



The Counternarcotics Situation in Afghanistan

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Remarks at Press Roundtable

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY SCHWEICH: First of all, thank you all for coming. I'm very appreciative that you're interested in the issue of the counter-narcotics situation in Afghanistan. I'm here today mainly to attend the President's Counter-Narcotics Conference, and to consult with friends and allies, and both Afghan officials and members of the international community to speak with them about the nature of the problem and what we can do to refine the counter-narcotics strategy in order to alleviate the problem.

What we've seen over the past couple of days as the United Nations has released its new cultivation numbers is a disturbing trend upward yet again in overall cultivation in Afghanistan. However, there's also an interesting change in the trend of cultivation whereby there has been substantial reductions in poppy cultivation primarily in the north and the east of the country, whereas the increases have been confined largely to the south. In fact, if you take out the six provinces that have shown the largest increase this year, those that have the greatest poppy cultivation, the rest of the country is actually down by about 50 percent. So we have a bifurcation of the problem for the first time, which has some lessons for us.

What we're trying to understand is why you have better results in certain parts of the country, 13 poppy-free provinces; and yet a continuing worsening of the situation in the south in Helmand [inaudible]. We believe the answer is fairly simple. Where there is security and where there is political will on the part of the Afghan officials in charge of the province, poppy reduction is going down. And where there is insecurity and/or a lack of political will, poppy cultivation is going up.

So the program that we advocate now to take into account the current situation is one that was designed to provide incentives for poppy-free provinces to remain poppy-free, and those that are near poppy-free to become poppy-free. And disincentives for those provinces where there is not a downward trend to encourage people to get the political will to follow the trend in the rest of the country.

The way that we intend to assist the Afghan government and generate political will there is to provide greater incentives for success and greater disincentives for failure. That's one big piece. The second piece relates to the security. No matter how much political will you have or how many incentives there are, if there's insecurity such that the counter-narcotics program cannot be delivered, we won't have success.

So, in addition to working with the government of Afghanistan and our international partners to provide greater incentives and disincentives to generate the proper political will, we also need to work more closely with the military forces that are in the country to make sure that security and counter-narcotics are coordinated and more effectively delivered.

So, in terms of the public information effort, we would like to see a better coordinated public information effort between the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, the Ministry of Interior, and the ISAF forces that are in the country. That means province by province, district by district, word of mouth activity, working each area individually, not so much the broader television and radio-type campaigns.

In terms of alternative development, today the Acting Minister for Counter-Narcotics and Ambassador Wood announced a much expanded and much better funded Good Performers Initiative for alternative development which involves giving substantial awards directly to governors with the coordination of local officials and local ISAF officials for new poppy-free provinces, and for provinces that remain poppy-free.

The second category that was announced today was for special recognition in provinces where, for example, there's been a great deal of interdiction, where high level traffickers have been arrested or prosecuted, or where there's been some other unique contribution to the counter-narcotics effort by the governor. There were actually awards announced today for that category. The governor of Balk was awarded \$2.5 million for his efforts in that regard. And other awards were also made.

The third category, which is still being finalized--we haven't announced all the details today--is a very simple, results-oriented per hectare reward for reductions in poppy production. So if you take the UN numbers, for example, this year we have Urzgan at 9,200 hectares. If it goes down next year to 8,200 hectares using the UN numbers, that can be either because of reductions in planting at the outset or eradication on the back end, it doesn't make any difference, that would be a 1,000 hectare reduction and there would be a certain dollar figure associated with that. We're hopeful to get the funding to have it \$1,000 per hectare, which would mean if you eliminate 5,000 hectares you get a million dollars, but it will be a substantial sum of money, the exact details of which haven't been worked out yet.

So it's a very specific program. If you are poppy-free or remain poppy-free, a very specific amount of money comes to your province, to this governor, direct assistance to those areas that made this happen. If you are successful in interdicting or prosecuting, you can get a special award like was given out today. Or if you do reductions by hectare you will get a specific amount of cash for development projects in your area.

