

War, Food Shortages Ravage Central Asia And Pakistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

After the landing of U.S. troops in Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, Afghanistan, and the adjoining areas of Central Asia and Pakistan have become one large theater of war and destruction. While it was a deliberate policy of the Bush Administration neocons to set up forward bases at the crossroads of three major areas—Southwest Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia—the British colonial forces have seized upon this American folly to unleash irregular warfare against Russia, Central Asia, and China.

For the British, who lost two wars against Afghanistan during the heyday of its colonial power in the 19th and 20th centuries, the sole value of Afghanistan is its space, and not its people. Such an empty space would not only be policed and maintained at the least cost, as Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire wrote recently; Afghanistan would provide Britain what it needs the most: opium. Britain used opium grown in British India in the 19th Century to drive China into addiction, and severed Hong Kong from China in 1842 after the First Opium War. London, given the opportunity by the Bush Administration, is now turning Afghanistan into the opium country. The aim is to use the opium not only to enhance the City of London's financial strength, but also to weaken China, in a campaign to pry loose the western Chinese province of Xinjiang.

Afghanistan, as late as the 1970s, had the capability to grow enough food to feed its people. But as a result of London's unmitigated evil policy, 30 years of war later, it is now fast turning into a permanently food-short nation. Meanwhile, opium production is growing fast and furiously. Aggregate production of opium today is more than four times what was produced in Afghanistan in the 1970s, and today, U.S.- and NATO-occupied Afghanistan "boasts" of producing almost 95% of the world's opium. If this policy is allowed to continue much longer, it is almost a certainty that Afghanistan, and adjoining nations, would become mere "empty spaces."

Since 1979, when the Soviet Army came in to occupy, Afghans have never enjoyed a day of peace. Years of bombings, hundreds of thousands of land mines strewn all over the agricultural and other areas, indiscriminate air strafing, and inability to carry out regular maintenance, have destroyed Afghanistan's irrigation canals and silted the rivers that were indispensable to the country's wheat and corn production. Without agricultural infrastructure, farmers became power-

less, and the land became good for opium production only. Just the way to create “empty space”!

Since the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan gave the boost to opium production to maintain drug warlords and their militia, and to maintain the bankrupt international banks with opium money, Afghanistan has been teetering on the brink of famine. In 2001, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported that about 7.5 million out of 23 million Afghans were short of food. This gap was, however, covered by donor nations by buying some of the surplus food that the world enjoyed at the time. But now, the situation has changed. The food shortage is no longer local, but global (see accompanying articles). As a result, the “smart” speculators have jacked up the food prices to make a fast buck by starving a few millions.

Early in 2008, Afghanistan appealed to the international community to provide extra supplies of wheat to alleviate a shortage, Commerce Minister Mohammad Amin Farhang said in an interview with the German newspaper *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*. He made this request amid rising discontent inside Afghanistan at the spiraling cost of wheat and other basic foods. The Winter turned out to be rougher than usual, reducing grain production further.

According to Amin Farhang, in some areas of Afghanistan, the price of bread has doubled or even quadrupled. “Food prices have gone up and no one can afford to buy all the food they need,” said a resident of Lashkar Gah, the capital of the southern Helmand province.

“A 100 kg [about 222 lbs.] of flour is about 3,300 afghanis (\$67), and poor people will not be able to afford to pay this at all. The government should do something about it,” he added.

Helmand province is one of the worst-affected areas. In 2007, it produced 53% of Afghanistan’s total opium, and it is where the British and Dutch, along with the Canadian and Australians, have been deployed to counter the insurgents. The fact remains that the opium poppy in Helmand is now the best protected, under the “watchful” eyes of the British. It is likely that no Afghan farmer is even allowed to grow wheat in Helmand, instead of opium poppy.

Smuggling and Hunger in Pakistan

Hamid Karzai’s government in Kabul has come under increasing pressure to take action, amid rising grain prices on the international market. Afghanistan’s northern neighbor, Tajikistan, is now a perpetually food-short nation. To the east, Afghanistan borders Pakistan, which, only a few years ago, was food-sufficient. But the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan by the United States brought Pakistan into the war zone. Pakistan is today torn apart by politics of dissension, militant movements, and Islamic jihad, imposed upon it by the British, Americans, and NATO.

As a result, Pakistan’s domestic policy was restructured to put out the many fires breaking out all along the border with

Afghanistan. Along these virtually undefined borders, militant secessionist forces, aided by the British, and those elsewhere with British colonial minds, are gaining ground.

This massive political crisis, now almost half a decade old, has induced Islamabad to neglect the agricultural sector. Pakistan is now short of water, short of power, and short of food. This is not only bad for the nation of 160 million people, but it also further endangers the Afghans, who, in times of food shortage, used to get surplus food grains from Pakistan, though not always legally. One recent report from Pakistan shows that 77 million Pakistanis are food-short.

