

A Comprehensive Approach to Counternarcotics in Afghanistan

John P. Walters, Director of the White House Office of Drug Control Policy; Kim Howells, Minister of State, Foreign Commonwealth Office, United Kingdom

Foreign Press Center Briefing

Washington, DC

June 25, 2007

2:00 P.M. EDT

MODERATOR: Good afternoon and thank you so much for coming to the Washington Foreign Press Center. We're very pleased today to have Mr. John Walters, the Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, here today and he is accompanied -- and I can't remember the last time we've been able to do this at the Washington Foreign Press Center -- by Mr. Kim Howells, the Minister of State from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

They are here today to speak about drug control policies in Afghanistan. They're going to begin with some opening statements and then we'll have time to take your questions. Mr. Howells will begin. Thank you.

FOREIGN SECRETARY HOWELLS: Thank you very much and good afternoon. I'm certainly delighted to be here today alongside my good friend, John Walters, to talk to you about the deadly challenges that narcotics poses to Afghanistan and to explain how our two countries are working together to help the Afghan Government and its people get rid of this evil trade.



President Karzai has said that alongside terrorism, drugs is the biggest threat to Afghanistan's long-term security and development and I wholeheartedly agree. The trade in opium feeds the evil of corruption that, together, are the most corrosive elements in Afghan society. It's impossible to tackle Afghanistan's problems today if we put off dealing with the drugs menace until tomorrow.

Drug-related crime and corruption are rife and permeate all levels of society. And in the south of Afghanistan, the drug trade and the Taliban insurgency are connected intrinsically and they share a common interest in resisting Afghan Government authority and international forces. And just like the threat posed by terrorism, defeating the drugs trade will require significant leadership from the Afghan Government and will have to be accompanied by a prolonged commitment from the international community.

And with this in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to explain to you how the United Kingdom, as G-8 partner-nation to Afghanistan on counter-narcotics, is working hand-in-hand with the Afghan Government and the U.S. to tackle the Afghan narcotics problem. The scale of the challenge that we and the Afghans face is enormous. Afghan opium and heroin production feeds huge numbers of addicts in Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan itself, and in countries from the United Kingdom to Australia. Demand in all of these markets is driving up and sustaining poppy planting and harvesting, especially in Southern Afghanistan.

It goes almost without saying, of course, that opium and heroin bring with them dark clouds of human misery and criminality right across the world. The fight back is going to be a long and difficult one and we must be realistic in our expectations for progress. Opium is deeply enmeshed in the administrative, economic and societal sinews of Afghanistan. Nothing can solve the drugs problem overnight. It's a complex problem which requires a complex solution and we must be clear that ridding Afghanistan of this curse will take a generation, perhaps more. So we have to be very wary of snake oil salesmen peddling the counter-narcotics equivalent of Amy's miracle elixir.

There are no short cuts to ending the drug trade. Take the example of this proposal to legalize cultivation for use in medicines. To the casual observer, this may make sense, but the truth is that it won't work. Don't just listen to me and Director Walters; listen to the Afghan Government who strongly opposed the idea and the G-8, whose ministers support the Afghan's position. Listen to the International Crisis Group or Care International, the respected NGO.

They all agree. The Afghan Government do not have the capacity to administer a licit cultivation scheme. Licit cultivation would be diverted for illicit purposes and without the institutional strength to be the sole purchaser of the crop, the Afghan Government would be in direct competition with the traffickers. Licit cultivation would give the wrong message. It would tell farmers that poppy cultivation was acceptable in some circumstances at a time when the Afghan Government is telling them it is illegal and is trying to persuade them to stop growing poppy. And with the enormous scope for expansion in Afghanistan, licit cultivation would add to rather than replace illegal cultivation and attract more farmers to cultivate poppy.

In some provinces, it's clear from the UNODC's winter crop assessment that where farmers have access to development, rule of law, and security, sustainable reductions in cultivation are possible. It is in these provinces that it's possible to see how the Afghan Government's National Drug Control Strategy, the NDCS, is starting to work. The Afghan drug trade is complex, deep-rooted and requires a holistic approach. The NDCS attempts to provide that. It's a balanced, eight-pillar plan covering the whole range of activities required to combat the narcotics trade. You cannot eradicate drugs without helping create legal alternatives for rural communities, nor can you arrest traffickers if no criminal justice system exists to give them a fair and rigorous trial. And building durable Afghan institutions is fundamental to long-term success.

