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THE SUNDAY TIMES

British soldiers suspected of heroin trafficking ring

MoD tightens checks on troops returning from Afghanistan to RAF Brize Norton after a whistleblower tip-off of drug-smuggling network

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Afghanistan grows 90% of the world's opium, the raw material refined into heroin (Richard Pohle)

Detectives are investigating a suspected heroin trafficking ring among British soldiers serving in Afghanistan.

The inquiry centres on British and Canadian troops based at Camp Bastion and Kandahar, the two main airports ferrying military personnel in and out of the country. Army chiefs are so concerned that they have ordered an increase in checks on troops returning from frontline duties.

This includes greater use of sniffer dogs, body and luggage searches and other covert monitoring at RAF Brize Norton, in Oxfordshire, the military airport from which up to 700 troops return each week.

The checks are so extensive that the Ministry of Defence this weekend issued an apology to its personnel for the inconvenience being caused. However, it also threatened that any troops found to be caught up in the trade would be subjected to the full rigours of criminal law.

Afghanistan grows 90% of the world's opium, the raw material which is refined into heroin. About 60% is cultivated

in Helmand province, the centre of combat operations for British and other Nato troops.

The trade brings in about £2 billion a year with Taliban-backed drug lords offering farmers three times their daily wage to harvest opium poppies.

Anecdotal evidence from local drugs smugglers has for some time suggested that British troops may be involved in the trade.

The criminal inquiry began after detectives from the MoD's special investigation branch in Hampshire were tipped off by a whistleblower that a network of British soldiers has been buying the drugs from dealers and shipping them back on military aircraft to Brize Norton.

The MoD said this weekend that it was investigating the allegations and had acted immediately to target soldiers who tried to smuggle drugs back from Afghanistan.

A spokesman said: "We take any such reports very seriously and we have already tightened our existing procedures, both in Afghanistan and in the UK, including through increasing the use of sniffer dogs."

Last year The Sunday Times interviewed one 32-year-old dealer who said he had worked for an official in the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban organisation which funds itself through the drugs trade. The dealer, who identified himself only as Aziz, described deals he had done in Kabul.

He said: "Most of our other customers, apart from drug lords in foreign countries, are the military. The soldiers whose term of duty is about to finish, they give an order to our boss. So most of the foreigners who do these deals are the military. They buy a lot from us.

"As I have heard, they are carrying these drugs in the military airlines and they can't be reached because they are military. They can take it to the USA or England.

"I have heard this when I first started out from the guys who referred me to my boss."

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