Reports indicate that illegal food smuggling from Pakistan into Afghanistan continues. But this food is not meant for poor Afghans, but for the drug lords, who maintain thousands of armed militias and are flush with opium-generated cash. These Afghans have further pushed up food prices in Pakistan. This is particularly visible in Northwestern Pakistan, where the population has been suffering a shortage because of rampant smuggling of edible goods to Afghanistan.

These drug warlords buy not only cereals, such as flour and rice, but also pulses and edible oils. The smugglers carry the foodstuffs illegally across the porous borders of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and adjoining Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and the goods are sold across Afghanistan. According to traders, there has been a 100% hike in prices in Pakistan because of unhindered smuggling. The people most affected by the rampant illegal trade to Afghanistan are those Pakistanis who are living in the border areas of NWFP, FATA, and Balochistan.

The Central Asian Republics

North of Afghanistan, a humanitarian crisis has developed in the perpetual food-short Tajikistan. This year is going to be worse for three reasons: The Winter was particularly harsh; there is little or no surplus food available on the world market; and the opium poppy is blooming brighter than ever in Afghanistan, under the vigilant patrol of the British troops.

Meanwhile, reports indicate that anger is mounting among Tajiks, who, for the first time since their civil war in the 1990s, may be ready to protest for major change. The anger has been furthered by the fact that energy supplies have also been cut from neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, in the midst of the harshest Winter in living memory. Some people also blame shortages of food in Afghanistan on the fact that wheat is being smuggled from there, into Tajikistan.

On Feb. 13, and again later, the United Nations urged the international community to come up with \$25 million to help feed 260,000 Tajiks. UN spokeswoman Michele Montas said, “More than half a million Tajiks are estimated to be food-insecure, while at least 260,000 need immediate food aid.”

Among the Central Asian nations, particularly the “stan”



USAF/Sgt. Jeremy T. Lock

Afghan villagers sit alongside a poppy field, watching the activities of Coalition forces. Afghanistan produces almost 95% of the world's opium, while one-third of the population does not have enough to eat.

nations—Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—Kazakhstan was by far the most food-stable. Helped by the fertile Ferghana Valley and the year-long adequate supply of water, Kazakhstan is one of the world's largest exporters of wheat, and much of Central Asia depends on a good wheat crop in Kazakhstan.

But Kazakhstan is worried about the intense wheat shortage all around. It does not want to allow a situation to develop similar to what exists in Pakistan. In other words, Kazakhstan does not want to become food-short by allowing drug money to buy off its people's food.

On April 7, Kazak Prime Minister Karim Masimov told reporters that he is considering imposing export duties on grain, or even banning exports altogether. This announcement is diametrically opposite to what Kazakhstan had said in 2007.

In 2007, the Kazakhstan government had said that its grain harvest would hit a post-Soviet record of 20.1 million tons. That would mean that the country's export potential is around 10 million tons. When the government floated the idea of grain export duties in March 2007, the news was one of several factors that contributed to a global 25% increase in grain prices, reports indicate.

According to analysts, the region that would suffer the most is Kazakhstan's own neighborhood, Central Asia. Apart from Kazakhstan itself, none of the Central Asian states is a grain exporter. Soviet-era economic planners devoted the agricultural land in the other four states to growing cotton as a cash crop, and that practice has not changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Central Asian countries import all of their grain, mostly from Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's decision, if it is final, will create a crisis in Kyrgyzstan, which had very severe problems in 2007. Last Autumn, the price of bread—the basic foodstuff for much of the nation—rose sharply, leaving many families battling for survival.

The situation inside Kyrgyzstan also needs special attention. It has only about 1.5 million hectares of arable land, less than 7% of its territory, and only 360,000 hectares is used for grain production. The country is highly vulnerable to fluctuations in cereal prices on world markets. To feed a population of just over 5 million, Kyrgyzstan has to import more than 200,000 tons of grain and about 30,000 tons of flour every year. Most of it comes from Kazakhstan, the breadbasket of Central Asia. However, from last August onwards, prices rose by 100% from an average of U.S.\$140 per ton of grain to a high of \$300.

It must be said, that the food crisis in this area could become even worse. With the world financial collapse at an advanced stage, and the Britain-led war to destroy the region in progress, this food-short area is further threatened by a new and virulent wheat fungus, Ug99, which was previously found in East Africa and Yemen, and has moved to major wheat-growing areas in Iran.

The FAO has warned wheat-producing countries east of Iran, such as India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, of a "dangerous wheat fungus on the move from East Africa to the Middle East." FAO warned: "The fungus is spreading rapidly and could seriously lower wheat production in these countries...." (See accompanying article.)