So we need to do more to help the Afghans to sharpen the implementation of their strategy and build on best practice right across the nation. The United Kingdom and the U.S. are working together with the Afghan Government and with other partners to do just that. Together, we are encouraging greater military support for the counter-narcotics effort, support will happen within the current guidelines for the -- of the NATO operation plan. It's not for NATO to take direct action against the trade, but we want to see the military and the provincial reconstruction teams playing a bigger supporting role.

The object, of course, is to increase the number of poppy-free provinces in Afghanistan. To help this, the United Kingdom and the U.S. jointly are supporting the Good Performers Initiative to encourage governors to take a strong stand against opium cultivation in their provinces and reap the benefits from development programs. As part of this, we need to improve the quality and quantity of targeted, ground-based eradication. Eradication targeted where there are access to legal livelihoods is part of the Afghan Government's strategy and an important way of deterring farmers from planting. We must also target eradication at those wealthy landowners cultivating poppy on government-owned land and who have alternatives available, but are choosing to ignore them. Targeting the greedy will set a good example that even powerful warlords

and gangsters can be dragged down.

And we're working with others to push for greater coherence across all sector institutions, certainly in the justice sector, with improved donor coordination and a longer-term approach to creating a joined-up rule of law sector capable of addressing the problems generated by the fight against narcotics. So progress is being made in many areas and we should take heart from this. However, Afghanistan faces some major obstacles to its counter-narcotics effort and I'd like to lay out what we see as the big issues to tackle.

The first is the south of Afghanistan. The problem down there is very serious and with 6,500 British troops in the south and the majority of these in Helmand Province, a center for the cultivation and trafficking of opium, the United Kingdom feels and understands the nature of the problem all too well. 60 percent of Afghanistan's opium was grown there in 2006. This year, it may be more.

Despite stating that narcotics are not Islamic, the Taliban's relationship with drug traffickers is becoming closer. We are seeing a clear overlap; indeed, extensive financial and logistical links between the drug trade and the Taliban insurgency. Traffickers and the Taliban have a mutual interest in resisting the Afghan Government's authority and international forces. ISAF also agree with this analysis. And the trade is fueling corruption in provinces such as Kandahar and Helmand, damaging not only the credibility of the Afghan Government, but also interdiction, eradication, and other operations to disrupt it.

For this reason, in the south, we need to tackle drugs and the Taliban together. To do this, we need to make sure that counter-narcotics is part of the comprehensive approach. In practical terms, this means NATO doing more to help the Afghan Government tackle the drug trade and I'm glad to say that things are moving in this direction. We need a coherent, year-round information campaign to expose anti-Islamic motives that lie beneath the Taliban's promise to protect the drug trade, the cynicism that underpins their offers of support, and their targeting of development programs and development workers that are in place to help the ordinary people of Afghanistan. And it's vital that we continue the work we're doing on development. We need to help the Afghan Government offer people real alternatives to the harsh life that the insurgency offers. Long-term sustainable development is the key to providing viable alternative employment opportunities for poppy farmers.

The second issue is corruption. Progress on counter-narcotics is intrinsically linked to the battle against corruption. Drugs are fueling corruption within the Afghan Government and in the provinces. When I was in Helmand recently, I saw large tracts of fertile, government-owned land being rented to the local drugs mafia with the connivance of local officials. The action of these corrupt officials undermined any eradication that might have taken place in the area already. They sought short-term personal gain at the expense of long-term development for their community. They sent all the wrong messages and probably pushed the local population further into the arms of ruthless traffickers or the Taliban or both.

We're aware of the reports suggesting that there are some powerful people in the Afghan parliament and in the government departments with links to the trade. So the United Kingdom and the U.S. will continue to press for action against corruption. We will stay focused on the balanced, long-term, and sustainable approach to counter-narcotics led by the Afghan Government.

We will continue to galvanize the international community to provide further support and resources. We'll seek to build on progress in the north and central areas of Afghanistan by sharpening implementation of the national drug control strategy in these areas. And in the south we'll step up the efforts to target the links between the big traffickers and the Taliban.

It's important that we remember that despite the great harm that drugs and corruption continue to generate, we've seen real progress in Afghanistan in the last five years. As we continue to support Afghanistan development, reconstruction and security, we must at the same time maintain our focus on attacking the drugs trade a central part of the comprehensive approach.

