

Insurgency morphs into drug trade

Numbed into submission: Drug addicts seen at a park in Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. NYTADAM FERGUSON

The labs themselves are simple, tucked into nondescript huts or caves: a couple-dozen empty barrels for mixing, sacks or gallon jugs of precursor chemicals, piles of firewood, a press machine, a generator and a water pump with a long hose to draw from a nearby well.

They are heroin refining operations, and the Afghan police and U.S. Special Forces keep running into them all over Afghanistan this year. Officials and diplomats are increasingly worried that the labs' proliferation is one of the most troubling turns yet in the long struggle to end the Taliban insurgency.

That the country has consistently produced about 85% of the world's opium, despite more than \$8 billion spent by the United States alone to fight it over the years, is accepted with a sense of helplessness among counternarcotics officials.

The refining makes the drug much easier to smuggle out into the supply lines to the West. And it is vastly increasing the profits for the Taliban, for whom the drug trade makes up at least 60% of their income, according to Afghan and Western officials.

The opium economy in Afghanistan grew to about \$3 billion in 2016, almost doubling the previous year's total and amounting to about 16% of the country's gross domestic product, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

High demand

The increase in processing means the Taliban have been able to take a greater share of the \$60 billion that the global trade in the Afghan opium crop is estimated to be worth. Demand remains high in Europe and North America: Ninety percent of the heroin on the streets of Canada, and about 85% in Britain, can be traced to Afghanistan, the U.S. State Department has said. NY Times

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