
No quick fixes

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SURROUNDED by his pyramids of fruit and vegetables, Gul Khaliq is a cheerful man. "Thanks to God we have customers, we have security and the people have the money to spend," says the fruit-seller at the main market in Jalalabad, slapping a watermelon and adding a eulogy to the governor of Nangarhar province, Gul Agha Sherzai. Jalalabad and the governor are both on the up. Millions of dollars of foreign aid and a building boom have dragged the place out of torpor. And Mr Sherzai, a bear of a man known as "the Bulldozer", has contrived to make Nangarhar officially "poppy-free" this year.

As recently as 2004 Nangarhar was the second-biggest opium producer in the country, after Helmand. It accounts for a big chunk of a drop in Afghan poppy cultivation in 2008 that may exceed 25%. In addition, a harsh winter in Afghanistan has forced down poppy yields. In Nangarhar Mr Sherzai has gained much kudos for imposing the will of the authorities on truculent poppy farmers. But the narco-economy is fiendishly difficult to interpret. Recent research suggests that greed on the part of farmers, at least in this part of the country, is actually a fairly minor factor in the decision to plant poppy.

David Mansfield, a researcher for the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, a think-tank, has produced statistics showing that Nangarhar poppy farmers are rarely the richest people in their communities. Their profits from poppy are often barely higher, and sometimes lower, than those from legal crops, particularly where they have to use petrol generators to pump water to their crops.

But there are many less obvious reasons why poppy is likely to remain a mainstay of farmers in many parts of the country. In Lower Shinwar, for example, a district around 80km (50 miles) from Jalalabad, listless unemployed men sit around. They are too far from Jalalabad to benefit from its boom and, despite a new road to the area, there is no transport to take produce out. Moreover, households have an average of 12 members. To grow enough wheat to feed themselves, they would need about two hectares. But farmers generally have no more than half that.

This leaves many trapped in a cycle of debt, exacerbated as each generation subdivides the family land. The legal agricultural economy is all but unsustainable in the absence of other sources of employment, and there are very few. Poppy cultivation offered some respite from the trap. Smugglers would visit farms to buy opium. They made loans against future production ahead of the planting season. Dry opium keeps for up to two years, so farmers can save it as capital and sell when the market looks favourable. The legal economy offers no such facilities.

"We need factories," says Kashwar Bacha, a 50-year-old local farmer. "The shopkeepers have stopped giving us loans. We have to plant poppy next year." So Nangarhar is unlikely to remain poppy free, and risks increased instability as its tight-knit tribes defy the government to plant poppy. Persistent reports of farmers selling livestock and even their daughters in marriage to meet debts tell of desperation.

But if opium-farmers often seem the hapless victims of circumstance, their estimated \$500m in combined annual income is dwarfed by the \$3.5 billion smuggling and refining business. The mafias controlling these trades are increasingly reliant on the involvement of corrupt officials at every level of government.

At the apex of the business are around 15 kingpins, who mostly have no direct links to the business of smuggling but use political influence to ease the movement of drugs and protect figures lower down the chain. All are known to Western intelligence officials, but currently enjoy impunity. One senior Western diplomat says that if the West is to gain credibility it must get President Hamid Karzai to take action against 15 senior officials. "There should be a night of the long knives."

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