Thank you very much.

MR. WALTERS: Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Howells. Kim has been a great friend and a great ally as a leader of the UK Government's efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world. And I want to thank him personally for his wisdom and his courage and diligence. He, like I, have responsibilities for some faraway places in the world, although he's more far away than I am, and I want to thank him for the risks that he's personally taken and that his government takes.

Once again, British troops and U.S. troops have continued to be brave and to shed their blood and to give their lives for the betterment of both of our peoples and for many people who seek freedom in the world. We're proud to be an ally with many nations, but we've had no stronger partner in this global world on terror than the United Kingdom. I want to thank Mr. Howells and his nation on behalf of the President and my colleagues for the sacrifices that they have made.

I'd like to mention two other members of our government that are here, Ambassador Thomas Schweich who's Acting Assistant Secretary for International Narcotic and Law Enforcement Affairs at the Department of State. The Department of State is key in helping to direct many of our programs in Afghanistan and other places fighting lawlessness and narcotics trafficking, and John Gastright, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. I want to thank both of them for their hard work and for joining me here. So if you ask a really, really hard question, they'll get a chance to talk.

I want to thank Kim for the thorough review of the situation that we face in Afghanistan. I won't repeat it, but the summary that he gave of what we see, the challenges -- difficult challenges moving ahead and our plans for moving ahead are obviously the ones that we share that we're working with ISAF, all the nations of the alliance and, of course, the Afghan Government to implement in the days ahead.

He did not sugarcoat the challenges and we tend to be candid about those. I will say, however, that Afghanistan is perhaps certainly the place where the combination of terror, of poverty, of institutions that have been battered and are weak, and narcotics trafficking is as intense as any we have seen in the history, I think, of our working on these policies in the modern period. It is a credit, I think, to the Afghan Government today and international community that we have created the kind of structures to move ahead. And I know that everybody would like these to move as rapidly as possible, but I think we have to be candid about what's achievable, as Kim mentioned.

This map summarizes I think what is not adequately understood about what's happening in Afghanistan. We hear about the amount of opium -- 90-95 percent of the world's opium being produced there. That is a bad thing that we're all dedicated to reversing. But there's a view that this is happening throughout the whole country. In fact, as Kim alluded to, in the north -- in the central parts of the country, there are provinces -- of the 34 provinces, a number that are poppy free. In the north, we've seen significant declines in poppy cultivation led by not only the central government but more importantly, a number of governors and local leaders who have reduced cultivation and dependence. And we have seen the problem of the southern area -- Helmand and Kandahar, Uruzgan (ph). And again, I think it's very critical to keep in mind that we've seen where we can get security, we can bring together strengthened institutions of government -- justice, law, economic, educational institutions and projects to help.

Obviously, in areas where that doesn't exist, there has been a using of the opium trade to both finance the Taliban and other terrorists, but also to pull people away from and to pull warlords and to have them pull the people away from growing. We are trying to influence decision makers. It is very important that we be clear about who the decision maker is. There's a tendency to talk about this as if the fundamental decision maker, even in the places where the growing is most intense, is a poor farmer and his family who are starving. Those are the not the critical decision makers. Many of those people do not decide what they grow. They're told as sharecroppers what to grow, sometimes by corrupt landowners, sometimes by corrupt warlords and tribal leaders, sometimes by people like the Taliban at the point of gun -- you will grow poppy here, you will not eradicate your poppy if you start growing it or we will kill you and your family.

The ability to influence that decision means we have to provide security. We have to remove corrupt officials. We have to remove the threat of the people with the guns from preying on the people with the families that are extremists.

We are working, as Mr. Howells mentioned, in a number of dimensions. We are working with the Afghan Government to stand up a narcotics interdiction unit, the Afghan

Special Narcotics Force. It's also been created and is operating against the infrastructure of traffickers. We have stood up combined intelligence fusion and targeting cells to go after leadership and infrastructure of trafficking. We have worked, of course, as Mr. Howells also mentioned, on a combined strategy with Afghanistan to bring together international resources on both supply and on alternative development and rural development. I think it's also very important and one of the things you can help us with, in the press, is to be clear about what we're trying to do here.

We are not trying to do alternative development and frequently understood as -- we have to find a plant that produces exactly the same amount of income as opium poppy hector for hector or row for row. In many cases, there is no such plant, especially if you have criminal organizations which are the beneficiary of selling these to addicted users, which is the principal market.

