The Afghanistan drug lords

Administration subsidized growing drug industry in Southwest Asia

By ALFRED McCOY

In April 1979, eight months before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter Administration began to support the fundamentalist Islamic resistance. The program accelerated rapidly under President Reagan. In The Politics of Heroin, *Prof. McCoy traces the explosive growth of the Afghan heroin industry under C.I.A. patronage. Afghanistan now ranks in second place as a supplier of heroin for the North American market, and heroin use is expanding in the United States.*
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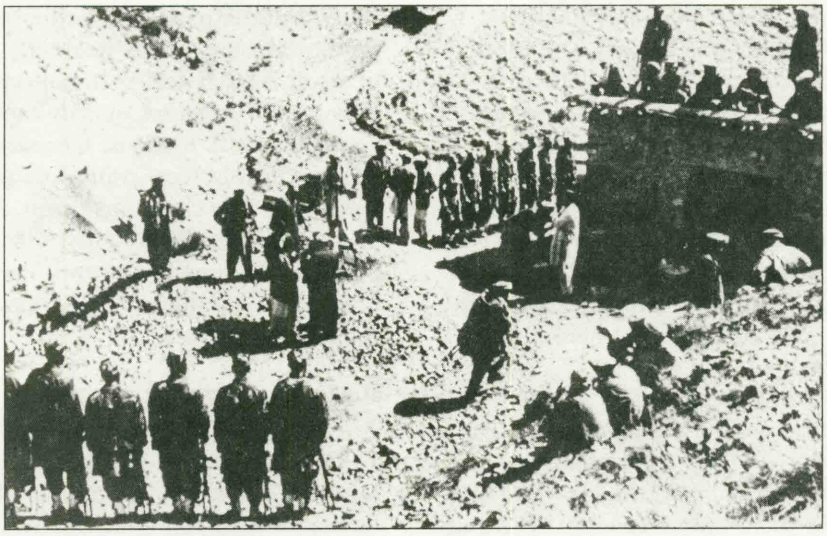

AP/Wide World Photos

Afghan* mujaheddin *stand guard outside a hillside bunker. Opium exports from* mujaheddin*-controlled poppy fields flooded the heroin markets of Southwest Asia and the United States during the 1980s.

During the ten years of C.I.A. covert support for the *mujaheddin* resistance, U.S. government and media sources were silent about the involvement of leading Afghan guerrillas and Pakistan military in the heroin traffic. As the covert operation wound down after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, the U.S. media began probing the scandal, gradually gathering enough data for a detailed portrait of the closed relationship between the *mujaheddin* resistance and the region's heroin trade.

[In May 1979] at Peshawar in Pakistan's North-West Frontier province, a C.I.A. special envoy first met Afghan resistance leaders, all carefully selected by Pakistan's I.S.I. [Inter Service Intelligence]. Instead of arranging a meeting with a broad spectrum of resistance leaders, I.S.I. offered the C.I.A.'s envoy an alliance with its own Afghan client, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the small *Hezbi-i Islami* guerrilla group. The C.I.A. accepted the offer and, over the next decade, gave more than half its covert aid to Hekmatyar's guerrillas.

It was, as the U.S. Congress would find a decade later, a dismal decision. Unlike the later resistance leaders who commanded strong popular followings inside Afghanistan, Hekmatyar led a guerrilla force that was a creature of the Pakistan military. After the C.I.A. built his *Hezbi-i Islami* into the largest Afghan guerrilla force, Hekmatyar would prove himself brutal and corrupt. Not only did he command the largest guerrilla army, but Hekmatyar would use it—with the full support of I.S.I. and the tacit tolerance of the C.I.A.—to become Afghanistan's leading drug lord.

