

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Transcript for: Operation Oversight – Episode 2: Counternarcotics in Afghanistan

Description: Hear about a SIGAR lessons learned report on U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan between 2002 and 2017 and the state of those efforts today.

Related SIGAR Work: SIGAR-18-52-LL: Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan

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[Phil LaVelle] Hi, welcome to Operation Oversight, the SIGAR podcast. I'm Phil LaVelle of the SIGAR Office of Public Affairs and today we're with Kate Bateman of our Lessons Learned Program. Kate's the lead analyst on the counternarcotics lessons learned report. Welcome Kate.

[Kate Bateman] Thanks Phil.

[Phil LaVelle] So, tell a little bit about our counternarcotics effort in Afghanistan. What did you find out?

[Kate Bateman] Well, it's not a very hopeful or positive story because the U.S. has spent more than \$8.6 billion on counternarcotics in Afghanistan over the past 17 years roughly. And despite that, Afghan opium cultivation's at record levels and Afghanistan is still the world's largest producer of illicit opium. It produces around 90 percent of the world's illicit opium. We also found that there has been no updated U.S. counternarcotic strategy since 2012.

[Phil LaVelle] O.K., so we've spent more than \$8.6 billion on this, American taxpayer dollars with the net result being that the opium trade out of Afghanistan is stronger than ever. How does that happen?

[Kate Bateman] Well, we found our counternarcotics efforts failed. We found no counterdrug program that brought poppy cultivation down or opium production down in the long term. Our eradication efforts, where we tried to physically destroy the crop, that often just did not work, didn't reduce the cultivation and we angered rural populations who were trying to make a living. Our development programs failed to give farmers sustainable alternatives to poppy.

And there are larger reasons the counternarcotics effort failed. Without greater security in the country, it is extremely difficult to have rule of law, to do interdiction, to have these kinds of development programs in the first place.

[Phil LaVelle] O.K., so just for a little context on Afghanistan, it's a very poor – obviously a war-torn country yet it's the world's leader in opium. That must account for a huge share of its economy. How big is that?

[Kate Bateman] Yeah, that's exactly right. Opium poppy's Afghanistan's biggest cash crop and its estimated export value is as high as \$3 billion, it's ranged between \$1 and \$3 billion in recent years. The value of the country's opium output last year was equal to 30% of Afghanistan's entire GDP.

[Phil LaVelle] What about the Taliban? How do they figure into all of this?

[Kate Bateman] Well, there's a general consensus that the Taliban get a lot of their funding from the drug trade, but exactly how much is really up for debate. It differs in different localities and different areas. The American commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan has said that the drug trade provided about 60% of the Taliban's funding. They're funded by many sources, but drugs do play a large role in their funding.

[Phil LaVelle] And no doubt it fuels the official corruption that's endemic throughout the Afghan system.

[Kate Bateman] That's right as well.

[Phil LaVelle] The United States recently began a bombing campaign targeting drug labs, primarily in the east and the south. Tell us a little about that and how's that going?

[Kate Bateman] Yeah, that's a new development. It was, the campaign was launched in late 2017. This spring, the U.S. military estimated that the bombing campaign had deprived the Taliban of around \$200 million in revenue.

[Phil LaVelle] O.K., that's a big number. That seems significant. How accurate are those figures?

[Kate Bateman] Well, it's unclear how those estimates are calculated and therefore, it's been difficult for us to gauge their accuracy. Based on our best figures for the price of opium in the country, we don't see how the revenue would be that would amount to \$200 million. Our estimate is far, far lower than that.

[Phil LaVelle] And there's also the risks of civilian casualties, which would turn ordinary Afghans against us, correct?

[Kate Bateman] Yeah, so there's a bigger question of whether the costs of this – that you may also be alienating the population and harming civilians and there is obviously risk for our larger military and reconstruction effort.

[Phil LaVelle] Right. So, this is a tough report with some sobering findings. What about successes? Did you find any?

[Kate Bateman] Yeah, we highlight two main successes. One is that some areas did see temporary reductions in poppy cultivation. And the second is U.S. support for some specialized

counterdrug units, some Afghan units, was really effective. We were able to help stand up and mentor well-trained, capable Afghan counterdrug units and they became trusted partners in a lot of these kinds of operations.

[Phil LaVelle] There's been a lot of reporting on counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan over the years. What makes this report different?

[Kate Bateman] This report uses really innovative GIS, Geographic Information System, imagery. It uses this imagery in an innovative way to try to track the results of programs, the effectiveness of programs, so we could take just a smaller sample size of several larger programs and look at using the satellite imagery ad saying the U.S. government tried to make these improvements on the ground. For instance, irrigation improvements and what was the effect of that? Did that lead to more poppy or less?

[Phil LaVelle] So this is a really comprehensive report and what are the key lessons that are presented here? What's the bottom line?

[Kate Bateman] Well, overall until there's greater security in Afghanistan, it will be nearly impossible to bring about lasting reductions in poppy cultivation and drug production. And in the meantime, we propose that the U.S. should prioritize cutting off money going to the insurgent groups. We should also be promoting legal livelihoods options for rural people and we should be fighting the drug-related corruption within the government. The U.S. ambassador, who can work closely with the military commander in country, should be leading these efforts because he or she is the one with the capability to direct U.S. agencies towards shared goals.

[Phil LaVelle] And this is something we'll be watching as we go forward as part of our oversight?

[Kate Bateman] Exactly, we will.

[Phil LaVelle] Kate, thanks so much for joining us on our podcast. If you're interested in learning more about this subject, we invite you to check out our website for the full report or the interactive report. That site is sigar.mil. S-I-G-A-R.mil. Thanks and we'll catch you next time.

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