This is not vague. This is a very, very specific set of incentives for success. So that's the major new program initiative in terms of alternative development. The U.S. and the UK have already put aside over \$25 million for this program and we are going to be seeking many, many more millions of dollars from our Congress so that hopefully it can be a program of \$50, \$60, or \$70 million type of a program - big money for success.

That's the incentives. Now we have to talk about the disincentives. In the past, eradication has not been effective. The numbers have not been high enough and the quality has been low. The United Nations tells us that in order to deter planting you need to eradicate between 20 and 30 percent of the crop. And it needs to hit the wealthier, not the poorer people in order for it to be effective.

In the past year approximately 10 to 11 percent of the crop was eradicated, and it was by negotiation. When you negotiate eradication, by definition you're steered or veered toward the less powerful instead of the more powerful. That is not what's going to be happening in the future. And we will not accept the false argument that eradication only hurts poor farmers. If it's done right, that's not the case.

I want to quote from the UN report here. Talking about the north/south divide, it says, "Opium cultivation in Afghanistan is no longer associated with poverty. Quite the opposite. Helmand, Kandahar and the three other opium-producing provinces in the south are the richest and most fertile, in the past the bread basket of the nation and a main source of earnings. They have now opted for illicit opium cultivation on an unprecedented scale." The wealthiest provinces are producing opium and the poorest provinces are the ones that are poppy-free.

Most of the poppy in Afghanistan is now grown by wealthy farmers, relatively wealthy farmers I should say, corrupt top officials, large landowners, and opportunists who have turned down alternatives that have been given to them. These people will find that we will be there this spring to eradicate their crops.

Then there is the element of interdiction. If you're going to attack a drug problem it has to be a comprehensive strategy and simply hitting the farmers, no matter how wealthy they are, is not enough. You have to get the traffickers. The United States will double the amount of resources it's putting into the interdiction activity over the next 12 months.

The counter-narcotics police of Afghanistan and particularly the National Interdiction Unit as well as the Afghan Special Narcotics Force will be better equipped, better trained, more mobile, and better protected in order to go in and take out high value targets. And ISAF, while not participating directly in either eradication or interdiction activities, we believe will be very supportive, particularly in the area of interdiction and taking out of high value targets by providing intelligence, airlift if necessary, and other things that we've been seeking. So we are very confident that there will be significant military assistance to these efforts.

Finally, the Criminal Justice Task Force and the Counter-Narcotics Tribunal will be expanded with the addition of additional U.S. mentors and prosecutors so that we're more able to prosecute high-level narcotics cases and extradite those who the Afghan government believes should be extradited to foreign countries.

In closing my remarks before I take your questions, I want to make one very important point. Everything we're doing, everything that I've said in terms of public information, additional development, eradication, interdiction, prosecution, military support, is designed to give the Afghans capacity to do all of this themselves. It's training, it's assistance, it's advice, it's funding, so that ultimately the Afghans will have complete control over this problem and they'll run all these programs themselves. We're here to help.

Thank you, I'm ready to take your questions.

Question: My question was regarding the eradication. Regarding the eradication, are you planning to implement fear as [inaudible]? Because [inaudible]. [Inaudible] position. So this [inaudible]. Are you planning to implement?

Assistant Secretary Schweich: We will assist the Afghan government in implementing whatever eradication program the Afghan government wants to implement. What we have said, though, and it's in our strategy that we recently released, is that we believe the only way to be effective is with forced, non-negotiable, equitable eradication. There are two ways to achieve that. One is to do force-protected ground eradication that could potentially use ground-based spray which makes it much more efficient; and the other is aerial eradication. So those are the two options. We will work with our UK counterparts who still have a lead role in this and the Afghan government to determine what the best way to effectuate it is.

It's not the policy of the United States government to implement aerial eradication. It is the policy of the United States government to work with the Afghan government and our allies to have non-negotiated forced eradication of whatever kind it agrees upon.

Question: A question regarding the U.S. forces in Afghanistan. The United States government is involved in counter-narcotic campaign in Afghanistan and the United States is a country which contributes to the counter-narcotics campaign in Afghanistan. You have troops on the ground in Afghanistan to fight terrorism in Afghanistan. And you are saying that we are building capacity of opium security forces to fight drug and narcotics in Afghanistan.