An Islamic militant and former engineering student, Hekmatyar had founded the Muslim Brotherhood and had led student demonstrations in Kabul during the late 1960s to oppose the king's secular reforms. According to a later *New York Times* report, in the early 1970s "he had dispatched followers to throw vials of acid into the faces of women students who refused to wear veils." Accused of murdering a leftist student in 1972, Hekmatyar fled into Pakistan's North-West Frontier where, as a member of Pushtun tribes that straddle the border, he was able to continue his political work. Living in Peshawar, Hekmatyar allied himself with Pakistan's *Jamaat-i Islami* (Party of Islam), a fundamentalist and quasi-fascist Muslim group with many followers inside the Pakistani officer corps.

C.I.A. Director William Casey gained direct access to General Zia [ul-Haq, then Pakistan's military dictator] and found himself warmly received during his regular visits to Islamabad. Unique in a region where the official attitude toward America ranged from the hateful to the hostile, Zia allowed the C.I.A. to open an electronic intelligence station facing the Soviet Union in northern Pakistan and permitted U.S. spy flights over the Indian Ocean from his air bases near the Persian Gulf.

Aside from the $3 billion in U.S. aid, the Pakistan military gained control over distribution of the $2 billion in covert aid that the C.I.A. shipped to the Afghan guerrillas during the ten-year war. For General Zia's loyalists within the military, these contracts were a source of vast wealth.

At an operational level, General Zia's military loyalists controlled the delivery of the C.I.A.'s covert arms shipments when they arrived in Pakistan. Once the arms landed at the port of Karachi in the south, the Pakistan army's National Logistics Cell, acting under orders from the I.S.I., trucked them north to military cantonments

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around Peshawar and from there to the Afghan guerrilla camps in the North-West Frontier. The governor of this critical borderland province was Lieutenant-General Fazle Huq, President Zia's closest confidant and the de facto overlord of the *mujaheddin* guerrillas. Even as the ranks of the resistance swelled after 1981, the I.S.I. insisted on maintaining the dominance of the "pre-1978 nucleus," that is Hekmatyar, and continued to deliver more than half of all arms to his *Hezbi-i Islami* guerrillas. Although Pakistan allowed formation of a few additional groups to accommodate prestigious Afghan exiles, I.S.I. still insisted that Hekmatyar be given the bulk of C.I.A. arms shipments.

Hekmatyar's heroin trade

As the Cold War confrontation wound down, the international press finally broke its decade of silence to reveal the involvement of the Afghan resistance and Pakistani military in the region's heroin trade. In May 1990, for example, the *Washington Post* published a page one article charging that the United States had failed to take action against Pakistan's heroin dealers "because of its desire not to offend a strategic ally, Pakistan's military establishment." The *Post* article said that U.S. officials had ignored Afghan complaints of heroin trafficking by Hekmatyar and the I.S.I., an allegation that at least one senior American official confirmed. Specifically, the *Post* reported that "Hekmatyar commanders close to I.S.I. run laboratories in southwest Pakistan" and "I.S.I. cooperates in heroin operations."

As the I.S.I.'s *mujaheddin* clients used their new C.I.A. munitions to capture prime agricultural areas inside Afghanistan during the early 1980's, the guerrillas urged their peasant supporters to grow poppies, thereby doubling the country's opium harvest to 575 tons between 1982 and 1983. Once these *mujaheddin* elements brought the opium across the border, they sold it to Pakistani heroin refiners who operated under the protection of General Fazle Huq, governor of the North-West Frontier province. By 1988, there were an estimated 100 to 200 heroin refineries in the province's Khyber district alone. Trucks from the Pakistan army's National Logistics Cell (N.L.C.), arriving with C.I.A. arms from Karachi, often returned loaded with heroin—protected by I.S.I. papers from police search. "The drug is carried in N.L.C. trucks, which come sealed from the [North-West Frontier] and are never checked by the police," reported the *Herald* of Pakistan in September 1985.