What we are doing is rural development, which is actually much more doable and much more hopeful, helping people go from being hand-to-mouth farmers to being able to bring more sophisticated -- in some cases more delicate crops -- to market, help them on a first stage of manufacturer or preservation of those products through electrification, through better roads, through micro credit to give them a chance to go from being a subsistence farmer to be able to have an economic future that grows and expands. That's why you see movement away from opium poppy in a lot of areas. When people are given a chance, they'd rather not be governed by drug mafias and warlords. They'd rather have control of their own lives and their own communities and they'd rather have a future that they don't have under the opium economy. None of these subsistence farmers have gotten wealthy.

Over the last ten years of expanded up and down cultivation in Afghanistan, it's important -- this is not a windfall to any farmers or any people who are living at the low end of the economic scale in Afghanistan, which is one of the lowest in the world, as you know. Who's gotten wealthy are warlords and traffickers and corrupt individuals. Those people are taking the wealth from this area. So the ability to convince the Afghan people as they have indicated by the results and participation in elections that the future is not with the old ways, with the old corruption and mafias, but with the new, is actually a much more promising prospect than some people admit.

There has to be accountability, as Mr. Howells mentioned. There is obvious responsibility of the Afghan Government for the leadership and people in Afghanistan. We've seen some of the areas where local leaders and others have taken their responsibility and have been successful. More of them have to do so and there has to be an ability to go after corruption. We can't succeed in the future that the Afghan people and the alliance wants for Afghanistan with the levels of corruption that are now coming principally from the poppy business.

Lastly, I'll touch on -- just emphasize one other point that Mr. Howells made. There have been a variety of proposals, silly proposals in my judgment, and I think manifestly silly if you look at them for ways of radically changing the policies that we're embarked on: cultivating massive amounts of opium here and allegedly selling them for the relief of pain in Africa. There's a lot of pain in Africa, but giving people heroin or opium from Afghanistan is not going to reduce the pain of Africa.

One, they're already in the illicit markets as the UN reports. There's more than enough capacity to produce opium for pharmaceutical purposes in morphine and other products. The issue is how to market and control these in many poor nations that really do need medicines.

Secondly, as Mr. Howells mentioned, the reason we have a problem in the remaining areas is precisely because the government can't regulate and can't produce rule of law because of the terrorists and the warlords and the drug traffickers. A regulated market requires the ability to regulate and it's precisely the inability to regulate that causes the opium problem as it currently exists.

Lastly, I would say that there are some who believe that we don't have to do the institutional effort, we don't have to do rural development, we don't have to do eradication here if we just would interdict all the drugs. Well, that would be fine if there was a practical way to interdict all these things in all dimensions. Interdiction is a part of the overall effort. It is not a substitute for institutions of justice. It's not a substitute for anticorruption measures. It's not a substitute of controlling cultivation.

When we use these things together, we get real declines. And I would point to the example of opium from Colombia which is down dramatically in the United States, which fed typically the eastern seaboard of the United States. We've seen dramatic declines. A few years ago, we had reports of teenagers using opium in New England as a result of its plentifulness and purity and you don't see that today primarily because there was a combined effort of eradication, enforcement, interdiction and prevention that we have adopted that's been international.

The way to do this is to go after supply and demand, to use key institutions, to not wait forever, but to have the patience to allow institutions to take the time that they really do need to build, grow and to be effective.

Again, I want to thank Mr. Howells on behalf of my government for the fine allies they have been to us in this and other dimensions and to the Afghans and to the other international allies that are working on this problem. We know it's not easy, but we also know that it will have enormously far-reaching effects on the addiction, on the crime and on the terror problem not only in this part of the world but throughout the world as well.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you so much. We have time for some Q&A. As always, please wait for the microphone and identify yourself and your media organization and since we have two briefers, if you could be clear who the question is addressed to. Questions, right here in the front.

QUESTION: I'm Jerome Bernard working for AFP. You said that fighting the drug trade is a long-term effort. Does it mean that the coalition forces are going to stay for decades in Afghanistan? . . .

