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Commentary: Afghanistan's opium tango
By ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE, UPI Editor at Large

WASHINGTON, March 14 (UPI) -- Sixty percent of Afghanistan's 30 million people are under 20 -- without the foggiest notion of what democracy stands for. Thirty-seven countries are involved in normalization and reconstruction -- with different agendas; some 2,000 non-governmental organizations (out of an estimated 25,000 worldwide) are now represented in Afghanistan. A former Afghan minister, speaking privately, said, "They spend over half their time coordinating among themselves... The Afghan tango is now known as one step forward, and three steps backward."

The Shiite suburbs of Kabul are now under the control of Iranian or pro-Iranian agents. The capital city has mushroomed from 400,000 at the time of 9/11 to 2 million today. Some 500,000 acres of public land was seized and sold for the benefit of the entrenched bureaucracy. To control this vast country of 30 million would require several hundred thousand troops. The U.S. and allied-trained Afghan army numbers 20,000 instead of the 35,000 projected by now.

The consensus forged in the heady days of liberation in December 2001 is broken. Fear of the B-52 bombers is gone. And today's Afghanistan is totally insecure, so much so that it has already been promoted to the ranks of failed states -- except for an all-pervasive opium culture that keeps Afghanistan from sinking into total chaos.

The illicit opium poppy industry is, according to a former minister in President Hamid Karzai's government, "a pyramid structure. If ever there were a management prize for the perfect supply chain," it would go to what generates from one half to two-thirds of Afghan GDP. He said there are "25 mafia dons at the top of the pyramid who control the key power levers. The Interior Ministry is owned by the drug industry." In Helmand province (40% of the country's opium production), Taliban fighters protect poppy farmers from eradication efforts, and extract millions of dollars for their services.

Managing relationships with the United States, NATO, the European Union, Iran, India and Pakistan, Russia and China is beyond the capabilities of the Karzai government. The game of nations is played below the president's radar screen. The U.S. is hoping to diversify Afghanistan's regional relationships by coaxing Gulf states to become stakeholders; but the "Gulfies" are otherwise engaged by the uncertainties of the Iraq war and Iran's nuclear ambitions.

An estimated \$8 billion a year is needed to dig Afghanistan out of its narco-state status. But the funds aren't available. And only an estimated 20 cents on the dollar is used for what it was intended. Afghans cannot be bought, said another ex-minister (not for attribution), "but they can be rented." And much rental money has been dispensed in the three Afghan provinces that share borders with Iran -- by Iranian agents. Clandestine U.S. "recon" operations are also run from these provinces -- into Iran.

Russia complains about being left out of Afghan affairs, which is hardly surprising. The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan throughout the 1990s and killed thousands of Afghans in a vain attempt to establish its dominion. But Moscow says it still has many friends in the former anti-Taliban Northern Alliance that resisted Talibanization in the northeastern part of the country, and which liberated large parts of the country when the U.S. launched the invasion in October 2001.

Many NGOs provide and perform services neglected by government-to-government aid. But it's highly

dangerous work. Volunteers from all over the world have been killed and injured by Taliban guerrillas and pro-Taliban civilians. Most of them now remain in major cities and pay local staffs for fieldwork.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies' most recent report on the state of Afghanistan was based on 1,000 "structured" conversations in half of the country's 34 provinces, 13 surveys, polls and focus groups; 200 expert interviews; and the daily monitoring of 70 media sources and 182 organizations. Principal findings are:

1. Afghans are losing trust in their government due to escalation in violence;
2. Public expectations are neither being met nor managed;
3. Conditions have deteriorated in all key areas targeted for development.

Afghans are more insecure than two years ago; insurgency and counter-insurgency campaigns spawn ever more violence. Security forces are unable to combat warlords and drug lords, frequently one and the same. State security institutions are plagued with corruption and retention problems as rank-and-filers switch sides for better pay. Local mafias and their militia frequently overwhelm local governance entities set up by the Karzai government. Democratic judicial structures are also stillborn, stifled by criminal networks and bribes, or camouflaged to practice sharia (Islamic) law.

The overall situation is infinitely more complex today than when Afghanistan was liberated in 2001. Staying the course is meaningless in today's Afghanistan, which requires massive infusions of foreign aid and a multi-year commitment that would require NATO troops and billions in aid for many years to come.

The uniqueness of Afghanistan's predicament was highlighted by one of CSIS' recommendations: Shift 50 percent of the development budget to the 34 provinces and distribute direct assistance through the hawala system. Hawala is the centuries-old way of bypassing banking circuits by using word-of-mouth between two parties that trust each other. Transnational terrorists, Taliban and drug lords have been using hawala since long before western security agencies took an interest in the system's inner workings. And it wouldn't take long to co-opt or silence government hawala circuits.

CSIS also says restoring progress in Afghanistan requires dramatic changes. The Afghan army is not truly national; the desertion rate rises when soldiers are dispatched too far from home base. And NATO member parliaments anxiously debate where and how NATO commanders in Afghanistan can utilize their troops. Mighty Germany won't let its Afghan contingent do any fighting. Only the United States, British, Canadian and Dutch troops are authorized to search and destroy. The U.S. is boosting its troops by 3,200 to 27,000, the highest level of the war. Meanwhile, Taliban's much-touted spring offensive is only days away.

Pakistan and Afghanistan should be a single theater of operations as Taliban enjoy privileged sanctuaries in the tribal areas on the Pak side of a mythical frontier. But NATO and U.S. troops cannot chase Taliban fighters back into Pakistan without triggering a chain reaction that could easily lead to the fall of President Pervez Musharraf -- and the control of the country's nuclear arsenal passing into unknown military hands and their anti-American, pro-Taliban political allies.

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