As we see the Afghan security forces, they are weak, they are not strong enough to fight the drug lords and the drug traffickers in Afghanistan. You have air power and you have control of all the borders in Afghanistan. Why don't your troops get involved on the interdiction of drug interdiction and counter-narcotics in the country? And you are always saying that counter-narcotics is strongly linked with the terrorism. You're fighting terrorism while the drug which is feeding the terrorism, you are not doing enough on drugs.

So what is your strategy on this?

Assistant Secretary Schweich: First of all, it's an excellent question. The simple answer is that the ISAF agreement--the agreement that got all the nations to come here and help the Afghan people--precludes direct involvement in eradication and interdiction options. So unless you renegotiate that entire agreement, that's going to stay. But I also think there's a reason why that agreement was reached. Counter-narcotics is a law enforcement operation and fighting the Taliban is a military operation. Having forces trained in law enforcement activity is just as important as having forces trained in military activity. We're training Afghans to be able to execute law enforcement objectives and we're also training Afghans to be able to execute military objectives. Where they overlap in this case, as in with the Taliban where the Taliban's involved in the drug trade, what you don't need is to have a military force doing narcotics or a narcotics force doing military. You need to have a well coordinated effort between the two, and that's the capacity we're trying to build.

Question: You said [inaudible] your resources to get the traffickers, the big traffickers.

Assistant Secretary Schweich: Yeah.

Question: All right. And you said the non-negotiate eradication has been an agreed option now between U.S. and Afghan government. Or is that --

Assistant Secretary Schweich: Everyone agrees there needs to be non-negotiated eradication. What we're working on is what's the most effective way to do that.

Question: Why do you believe that [inaudible] the Afghan government are reluctant to agree with you on aerial spraying. Ground spraying [inaudible] the environment [inaudible].

Assistant Secretary Schweich: When you do aerial eradication, which we've had plenty of experience with in Colombia and other places, you have to balance the risk. Aerial eradication is undoubtedly the most effective way to eradicate. You go in, you can get large blocks of land in a very short period of time, you do it with minimal loss of life since you don't have to fight your way in and you don't have to fight your way out. You don't ever negotiate with anybody. You're coming in from the air. There are no meetings, we just come in and get rid of the crop. And poppy is particularly receptive to [Glyphosate], the common herbicide that we use to eradicate. So there's a tremendous advantage to it. That has to be counter-balanced against the fact that there's a lot of misinformation out there. There was in Colombia, too, and Ecuador and other countries where people think that being sprayed with a chemical means it's going to affect your water supply or cause birth defects or things like that.

There's a lot of research, a tremendous amount of research showing that's not the case and in fact [Glyphosate] is used all over America, Europe, and Asia and Africa--everywhere. But the Taliban are pretty good at propaganda. They're pretty good at exploiting any potential weakness on the part of the Afghan government or the allies. They will, if there's spray used, undoubtedly try to claim that this is poisoning the Afghan people. It's not true, but this is a real risk that would have to be very carefully balanced before a determination would be made to use what is otherwise a very effective way to eradicate.

The question is when do the obvious benefits of aerial eradication outweigh the potential risks, and can those potential risks be mitigated through a counter-information campaign such that they're worth taking? That's what the discussions are about and no resolution has been reached on that, which is why that's not in the current policy.

Question: [Inaudible] more of a PR decision which you're [inaudible] rather than [inaudible]. [Inaudible] very [inaudible].

Assistant Secretary Schweich: All I will say is the overwhelming scientific evidence is that Glyphosate is completely harmless to human beings. It is used all over Europe, all over Africa, all over Asia, in every farm in the United States. We encourage people to use it independent of the drug issue. We think the Afghan farmers should use it just to help them grow better and stronger crops. It is the most common herbicide in the world and when you eradicate opium you actually use a diluted form of it, to about a third of the normal strength that you would use on a typical farm.