FOREIGN SECRETARY HOWELLS: I think the coalition forces are going to be in Afghanistan for some time to come. A lot of it will depend on how successful we are -- and there are 36 or 37 countries there now -- in building up Afghan capacity. And that primarily means building up the Afghan police force and the Afghan army under the control of the new democratic parliament in Kabul. If we can train people at a reasonable rate, the kind of planned rate, then I would assume that the Afghan police, the counter-narcotics agencies will be able to take responsibility for a lot of the work that we're doing at the moment, sooner rather than later, but it will depend very much on there being a sustained international effort.

And part of our job politically is to try to convince our partners who are in Afghanistan that they must do more and they must do more especially, I think, in trying to help to create a viable legal system, a system that's got honest police officers, prosecution people, judges on a jail system, a penitentiary system that is humane, is fit for purpose and that works within the country. Those are big jobs, but the international community is very much focused on it at the moment and it supplements the efforts that we're making in some of the areas that Director Walters has just outlined, which include interdiction and going for high and medium level targets, in other words, for the traffickers and the gangsters who run this trade.

MODERATOR: Christian.

QUESTION: Good afternoon. My name is Chris Wernicke. I'm working for the German Daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. Could you be a little bit more specific how you want to address this huge issue in Afghanistan? If we take, for example, the province of Helmand, could you please indicate a little bit more concretely how do you want to cope with this challenge? I mean, from my times as a NATO correspondent, I know there have been long discussions not only but certainly between some Europeans and the U.S. about the balance between eradication and alternative livelihood. Now, we heard a lot of, if I may say so, general remarks, but how do you do it? I mean, how do you go into the fields? What do you offer? How can you do it in an area where as you said, warlords and Talibans are intertwined and a harsh hit on the opium trade might even worsen your chances of winning the war on terror down there?

FOREIGN SECRETARY HOWELLS: Well, it -- this is a good question and I think we've got some good answers to it. The most important work is development work.

We've got to ensure that farmers can get other products to market. I've seen projects, for example, where the lives of apple and pear growers is being transformed by very simple little projects like turning a mill track into a hard track that can take a four-wheel drive vehicle. It's enabled their fruit to get to markets in an undamaged state, which wasn't the case when they were on the backs of donkeys. It means that children can get educated. It gives hope and aspiration to people living in those areas. Now this is not an impossible mission by any means. Helmand Province was, until relatively recently, the breadbasket of Afghanistan.

In the second half of the 1950s, the American Government built a huge irrigation system to the south of Lashkargar and as a consequence of that, it became the most productive agricultural area in the whole of Afghanistan. And indeed, they were exporting all sorts of agricultural products from there. I mean, in my lifetime, I can remember our markets being full of Afghan grapes. And the growing of opium on the present scale of opium poppies is a relatively new thing and it's something which is very much tied to the influence of warlords, of terrorists, like the Taliban. And they see it -- they see the promotion of anarchy in an area like Helmand as very much in their favor. The last thing they want is the extension of a sense of law and order, of stability to the area. They like that area to be uncontrollable.

Now I don't think it's an impossible task by any means to improve roads, to try to bring electricity to areas like Kandahar and Helmand, to give people the basics of education so that they can learn new skills, to begin, for example, to convince our partner nations that perhaps they ought to be buying local produce instead of exporting it all the way from Europe and from America to feed their development workers and their troops in those areas.

There are lots of ways, I think, of kick-starting the economy down there. But at the same time, there's a political battle to fight as well. It's very, very important, I think that we don't assume that this is a kind of ancient way of life that's always been. This is highly organized and it's organized by a relatively small number of people. These are the narco-gangsters who are making huge amounts of money. They often live in Dubai. They operate across borders into Pakistan, into Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. They are -- they're very well organized. And they've learned a great deal from the cocaine traffickers of Colombia.

We have to pool our knowledge and our cooperation which is a great thing there, as Director Walters has just told us, that the United Kingdom and the United States are doing. But we need that cooperation to be much more widely felt and we have to convince other countries in Europe and other parts of the world that the poison that's being pumped into the veins of our kids is also being pumped into the veins of their kids in their countries and they have to play a part in that dangerous work in Southern Afghanistan, as well as doing the very constructive work that they're doing in the PRTs and elsewhere in Northern Afghanistan.

MODERATOR: Yes, sir. And then you, ma'am.

