



The SENLIS Drugs for Development Option in Afghanistan

By Brian MacDonald
Senior Defence Analyst

The SENLIS Council Security and Development Policy Group, a European think-tank based in Brussels, released earlier this year a study titled “Canada in Kandahar: No Peace to Keep,” arguing that Canada was too focused on military operations in Kandahar, at the expense of development activities.

They are conducting a seminar in Ottawa this week promoting their earlier report.

SENLIS argued there were three parallel crises to be dealt with: a Poverty Crisis, an Opium Crisis, and a Security Crisis. Few would argue with this assessment—particularly with respect to the Opium Crisis.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, www.unodc.org), the best international source for statistics on the Afghanistan Opium Crisis, noted in its Report “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006,” that opium poppy acreage increased by 59% from 2005 to 2006, with Afghanistan opium production, 6,100 tonnes annually, now accounting for 92% of global opium supply.

The increase in the South was even more spectacular, with production up by 121% overall, and by 162% in Helmand province, though

decreasing by 3% in Kandahar Province where the Canadians are located.

The money involved is staggering. The UNODC estimated that the global retail value of Afghanistan based opium, and its heroin derivative, amounted to over \$50 billion dollars.

Earlier this year, UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa said “Revenue from the harvest will be over three billion dollars this year, making a handful of criminals and corrupt officials extremely rich. This money is also dragging the rest of Afghanistan into a bottomless pit of destruction and despair.”

The opium farmers get about 25% of the take, with the druglords keeping the remaining 75%—or about \$2.3 billion dollars.

Compare that \$2.3 billion figure with the total revenue base of the central government, which the Asian Development Bank’s “*Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries*” estimated to be about \$652 million for 2004, with half of that coming from international grants.

The proposed SENLIS solution to the Opium Crisis is a novel one—buy the total opium crop from the farmers directly, and process it into medical opiates, especially for distribution to developing countries.

There is a precedent for this.



The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) supervises the production of medical opiates. The demand amounts to about 300 tonnes of morphine equivalents annually. The 6,100 tonnes of Afghanistan opium would yield about 830 tonnes of morphine equivalents. Added to the 400 tonnes of INCB approved production, that would effectively triple the current global supply.

Whether the opium farmers of Afghanistan would be interested in such a proposal would certainly depend on the price they would receive. In India, one of the countries where legal opium is grown, the official procurement price of opium that the Government pays to the farmer is between US\$ 12 and 35 per kg.

In Afghanistan the druglord “farm gate” price for dry opium at harvest time averaged about US\$ 125 per kg in 2006—between 3 and ten times the “farm gate” price in India. Not much incentive for the Afghanistan farmer there!

Mind you, it would only cost about \$760 million a year to meet the druglord price—which might well be a bargain.

On the other hand, the druglords might have a different view of the SENLIS buyers—and the potential loss of their US \$2.3 billion per year revenue stream.

Students of the Chicago Prohibition era mob scene might remember gangster Al Capone’s response to a rival attempting to

muscle in on his booze business. The St. Valentine’s Day massacre left seven of his rival’s gang dead.

One might expect something similar to happen to the SENLIS drugbuyers—unless, of course, a heavily armed Canadian Forces escort went along with them.

No wonder UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa rejected the SENLIS proposal for Afghanistan Opium crisis, saying: “The superficially enticing proposal of transforming its opium into (licit) morphine is no *silver bullet*”

What might be Costa’s alternative proposal for dealing with the Opium Crisis?

“In the turbulent Southern region counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics efforts must reinforce each other so as to stop the vicious circle of drugs funding terrorists and terrorists protecting drug traffickers. I call on the Afghan army and on NATO forces to destroy the heroin labs, disband the open opium bazaars, attack the opium convoys and bring to justice the big traders.”

The UNODC solution makes sense.

The SENLIS solution doesn’t.

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The Conference of Defence Associations
359 Kent St., Suite 502
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K2P 0R6
Telephone : (613) 236-1252
Facsimile : (613) 236-8191
E-mail : cda@cda-cdai.ca