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NATO green-lights attacking Afghan drug operations with Taliban links

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — NATO has ironed out its legal concerns and formally issued orders to treat Afghan drug lords who fuel the violent Taliban insurgency as legitimate military targets.

Bombing narcotics shipments, arresting drug barons and blowing up opium processing labs with a verifiable link to militants is now a key priority - one that senior commanders and political leaders of the military alliance are confident will not violate international law.

"This discussion within the chain of command is now complete and the orders issued," James Appathurai, a spokesman for NATO's secretary general, said Thursday in an email to The Canadian Press.

Appathurai said NATO lawyers have reviewed the new policy, which requires that any case against Afghan drug dealers be proven through intelligence.

"The orders require the demonstration of a link between the narcotics facilities and facilitators, and the insurgency."

The formal issuing of the order clears the way for stepped-up operations to begin "within days," said other senior military officials.

NATO officials said Thursday that countries will have the choice whether their soldiers take part in such attacks. Many of the 41 countries fighting in Afghanistan as part of the NATO mission have imposed caveats on how their forces are used.

And while Canada supports the policy at the political level, it is unlikely that soldiers in the Kandahar battle group will be undertaking specific, independent operations aimed at the murky world of Afghan drug lords.

Testifying before a Commons committee this week in Ottawa, Defence Minister Peter MacKay stood behind the policy of turning the guns on Taliban drug lords as a "legitimate exercise" for Canadian soldiers.

But he cautioned it has "not been identified as a priority for our country," and that soldiers would "act accordingly" whenever a link is proven between drug shipments and insurgents.

MacKay was not available to comment Thursday, but spokesman Dan Dugas said the policy, as articulated by the minister earlier, remains unchanged.

"The policy is, yes, we signed on in Bucharest," Dugas said.

"That being said, it's not one of our priorities. Should the need arise and there's a direct linkage between the drug lords' activities and the financing of terrorist activity, the Canadian Armed Forces will, where they can, take part in activity to stop that."

Nonetheless, the size of Canada's force on the ground likely precludes it from playing a significant role in drug offensives, and with the imminent arrival of tens of thousands of fresh U.S. troops, the chances of Canadians being called on appear slim at best.

As well, tracking, identifying and separating Taliban drug shipments from non-Taliban ones would demand a complex intelligence web on the ground, the sort of network only the U.S. and perhaps Britain could possess.

The Canadian military began studying last fall how it might conduct anti-narcotics operations in Afghanistan, but realized that there was a limit to the army's ability to carry out such raids, the country's top commander said in an interview at the time.

Gen. Walter Natynczyk, Canada's chief of defence staff, said Canada has considered adding "additional competencies," such as RCMP and police investigators, "who understand that world better than we do."

But an RCMP spokesman said no formal request has been made to add drug enforcement

officers to the existing civilian police garrison at the provincial reconstruction base in Kandahar.

The military is as much about preparation as it is fighting and Natynczyk said the army would have to figure out how to incorporate drug raids into planning and training.

He called the connection between illicit narcotics and the Taliban "a huge threat to the stability of the Afghan government" and indicated that on previous military operations, soldiers have uncovered caches of opium and heroin.

A few weeks ago, NATO's supreme commander, U.S. Gen. John Craddock, essentially declared all drug barons to be fair game for soldiers, but Germany's senior officer overseeing Afghanistan, Gen. Egon Ramms, objected and wondered in a leaked memo whether the order violated international law.

The order was withdrawn on Jan. 30 and redrafted to make the distinction between Taliban and non-Taliban drug operations.

MacKay, in his testimony to Parliament, emphasized that NATO troops were not taking part in the ground-level eradication of poppy fields - a practice that is supposed to be conducted by the Afghan government.

Canada has had a long-standing policy of avoiding damage to poppy fields in order to keep dirt-poor farmers from rising up and joining the insurgency.

Profits from Afghanistan's booming illegal narcotics drug trade is thought to pump as much as \$100 million per year into the Taliban's war coffers; NATO commanders say it's their plan to break that nexus.

"The bottom line is this: drug money is buying the weapons that are killing our soldiers," said Appathurai.

"And for that money, the Taliban is fostering a drug trade that is providing 90 per cent of the world's heroin in our schools and back alleys. We need, as a community, to deal with this problem more directly."