QUESTION: Yes. Good afternoon. My name is Meredith Buel. I'm with the Voice of America. A UN official in Afghanistan said today that the drug trade is becoming more advanced with much of its poppy crop being converted into heroin and morphine inside the country. Their newswires are quoting Christina Oguz of the UN's Office for Drugs and Crime, saying that laboratories have sprung up inside the country, allow drug traders to process 90 percent of poppy crops before smuggling them out of the country. She said this presence of these labs indicates a new level of sophistication in the drug trade in Afghanistan that did not exist before. Does that increasing sophistication concern you? Because presumably, the actual transport of the final product is easier than the unrefined product. She also, by the way, is predicting that this year's crop could surpass last year's record crop, due to what she says are positive weather considerations.

MR. WALTERS: Yeah. We expect this year's crop to probably be greater than last year's. There's been a lot of rain. And again, the -- but the distribution has changed somewhat. We have a concentration in the areas of security. It is been the case for the last several years that more of the processing has gone on inside Afghanistan. This shows, I think, the control of some of the higher level groups, traffickers and warlords, corrupt officials in seeking maximum profit, the processing increases the value greatly.

We have been working -- one dimension of our strategy is to work with other countries on the smuggling of some of the processing chemicals to reduce their efficiency and there have been some operations in individual places that have reduced the availability of those chemicals and put some additional pressure on this. So we're trying to do this in multiple dimensions, as well as going after the financing. So there's no question, again, as Mr. Howells said, that this is not something that is a grassroots problem. This is something that is a structured problem, structured by terrorists, structured by organized criminal -- violent criminal groups and structured by corrupt officials in some cases.

What do we -- to go back to the issue, what do we need to do about this? We need to remove the ability of the violent individuals to control these. And in addition to what Minister Howells said, obviously, part of our policy here is to drive out the terrorists or to kill them and to prevent them from forcing people to grow poppy and to being subject to area -- great areas where government control is prevented.

In addition, as we have said specifically, we are -- we need more work by the Afghan Government to remove corrupt officials and to bring them to justice. We have been working with the Afghan Government to establish a legal system. They have created necessary statutes on narcotics trafficking. They have been working and we have been training with the international community investigators, prosecutors and judges.

They are now in a vertically integrated structure to help bring traffickers to justice, lower level individuals. Over 300-some, I believe, have been adjudicated and are being incarcerated. The effort now is to go after some of the higher-level individuals who are potentially more dangerous. And in addition, we have had extradition of several individuals. This is another tool that we have used in other areas that can be used against those who are powerful and threaten fledgling institutions.

We have tools that can turn this around. It cannot do it overnight. It can do it in a steady manner. We see steady progress, as I said, in the northern parts of Afghanistan and in areas where there have been local and effective leadership that has pushed the trafficking down. We need to make sure that we're ready for next year, early this fall, to help inform farmers and key decision makers that the threat to continue growing is great and to encourage them where they have a choice not to plant poppy, but we have a locus of instability and terror in some areas that have caused this to explode.

We are putting hundreds of millions of dollars more into these areas and I think it's important to point out here Helmand Province has been, through the bravery of many Afghans, a place where we've put a great deal of development assistance in the last several years. In fact, it's been the locus of more development assistance to try to build the foundation to be able to do -- to control the poppy. So what we're partly talking about here is stepping up the battle in all dimensions, but to shift from simply fighting this with carrots and do a little more on the stick end of the problem.

QUESTION: Can I just follow that up and ask you what --

MODERATOR: No, I'm sorry --

QUESTION: If I can follow up?

MODERATOR: -- because we just have two minutes. Ma'am, if you could go ahead and --

QUESTION: Beth Mendelson with Voice of America. And I wanted to ask either Mr. Walters or Mr. Howells if they could talk about the disagreement between the United States and the United Kingdom on eradication issues because clearly, there is a divide there. If you could speak to that.

FOREIGN SECRETARY HOWELLS: Well, I'd like to say, first of all, it comes as a surprise to me, that question, because there hasn't been a divide. There has been discussions, certainly, about aerial spraying and that discussion continues, as it does about ground-based spraying. But that's in a sense, a very small part of this whole debate. And it's been marked much more by cooperation than it has about disagreement and in general approaches. I think we're beginning to garner now much more intelligence than we've had until now, especially about the way the industry works in the south.

I was very interested in the question now about the growth of the number of laboratories inside Afghanistan. One of the explanations besides those which Director Walters just gave was given to me by the Pakistan counter-narcotics authorities just a couple of weeks ago, when they told me that they'd had a big drive against -- in order to try to push the heroin laboratories out of Pakistan and undoubtedly, some of them have crossed back over into Afghanistan. So I think it's a sign that we're doing the right thing. We're trying to involve as many international partners as possible in this and especially Pakistan.

