

Narco Aggression: Russia accuses the U.S. military of involvement in drug trafficking out of Afghanistan

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Global Research, February 24, 2008
Frontline 24 February 2008

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Intelligence](#)

Global Research Editor's Note

The global proceeds of the Afghan drug trade is in excess of 150 billion dollars a year. There is mounting evidence that this illicit trade is protected by the US military.

Historically, starting in the early 1980s, the Afghan drug trade was used to finance CIA covert support of the Islamic brigades. The 2003 war on Afghanistan was launched following the Taliban government's 2000-2001 drug eradication program which led to a collapse in opium production in excess of 90 percent.

The following report, which accuses the United States of using military transport planes to ship narcotics out of Afghanistan confirms what is already known and documented regarding the Golden Crescent Drug Trade and its insidious relationship to US intelligence.

February 23, 2008

Russia, facing a catastrophic rise in drug addiction, accuses the U.S. military of involvement in drug trafficking from Afghanistan.

JOHN MACDOUGALL/AFP



Afghan workers cutting open poppy bulbs, the first stage in the harvesting process, in Jalalabad.

Afghanistan produced 8,200 tonnes of opium last year, enough to make 93 per cent of the world's heroin supply.

Could it be that the American military in Afghanistan is involved in drug trafficking? Yes, it is quite possible, according to Russia's Ambassador to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov.

Commenting on reports that the United States military transport aviation is used for shipping narcotics out of Afghanistan, the Russian envoy said there was no smoke without fire.

"If such actions do take place they cannot be undertaken without contact with Afghans, and

if one Afghan man knows this, at least a half of Afghanistan will know about this sooner or later,” Kabulov told Vesti, Russia’s 24-hour news channel. “That is why I think this is possible, but cannot prove it.”

Afghan narcotics are an extremely painful issue for Russia. They first hit the Russian market during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s when Russian soldiers developed a taste for Afghan heroin and smuggled it back to Russia.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 threw open the floodgates of drug trafficking from Afghanistan across Central Asia to Russia and further west to Europe. Afghanistan’s narcotics struck Russia like a tsunami, threatening to decimate its already shrinking population. According to the Federal Drug Control Service, 90 per cent of all heroin sold in Russia comes from Afghanistan. Russia today has about six million drug-users – a 20-fold increase since the collapse of the Soviet Union and a huge figure for a country of 142 million people.

The Federal Drug Control Service said earlier in January that as many as 30 to 40 million people in Russia may have tried drugs at least once. Annually, some 80,000 Russians die of drug-related causes. One in five crimes committed in Russia is related to drugs. The illegal drug turnover in Russia is estimated at between \$10 and \$15 billion, discounting transit trafficking.

Narcotics have become an integral part of the youth subculture in Russia. In Moscow alone narcotics are sold at about 100 discotheques and cafes frequented by young people, the city drug control service reported in December. About 45 per cent of Russian university students use drugs, according to Russian Minister for Education and Science Andrei Fursenko. He described the situation as “critical”. The Moscow city government plans to introduce mandatory drug tests for all students in the Russian capital this year. Schoolchildren may be next in line for screening: some surveys indicate that four out of five young Russians are familiar with drugs. The Russian Parliament is planning to discuss a law to allow compulsory treatment of drug and alcohol addicts.

President Vladimir Putin has described the drug abuse problem as a “national calamity”. The catastrophic rise in drug addiction in Russia has been spurred by the painful transition from socialism to capitalism that Russia has been going through since 1991. Millions lost their jobs and were reduced to abject poverty during Russia’s worst-ever economic meltdown in the 1990s. But external factors have played a crucial role in the spread of drugs. Last year Putin bluntly stated that Russia and Europe had been victims of “narco-aggression”.

When the Soviet Union broke up into 15 independent states, Moscow overnight lost control of nearly 5,000 kilometres of former Soviet borders in Central Asia and the Caucasus. At the same time, nearly 8,000 km of what used to be internal nominal boundaries between ex-Soviet republics became Russia’s new state borders.

In 1993, Russian border guards returned to Tajikistan in an effort to contain the flow of drugs from opium-producing Afghanistan. In 2002 alone they intercepted 6.7 tonnes of drugs, half of them heroin. However, in 2005 Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon, hoping to win financial aid from the U.S., asked the Russian border guards to leave, saying Tajikistan had recovered enough from a five-year civil war (from 1992-97) to shoulder the task. Within months of the Russian withdrawal, cross-border drug trafficking increased manifold.

Turkmenistan, another major opium route from Afghanistan, threw out Russian border guards in 1999. Since 2000, Turkmenistan has reported no drug seizures to international organisations. President Saparmurat Niyazov, who died last year, claimed his country had no drug problem. However, independent surveys indicate that up to half of Turkmenistan's male population use drugs. In 2002, the country's Prosecutor-General Kurbanbibi Atadzhanova was arrested for operating a drug-trafficking ring.

Seventeen years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, borders between the newly independent states are still porous and travel is visa-free. Air passengers arriving from Central Asia are routinely screened for drugs in Russian airports, but if drugs are shipped by land, there is only a remote chance that they get intercepted.

Afghanistan under the U.S.

When Russia backed the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan to crush the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the post-9/11 scenario, the last thing it expected to happen was that drug trafficking from Afghanistan would assume gargantuan proportions under the U.S. military. Since 2001, poppy fields, once banned by the Taliban, have mushroomed again. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan produced 8,200 tonnes of opium last year, enough to make 93 per cent of the world's heroin supply.