So the medical arguments I don't buy at all. I think they're completely fabricated by people who have other motives at stake. Or who were just misinformed. You can believe them because you were misinformed by somebody who has another motive. I'm not saying everybody who says there are medical problems has another motive. Some of them have been simply misinformed by people who do have bad motives. I want to be careful about that.

But the medical issue is long since resolved, as is evidenced by the fact that it's even used, we've found it used in Afghanistan by farmers. It is available here now. As are other herbicides. It's the potential exploitation of the spraying that is at issue, and it's really the aerial spraying that people object to, not the ground spraying. The idea that somehow it's worse by being airborne or something to that effect, which again is not true, where people seem to have the most concern.

Just to reemphasize, it is not the policy of the United States to do aerial eradication. It's the policy of the United States to do what the Afghan government wants us to do. But we will present the options, we will present the evidence in favor or against every option.

Question: In the UNODC report we have read that most of the poppy which were cultivated were in the six most violent and aggressive provinces in the south. In these provinces Taliban have control of most of these areas. So what would you address that issue if you go and do the ground, non-negotiating eradication? What would be this problem?

Assistant Secretary Schweich: You hit the nail on the head, which is insecurity allows an environment where poppy thrives. If you're going to go out and take it out, you need force protection. That's where you would need the Afghan Army or Police with the coordination of ISAF and you'd have to have a coordinated effort.

The Taliban are spread thin. They can't be everywhere at all times. Even good intelligence would allow you to go in and eradicate a field at the right time if it's good intelligence. So that's where we need better coordination with the military authorities. It can be in the form of helping Afghans develop force protection capability, or it could be in the form of essentially providing very good, reliable intelligence on where we can go and where we can't go at a given time.

Question: [Inaudible]? How much [inaudible] are you going to give the [inaudible]?

My second question is what disincentives do you propose for the provinces and the provincial authorities [inaudible] with regard to [inaudible] if there is a problem?

[Inaudible] story on the threat, and the [inaudible] seems to have had [inaudible] eradication, but they've got geographic problems in that province. You cannot [inaudible]. It takes two or three days to get [inaudible]. So have you considered all these things [inaudible]?

Assistant Secretary Schweich: Yes. First of all, with respect to the time, the way the incentives are going to work is the United Nations survey was released yesterday and 365 days from now the next one's going to be released. If you've gone poppy-free during that time you get the reward. It's a yearly program. So that's the amount of time you have to go poppy-free to be eligible for the award.

If you already were poppy free and you stay poppy-free during that one year time period you'll get a similar award. So it's an annual type of a program.

In terms of the disincentives, that's very much up to the Afghan government, but in programs around the world that I've been involved in, the disincentives for officials who fail are they are fired if they're incompetent and they're prosecuted if they're corrupt.

The question of Badakhshan is a very good one, and a good example of how all parts of the strategy have to work together. You had a governor who really did a very good job in eliminating the poppy, a 75 percent reduction, I think, over the past 12 months. But the reason why it grows there is that opium keeps for a long time, so you have three or four days to get from one place to the other. Whereas if you're going to grow traditional vegetables or crops you have much less time.

So it's our job in the international community to reward a province like that with the kind of assistance that will allow crops to get to market so there can be sustained reductions. That's what we're going to be encouraging the international community to do.

Question: Right now there are two Afghans being prosecuted in the United States and there are reports saying that --

Question: You mentioned you wanted to request the Afghan government to [inaudible] --

Assistant Secretary Schweich: Extradition.

Question: Did you earlier put out a request for any of them to be extradited to the [inaudible]?

Assistant Secretary Schweich: Well the two that are there, one happened to show up in the United States and was apprehended. He came on his own. The other asked to be extradited to the United States. I think he thought he'd have a better chance. I don't know what the reason was, actually. So we didn't do a formal extradition in either case.

There was actually a third that was extradited not through traditional bilateral extradition treaties, but pursuant to UN conventions. There's actually three who are there. So that was a UN type of extradition.

But there's never been a formal bilateral Afghanistan-U.S. extradition. But I am optimistic there will be some more opportunities in the near future.

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