Writing in *The Nation* three years later, Lawrence Lifschultz cited numerous police sources charging that General Fazle Huq, General Zia's intimate, was the primary protector of the thriving heroin industry in the North-West Frontier province. Lifschultz said that General Huq "had been implicated in narcotics reports reaching Interpol" as early as 1982.

Both European and Pakistani police claimed that all investigations of the province's major heroin syndicates had "been aborted at the highest level." With 17 agents assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, the D.E.A. compiled detailed reports identifying "40 significant narcotics syndicates in Pakistan." Despite the high quality of D.E.A. intelligence, not a single major syndicate was investigated by Pakistani police for nearly a decade. Farther south in the Koh-i-Soltan district of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, Hekmatyar himself controlled six heroin refineries that processed the large opium harvest from Afghanistan's fertile Helmand valley. Describing the corruption of the Pakistani military, I.S.I. included, the local Baluchistan governor, Mohammad Akbar Khan Bugti, a tribal nationalist often critical of Islamabad, said: "They deliver drugs under their own bayonets."

The heroin boom was so large and uncontrolled that drug abuse swept Pakistan itself in the early 1980s, leaving it with one of the world's largest addict populations. In the late 1970s Pakistan did not have a significant heroin abuse problem. When the region's political upheavals of 1979 blocked the usual shipment of Afghan and Pakistani opium westward to Iran, traffickers in Pakistan's North-West Frontier perfected heroin-refining skills to reduce their mounting opium stockpiles. Operating without fear of arrest, heroin dealers began exporting their product to Europe and America, quickly capturing more than 50 percent of both markets. Unrestrained by any form of police controls, local smugglers also shipped heroin to Pakistan's own cities and towns. Addiction rose to 5,000 users in 1980 to 70,000 in 1983, and then, in the words of Pakistan's Narcotics Control Board, went " completely out of hand," exploding to more than 1.3 million addicts in less than three years.

Restoration of civilian rule

The blatant official corruption continued until August 1988 when General Zia's death in an air crash brought an eventual restoration of civilian rule. Typical of the misinformation that had blocked any U.S. action against Pakistan's heroin trade, the State Department's semiannual narcotics review in September called General Zia "a strong supporter of anti-narcotics activities in Pakistan" and speculated that his death might slow the fight against drugs. Instead of fighting drugs, General Zia's regime had of course protected the country's leading heroin dealers.

Soon after assuming office through open elections, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, by contrast, declared war on the country's drug lords by dismissing two of I.S.I.'s top military administrators and creating a new ministry to attack the drug trade.

Despite Prime Minister Bhutto's good intentions, the outlook for an effective attack on Pakistan's highly developed heroin industry seemed bleak. After ten years of unchecked growth under General Zia, the country's drug trade was now too well entrenched in the country's politics and economy for simple police action. Conservative economists estimated the total annual earnings from Pakistan's heroin trade were $8 billion to $10 billion, far larger than Pakistan's government budget and equal to

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one-quarter of its entire gross domestic product. With so much heroin money flowing into the country, Pakistan's commentators were concerned that the country's politics would take on a Colombian cast, that is, that the drug lords would start using money and arms to influence the nation's leaders.

Indeed, the first signs were not long in coming. Facing a no-confidence motion from the National Assembly in late 1989, Prime Minister Bhutto charged that "drug money was being used to destabilize her government." When she claimed that heroin dealers had paid 194 million rupees for votes against her, many observers found the allegations credible. Moreover, the heavily armed tribal populations of the North-West Frontier province were determined to defend their opium harvest. Police pistols would prove ineffective against tribal arsenals that now included automatic assault rifles, anti-aircraft guns and rocket launchers. "The government cannot stop us from growing poppy," one angry tribal farmer told a foreign correspondent in 1989. "We are one force, and united, and if they come with their planes we will shoot them down."