The U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO] forces in the country have not only failed to eliminate the terrorist threat from the Taliban, but also presided over a spectacular rise in opium production. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Afghanistan was on the brink of becoming a "narco state".

Narco business has emerged as virtually the only economy of Afghanistan and is valued at some \$10 billion a year. Opium trade is estimated by the U.N. to be equivalent to 53 per cent of the country's official economy and is helping to finance the Taliban.

"Unfortunately, they [NATO] are doing nothing to reduce the narcotic threat from Afghanistan even a tiny bit," Putin angrily remarked three years ago. He accused the coalition forces of "sitting back and watching caravans haul drugs across Afghanistan to the former Soviet Union and Europe." As time went by, Russian suspicions regarding the U.S. role in the rise of a narco state in Afghanistan grew deeper, especially after reports from Iraq said that the cultivation of opium poppies was spreading rapidly there too.

"The Americans are working hard to keep narco business flourishing in both countries," says Mikhail Khazin, president of the consultancy firm Niakon. "They consistently destroy the local infrastructure, pushing the local population to look for illegal means of subsistence. And the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] provides protection to drug trafficking."

U.S. freelance writer Dave Gibson recalled in an article published in *American Chronicle* in December what a U.S. foreign intelligence official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told [NewsMax.com](http://www.newsmax.com) in March 2002 of the CIA's record of involvement with the international drug trade. The official said: "The CIA did almost the identical thing during the Vietnam War, which had catastrophic consequences – the increase in the heroin trade in the USA beginning in the 1970s is directly attributable to the CIA. The CIA has been complicit in the global drug trade for years, so I guess they just want to carry on their favourite business."

AFP



A USAF cargo plane takes off from the U.S. airbase in Incirlik in Turkey in March 2003.

A Russian news channel reported that drugs from Afghanistan were hauled by American transport aircraft to the U.S. airbases in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey.

Now Russia has joined the fray accusing the U.S. military of involvement in the heroin trafficking from Afghanistan to Europe. The Vesti channel's report from Afghanistan said that drugs from Afghanistan were hauled by American transport aircraft to the U.S. airbases Ganci in Kyrgyzstan and Incirlik in Turkey.

The Ganci Air Force base at the Manas international airport in Kyrgyzstan was set up in late 2001 as a staging post for military operations inside Afghanistan. The Kyrgyz government threatened to close the base after neighbouring Uzbekistan shut down a similar U.S. airbase on its territory in 2005, but relented after Washington agreed to make a one-off payment of \$150 million in the form of an assistance package and to pay \$15 million a year for the use of the base.

One of the best-informed Russian journalists on Central Asia, Arkady Dubnov, recently quoted anonymous Afghan sources as saying that "85 per cent of all drugs produced in southern and southeastern provinces are shipped abroad by U.S. aviation."

A well-informed source in Afghanistan's security services told the Russian journalist that the American military acquired drugs through local Afghan officials who dealt with field commanders in charge of drug production.

Writing in the *Vremya Novostei* daily, Dubnov claimed that the pro-Western administration of President Hamid Karzai, including his two brothers, Kajum Karzai and Akhmed Vali Karzai, are head-to-heels involved in the narcotics trade.

The article quoted a leading U.S. expert on Afghanistan, Barnett Rubin, as telling an anti-narcotics conference in Kabul last October that "drug dealers had infiltrated Afghani state structures to the extent where they could easily paralyse the work of the government if decision to arrest one of them was ever made."

Former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Richard Holbrooke said in January that "government officials, including some with close ties to the presidency, are protecting the drug trade and profiting from it."

In an article carried by *Washington Post*, the diplomat described the \$1-billion-a-year U.S. counter-narcotics effort in Afghanistan as "the single most ineffective programme in the history of American foreign policy."

"It's not just a waste of money. It actually strengthens the Taliban and Al Qaeda, as well as criminal elements within Afghanistan," Holbrooke wrote in the *The Washington Post* in early January.

It is an open question whether the Russian charges of U.S. complicity in drug trafficking are based on hard evidence or have been prompted by Moscow's frustration at Washington's failure to address the opium problem in Afghanistan. But it is a fact that the U.S. and NATO have stonewalled numerous offers of cooperation from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a

defence pact of six former Soviet republics.

Nikolai Bordyuzha, CSTO Secretary-General, quoted a Pentagon general as telling him: "We are not fighting narcotics because this is not our task in Afghanistan."

Instead of joining hands with the SCO and the CSTO in combating the narcotics threat, the CSTO chief said, the U.S. was working to set up rival security structures in the region. Washington is working to "drive a geopolitical wedge between Central Asian countries and Russia and to reorient the region towards the U.S.", Bordyuzha said last year.

With the U.S. and NATO rebuffing their cooperation offers, Russia, China and the Central Asian states have to rely on their own forces in combating the narcotics threat from Afghanistan. The CSTO has been running a wide-ranging aid and military assistance programme for Afghanistan, which includes training Afghan anti-narcotic police.

Last year, the SCO joined in signing a cooperation protocol with the CSTO, which is aimed, above all, at curbing drug trafficking. At its summit in Bishkek, the Kyrgyzstan capital, last August, the SCO decided to set up jointly with the CSTO an "anti-narcotics belt" around Afghanistan.

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