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Afghanistan's Drugs Crisis

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A US-funded study found this month that there are now more than three millions drug users in Afghanistan, up from 1.6 million in 2012. According to a joint report by Afghanistan's Public Health and Counter Narcotics ministries and US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law enforcement, addiction among Afghans is as high as 11 percent, meaning that 1 of every 9 Afghans are in some ways addicted to drugs. The sharp rise of drug users in Afghanistan is due to the thriving poppy cultivation in last two years. Afghanistan is one of top opium producers in the world, and it produces more than 90 percent of the world's heroin, which is the most addictive substance of the drugs. This is while an investigative report published recently suggest how the United States and the government of Afghanistan failed to pursue high-profile drug lords in Afghanistan.

According to the report, many high-profile drug traffickers with international fame have been released from Afghan custody in the past, and even Afghan officials have helped securing their release due to the widespread corruption. The sharp rise in opium production is attributed to friendly climate for the illegal harvest and the ongoing insurgency in the country. However, the high demands in regional and Western markets are also mentioned as one of the major factors behind Afghanistan's flourishing poppy cultivation and drug trafficking. Without any doubt, the long-lasting insurgency in the country is the most important factor for the failures of the past fourteen years of the international efforts to fight the Afghan opium.

During past over-a-decade years of the war, the US-led international coalition as well as the government of Afghanistan have frequently been defocused from their counter narcotics mission

in the country. As the US gradually pulled out its forces from Afghanistan, the war on drugs went into a marginal issue while the Afghan government did not have the capability to curb the menace. Now, after fourteen years of the anti-drug efforts in Afghanistan, the mission is viewed as a failed endeavor. Afghanistan continues to be top illicit drug producer in the world, and drug addiction has reached to a peak with now more than 3 million people using illegal drugs.

The government of Afghanistan and the United States have pursued flawed policies regarding combating the menace since 2001. The US funded programs of alternative harvest for Afghan farmers. However, the policy was a major failure as it failed to convince Afghan farmers to cultivate and grow alternative crops. In turn, the Taliban and other insurgent groups mostly encouraged locals to cultivate poppy and they even protected their crops in return for a tax from the harvest. Back when ruling Afghanistan, the Taliban regime also backed poppy cultivation with the pretext that mostly the Western nations are users of the Afghan-exported drugs. The US-backed government's policies failure and the insurgents' endorsement of the illegal harvest further helped increasing cultivation of poppy crops by Afghan farmers. The drugs market was a major source of funding for the Taliban along with levying taxes on transport sector and charities from the Arab nations. In the last fourteen years, the Taliban, as an insurgent group fighting the US-led coalition and the Afghan government forces, have been immensely benefited from the lucrative drugs market as it was, and still is, the main source of funding. The drug production and its trafficking have been devastating for the international and the Afghan government's efforts to rebuild the country's economy and to win the war against the militant groups.

The opium production continues to finance the insurgency and fueling the unending insurgency and militancy in the country. The poppy cultivation and drug trafficking is further injecting money into Afghanistan's mostly informal and black economy, failing the government in its efforts to promote a formal economy based on legal businesses. In addition to that, Afghans are now the most affected victims of the addictive harvests they grow. It is believed that the current trend of using drugs by Afghanistan will turn into a major threat and a potential crisis for Afghanistan's social security in the future. It is rightly likened to a tsunami that will endanger the very fabric of the country in the long run. As the recent report suggested, the weak governance and pervasive corruption in the country was a major part of the problem. Due to this, Afghanistan has failed to carry out a decisive combat against drug traffickers who are the most blamed individuals in this illegal market. Afghan officials have helped release of many of major drug traffickers and Afghanistan's judicial system is unable to pursue the so-called drug lords. According the report, high-profile drug traffickers are freely living in many southern and western provinces and operating their businesses under a de facto protection of corrupt government and judicial officials.

The report is a major blow to the government's reputation in fighting drug trafficking as it reveals the extent of the government's failure in pursuing drug lords. If the government does not bring a drastic change in the course of fighting poppy cultivation and drug trafficking, the menace will continue to grow into a major crisis for the country. The new unity government should come to the point and realize the nature of the threat not only for the future of Afghanistan's economy and social order but also for the ongoing anti-insurgency war. The government needs to learn from the previous government's mistakes and seek a long-term approach to overcome the menace.