Expanded opium production

As foreign aid declined in 1989, Afghan leaders expanded opium production to sustain their guerrilla armies. The Soviet withdrawal in February 1989 and a slackening in C.I.A. support produced a scramble among rival *mujaheddin* commanders for Afghanistan's prime opium land, particularly in the fertile Helmand valley of southern Afghanistan. During most of the war, the local commander Mullah Nasim Akhundzada had controlled the best-irrigated lands in the northern Helmand valley, once the breadbasket of Afghanistan, and decreed that half of all peasant holdings would be planted with opium. A ruthless leader and Hekmatyar's bitter enemy, Mullah Nasim issued opium quotas to every landowner and maintained his control by killing or castrating those who defied his directives. Known as the "King of Heroin," he controlled most of the 250 tons of opium grown in Helmand province. Visitors to Helmand during this period spoke "in awestruck tones of the beauty of the poppies which stretch mile after mile." In early 1986 *New York Times* correspondent Arthur Bonner spent a month traveling in Helmand, where he found extensive poppy fields in every village and town. "We must grow and sell opium to fight our holy war against the Russian nonbelievers," explained Mullah Nasim's elder brother Mohammed Rasul.

The *mujaheddin* leader's admission contradicted the assurances that the U.S. embassy in Islamabad had been giving about the Afghan drug trade. Typical of its disinformation on the subject, just two months before, the embassy had issued a formal denial that Afghan guerrillas "have been involved in narcotics activities as a matter of policy to finance their operations."

By early 1990 the C.I.A.'s Afghan operation had proved doubly disastrous. After ten years of covert operations at a cost of $2 billion, America was left with *mujaheddin* warlords whose skill as drug dealers exceeded their competence as military commanders. In 1989, as the cold war ended and the Bush Administration's war on drugs began, Afghan leaders like the opium warlord Hekmatyar had become a diplomatic embarrassment for the United States.

Main currency of trade

In mountain ranges along the southern rim of Asia—whether in Afghanistan, Burma, or Laos—opium is the main currency of external trade and thus is a key source of political power. Since agency operations involve alliances with local power brokers who serve as the C.I.A.'s commanders, the agency, perhaps unwillingly or unwittingly, has repeatedly found its covert operations enmeshed with Asia's heroin trade. By investing a local ally such as Hekmatyar or Vang Pao with the authority of its alliance, the C.I.A. draws the ally under the mantle of its protection. So armed, a tribal leader, now less vulnerable to arrest and prosecution, can use his American alliance to expand his share of the local opium trade. Once the C.I.A. has invested its prestige in one of these opium warlords, it cannot afford to compromise a major covert action with drug investigations. Respecting the national security imperatives of C.I.A. operations, the D.E.A. keeps its distance from agency assets, even when they are major drug lords. During the ten years of the Afghan war, some seventeen D.E.A. agents sat in the U.S. embassy at Islamabad watching—without making a major arrest or seizure—as the flood of Afghan-Pakistan heroin captured 60 percent of the U.S. drug market. □

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cargoes. At a Federal trial in April 1990, Colombian drug pilot Ernesto Carrasco confirmed Morales' relationship with the *contras*. He testified that he saw Morales pay more than $1 million in drug profits to *contra* leader Adolfo "Popo" Chamorro at a florida restaurant in 1985.

Did Oliver North and other senior officials in the Reagan-Bush Administration know that drug traffickers were using *contra* bases as assembly areas for drug flights into the United States? The public record shows that they did and, moreover, that the Administration intervened to protect drug traffickers from investigation and prosecution.

■ A message to Oliver North from U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica Lewis Tambs, dated March 28, 1986, includes a notation that contra drug leader "'Popo' Chamorro is alleged to be involved in drug trafficking."

■ An April 1, 1985 memo from Rob Owen to Oliver North describes one Costa Rican rebel leader, Jose Robelo Chepon, with the words "potential involvement in drug running." Another *contra* leader, Sebastian Gonzalez Wachan, was "now involved in drug running out of Panama," according to Owen.

■ During an Aug. 9, 1985 meeting with Owen, North

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