've worked with the Mexican Government in looking at the random student drug testing in schools, since random testing is not used to punish children but helps to both give them a great reason not to use because there will be testing, as there has been in our militaries or in the transportation industry and many businesses in the United States. It's a very, very powerful tool and also allows us to intervene very early where there's use. I've also talked to Russian officials about that tool as well, as well as I say what's been experimented and started in the UK and some other countries.

So I think we're seeing common efforts. But it's not all sweetness and light, and I think we should be clear about that. There is a countervailing force that is trying to undo some of the international conventions that are now so important to us. Unfortunately, you know, a wealthy American, George Soros, has been funding front groups around the world to try to say the best we could do is to give up and legalize drugs, which would be a catastrophe not only for young people and those who suffer from addiction, but to the countries that are the sources of production. It would unbound demand and it would unbound supply, with various phony arguments about the need to turn this into medicines. We have medicines. We need to distribute medicines, especially addictive medicines, with care and with infrastructure so they do good and not harm.

So you know, unfortunately, there is a debate that we have to be clear to engage and be clear with people around the world, because many of them are being given false information that the best that we can do is to give up. That would be a terrible tragedy. Many of the nations that have tried the path of let's not be as aggressive against drugs, Sweden for example, are now one of the examples of the lowest rates because they had to turn back from that policy to a policy of aggressive, balanced law enforcement and intervention and treatment.

So again, we've tried these experiments before. They always fail. Because why? Because these are dangerous substances and poisons. You let more in, you get more deaths, you get more harm. But that debate is still going on. And unfortunately, with the wealth of George Soros, it's being able to be spread in many, many areas. And we have to join that debate. We have to say it's wrong and we have to count on international partners to see the truth and to stand because, if we don't, this obviously is something that uses international boundaries and differences among the international community to harm more people.

MR. HAIDARI: If I could make one more comment. In the case of Afghanistan, of course, Islam culture and the people, the sharecroppers who are the victims of drug production and opium cultivation are the best weapon against eradicating opium poppy in Afghanistan. And our President has effectively utilized those mechanisms. Of course, the oloman (ph), the Islamic clergy in Afghanistan, passed a fatwa in 2004 forbidding cultivation, production and consumption of drugs in Afghanistan. And in our public information campaigns, each time we have talked to people and the President has called on the farmers to give up cultivation in return for alternative assistance, they have obeyed the call because if they're given the choice between, of course, a legal crop and an illegal livelihood, of course, they always go for a legal livelihood.

Unfortunately, in Afghanistan, drug traffickers who are more regional and global, transnational, of course, are driving the business because we know it is,

I think, by some estimates, it's a \$30 billion business on the black market that we are, in essence, fighting in Afghanistan. And so we have seen, you know, going from six provinces to 18 drug-free provinces is a major achievement. And if we hopefully continue this, you know, trend to provide rule of law, of course, alternative assistance and security, that the whole of Afghanistan will be drug-free soon.

Thanks.

MODERATOR: Any other questions? We'll go in the back.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm Andrew Siddens of the Yomuri Shimbun. Since so much of the poppy cultivation is toward the south and the border with Pakistan, how much does cultivation – does it really extend over the border? And how much does cultivation and trafficking contribute to cross-border tensions with Pakistan?

MR. WALTERS: I guess I'll take a stab at that, and then anyone that has anything to add behind me, I'll let them do it.

We are doing primarily a survey – I want to be clear – of Afghanistan at this point. So we have estimates of cultivation in Pakistan, for example. That estimate for the last year is not yet done. So we will do some estimate as a part of the State Department requirement by our Congress that we report on major trafficking production and transit countries that will be a part of it. But I don't believe that estimate is done.

Pakistan has had more cultivation in the past. It's gone down. Obviously, where there is more turmoil and problems with governability, it can come back. And it has been an issue we've been watching and working with the Pakistani Government about.

In terms of tension, I mean, it depends on what you mean by tension. But basically speaking, I think one of the wakeup calls that we've had with the parts of the international alliance here is the now overwhelming evidence of the Taliban using the poppy business and opium as a source of funding, a major source of funding, in addition to pulling people away from the government, in addition to the contribution it makes to corruption as a source of funds.

Why can they do that? Because you can take poor areas that – you know, it's very hard to make much support by stealing food from subsistence farmers. I mean, they just don't have much. But if you produce opium, you barter opium, you protect opium, you guard labs that produce – change opium into heroin, you can make a lot of money. That's what's happened in other parts of the world. That's what's happening there. So what we see is a kind of major financial source for the terrorists being rooted, again, with the opium industry.

So in terms of the tension caused by giving them greater wealth, greater power, greater strength, yes, it does contribute to that. And that's, I think, one of the things that's helped to better galvanize the collective response to this part of the threat, in addition to the terror threat directly, because they're linked together.

Does anyone want to add anything?

MR. MCGLYNN: Just to follow up on the Director's remarks, where there has been instability, where there has not been governance, that's where the insurgency has been. Clearly, so much of it has been linked to the border with Pakistan, (inaudible) the bases and supply lines of the Taliban and the insurgents. And as the Director has pointed out, the financial benefit, which we estimate roughly at 100 million a year, has been a huge source of concern in fueling the insurgency. That's why the Afghan and U.S. strategies have focused on Helmand and the main producing area now and attacking that. Also, we're very pleased to see the decision at NATO at Budapest to look for ways that our military can support even more attacking the drug trafficking aspects, which, again, is fueling the instability in the south.

MR. HAIDARI: And, of course, our position of the Afghan Government has always been that drugs finance terrorism and insurgency of the Taliban in Afghanistan. We've been saying that as early as 2004, and we're very glad that the realization is there that we integrate counternarcotics with counterterrorism in Afghanistan, particularly in southern Afghanistan where the Taliban, as was just mentioned, gets some 10 percent and estimates of even 40 percent the amounts to over a hundred million dollars to finance their operations in Afghanistan. And there are cases of where they intimidate people; they basically force people to continue cultivating because, of course, they make so much money off, you know, protecting (inaudible) and drug traffickers and transportation of both, of course, precursor chemicals and drugs out of Afghanistan.

MODERATOR: Anyone else? Well, I guess we will end there. Thank you all for coming, and thank you to you guests.



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