There are probably somewhere between three and four million users of opium and heroin in Pakistan and the same number in Iran. Now these are very convenient markets for the drug traffickers of Afghanistan. And within Afghanistan itself, the use of heroin and opiates is increasing. It's a big problem there. And as it becomes more difficult for the traffickers to get their produce to market internationally, it may be that they'll concentrate on those near markets, on those permeable borders.

And I think that between us, we've got now a much, much better picture of what needs doing in terms of making those borders less permeable, of trying to persuade certainly the Pakistanis that the effort that they are putting on -- it is a considerable effort -- into trying to police that frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan has to be stepped up. And hopefully, if the Iranian rhetoric about opium-growing being -- heroin production being non-Islamic, then they ought to turn some of that rhetoric into some real action in trying to stop this stuff transiting Iran and heading for Europe because that's what happens at the moment.

The great flow of heroin from Afghanistan up to the lucrative markets of Europe means that it transits mainly Iran and mainly Pakistan. So we've got to work to ensure that that doesn't happen. So the whole business of spraying is a very small part of that. It's the kind of interdiction which comes when we can't convince people to do other things. And we'll go on talking about that and about the best way of ensuring that those crops are knocked down and that people are not allowed with impunity to grow this stuff in huge quantities on government-owned land. Sure, we're going to target the greedies and the gangsters who currently are making the most money out of this. Because as Director Walters said, it's not the poor farmers who are making the money out of it; it's those organized criminals and their networks.

MR. WALTERS: Can I just -- at the risk of antagonizing our moderator, say one thing about that kind of blend of policies here?

There's been disagreements inside the United States Government. I think people are aware of that and about how we blend security and counter-narcotics. I think there was a view in the past that they ran antithetical to each other. There still is some of that residual inside the United States Government, I think, outside some of our partners here. But I think today, in fact, we are more clear about the priorities being a dual priority than ever before.

There are two cancers on the future of Afghanistan: terrorism and opium. And either one of those cancers is capable of killing the future that Afghans want and that I think the international alliance is trying to create. There was a view that to act in regard to the opium poppy was antithetical to security.

What we've seen, I think, more clearly than ever in the last several years, is the way in which resources from the opium economy feeds the Taliban directly in al-Qaida; the way the cycles that they create provide ties to the people and to the regions that you see here that are still sources of insecurity; and thirdly, the way in which the opium economy is an enormous fountain of acid destroying the integrity of Afghan institutions by corrupting the officials in them.

We can't do what we need to do in Afghanistan without blending the counter-terror missions with the counter-narcotics missions. Now, they have to be blended. They have to be -- they're in contested environments. Obviously, these are matters that require considerable ability and effort to bring them together. But it's also true that, you know, we are aware -- we have to get rid of the crop. And we would prefer to get rid of it because people make other decisions. We'd prefer to get rid of it because people make other decisions if they have to by local direction, but if they have to by national direction and if they have to by increasing efforts by the central government as a last resort to get rid of the poppy crop, and to put risk on those who are not convinced by every other argument about the future, about economic development, about options, about threat of criminal prosecution.

Again, the key here is to create a structure, which I think we're close to, where no matter what level of escalation happens, the Afghan people win and the bad guys lose, the traffickers and the terrorists; that at every level of security and counter-narcotics, we have a capacity to influence those who are resistant, if they are resistant, and to prevail over them. We are not entirely there yet. And obviously, the growth in the south, which has become a bigger part of the overall problem, indicates where the challenge is.

But I would say the reductions in the north also show that people up here are voting. They're voting with the alliance in the Afghan Government; the future of Afghanistan is not about poppy and it's not about terror. What we've got to do is make sure that trend continues and flows south and the southern trend does not flow north. So again, this is a contest, but I would say right now, especially when we hear talk about the spring offensive and we hear talk about a lot of other things, the Afghan people are winning right now and the effort is to build that in that capacity and that agreement between us about how to go forward and what tools we choose will depend on what the situation demands.

MODERATOR: Thank you so much for coming.

###

Released on June 25, 2007



[Updates](#) | [Frequent Questions](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Email this Page](#) | [Subject Index](#) | [Search](#)

The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.

[FOIA](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Other U.S. Government Information](#)