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NATO in awkward position about Afghan opium

By Bill Graveland, THE CANADIAN PRESS

SPERWAN GHAR, Afghanistan - The vast fields of opium poppies in this lush farmland south of the Arghandab River give little credence to claims that progress is being made in eradicating the production of this potent narcotic.

Afghanistan now accounts for more than 90 per cent of the world's total crop, up from 70 per cent in 2000 and 52 per cent a decade earlier.

As they patrol the area daily searching for signs of the Taliban and improvised explosive devices, Canadian soldiers need only look around to see the very visible presence of the poppy crop.

Growing opium is not generally a choice for farmers in the Panjwaii and nearby Zhari districts, where the Taliban retains a stubborn grip. Often they are ordered by local drug lords, many with ties to the Taliban, to grow opium.

The farmers themselves are not getting rich from growing poppies or marijuana - the drug lords are. The areas on the outskirts of Kandahar city is a study in contrast: ordinary villagers live in humble mud dwellings while the rich and powerful have palatial homes that would not be out of place in Malibu.

The drug lords use part of their enormously profits to help fund the Taliban as a way of keeping Afghan government forces out of their turf.

NATO's International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, is not directly involved in eradicating the opium crop. The task falls to the government of Afghanistan.

But ISAF recognizes the cultivation of opium presents a problem for coalition forces supporting the Kabul government.

"You've got this issue of multiple problems interlinking with one another," said Wing Cmdr. Antony McCord, a spokesman for ISAF's Regional Command South.

"The narcotics trade is linked to the terrorists that are operating here in the south of Afghanistan. You cannot separate those out, so there is a link there. And as ISAF looks at the security of the south, obviously there are bits of that which links to the narcotics trade."

But everyone seems to have a different view on how to deal with the poppy trade. There are too many opinions and not enough concrete action to make a dent in the production of poppy in Afghanistan.

The current process favoured by the poppy-eradication force is to lop the heads off the plants with sticks. The United States has proposed spraying or buying up all of the opium crop and using it for pain medication.

So far, the efforts have been well meaning but not focused enough to do any lasting damage to the opium trade.

"There's always room for improvement," McCord said.

"We have not got the perfect solution and it would be very difficult, I suspect, because of its complexity to get that perfect solution."



Poppies are seen in a field in this photo taken Nov. 30, 2007, in the Zhari district in southern Afghanistan. Efforts to curtail the production of poppy in Afghanistan have been ineffective as the country produces 90 per cent of the world crop. THE CANADIAN PRESS/ Bill Graveland

"We need to get some clever blokes together in a room, work on it and actually take that solution and put it into practice."

But the ultimate decision lies with the Afghanistan government. Discussion on the issue are being held in Kabul between the government of President Hamid Karzai and ISAF.

Although there is a train of thought that the opium crops should all be destroyed, McCord said it is not quite so simple - "If you mean by eradicating the poppy that will in turn hurt the Taliban? It's more complex than that."

"If you think the people who actually grow the opium are people who are forced to grow it, then you would actually be hurting people that you don't want to hurt," he said.

"If we say we'll get rid of all this poppy and have no way of filling that vacuum, you are hurting the people you are wanting to support."