Corrupt Combatants Fight for Control of Lucrative Afghan Drug Trade

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/07/world/asia/afghanistan-helmand-opium-poppy.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FDrug%20Trafficking%20in%20Afghanistan&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=4&pgtype=collection&_r=2>

Afghans have an expression: “Well, whatever has happened, we are still skinny.” In other words, they have not gotten rich yet, try as they might.

It is an expression heard often here in Helmand Province, the southwestern region that is the world capital of opium and heroin production. [Afghanistan](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/afghanistan/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) accounts for 90 percent of the world’s heroin; more than two-thirds of that comes from Helmand’s opium poppies, according to United Nations [figures.](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/_Afghan_opium_survey_2015_web.pdf)

Sometimes, the expression is uttered enviously — how did we miss out? Other times, it is delivered with greedy sarcasm — how much more can we get before the feeding frenzy is over?

This year’s first poppy harvest season has just begun, and the bright red flowers are garish splotches across the heavily irrigated landscape. But unlike in previous years, there will be no serious efforts to eradicate the opium crop in Helmand, because of a combination of [Taliban](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/t/taliban/index.html?inline=nyt-org) advances and out-of-control corruption, with both sides battling over the drug trade.

Helmand is also the deadliest province in Afghanistan, with more than half of all the country’s combat fatalities in the last year, Afghan officials have confirmed.

President Ashraf Ghani’s envoy for Helmand, Maj. Gen. Abdul Jabar Qahraman, has been given the task of fixing the situation. He says that a big part of the reason Helmand has become so difficult is that so many of its combatants have a financial stake in the continuation of the drug trade and of the war itself — something he hopes to undo by getting all sides talking to one another.

He calls the problem fourth-wife syndrome. The fourth wife — four is the most allowed under Islam — is often several decades younger than the husband, so her father can demand a high price for the bride. The implication is that big players on both sides are hungry for money. But in some prominent cases in Helmand, there really are four wives in the picture.

The Taliban shadow governor for the province, Mullah Manan, is from a poor family, yet recently he took a young girl as his fourth wife. “Where did he get this money?” General Qahraman said. “He had to pay a lot for such a marriage, and his father didn’t even own a donkey.” As a counterpoint, he mentioned that the Afghan National Police commander in Nad Ali district, Hajji Marjan Haqmal, had also just paid 3 million afghanis for a young, fourth wife — around $42,000, or more than three years’ salary for a district commander.

“There is a big game going on, and Helmand is at the center of it,” General Qahraman said. “The war and the fighting in Helmand is a tool for everybody — they’re making millions off it.”

Whoever controls opium territory controls a rich income stream. The [Taliban directly impose taxes](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/17/world/asia/afghanistan-opium-taliban-drug-cartel.html) on the crop; [some government officials do, too](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/16/world/asia/afghanistan-opium-heroin-taliban-helmand.html), or more often solicit bribes to look the other way.

The war effort is another rich target for corruption, General Qahraman said.

“There’s a firefight, and the government side fires three rounds, but they say it’s 50, and the other side, they fire a few back, and say it’s 100, and then each side goes and sells the extra rounds,” he said. “The guys fighting are just tools; their commanders make the money.”

In the last 11 months, 3,000 Afghan government soldiers and policemen have been killed in Helmand, according to General Qahraman’s figures. That is half or more of the estimated 6,000 Afghan security forces, police officers and soldiers killed in the country’s 34 provinces over the last 12 months — a sharp rise from last year, according to a senior Afghan official, who spoke anonymously because he was not authorized to discuss the figures publicly.

“If I say it’s not that bad, I’d be lying,” General Qahraman said. “But if I say it’s overwhelmingly bad, that’d be lying, too. The situation is fragile. When we’re strong, we’re going to gain. When they’re strong, they’re going to gain.”

Civilian casualties are rising, too. At Lashkar Gah’s Emergency Hospital, run by an [aid group based in Italy,](http://www.emergency.it/index.html) casualties increased 10 percent in January and February, to 405, compared with the same period a year earlier.

“You can’t go anywhere in Helmand now safely,” said Maj. Gen. Esmatullah Dawlatzai, who was recently put in charge of all the police forces in Helmand. “You can’t step outside of Lashkar Gah safely, and that’s a fact,” he added, referring to the provincial capital city.

“It’s not going to change until we do something about the political corruption, which is being carried out from Kabul, and involves everyone: elders, parliament members, politicians, all of them,” General Dawlatzai continued. “The police, especially, are not a national police. They are not fighting for the benefit of their country, but for their patrons.”

Mullah Majid Akhonzada, the deputy provincial chairman, said that all that Helmand got from Kabul was empty promises, as the Taliban gain more and more territory. “The fact is, nothing has been done except filling their own pockets,” he said. “That’s all they do.”

Corruption does not just fatten up the skinny, it also undermines security.

Hajji Ahmad is a provincial councilman from Gereshk District, the center of some of the fiercest fighting. “This is how it works,” he said. “The police chief buys his post, then he has to make his money back by selling other positions to other commanders, in the districts and subdistricts, and then those guys are selling to each checkpoint.”

“So I’ll give you an example, a recent example of what happens,” Hajji Ahmad said. “In Margir area, at a police checkpost in Gereshk District, there’s 24 hours of fighting going on and at night the commander runs out of ammo. So he goes to his district commander and says, ‘We need ammo’, and the commander says, ‘Well, give me money so I can give you ammo.’ And he doesn’t have any money, so the Taliban overrun the checkpost and nine policemen are killed. That’s what happens.” He was referring to an attack that took place last month.

The men appointed to reform the police and military in Helmand, General Dawlatzai and General Qahraman, are finding it hard going, and many of the obstacles are internal.

From 2014 to 2015, opium eradication in Helmand [nearly doubled](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/_Afghan_opium_survey_2015_web.pdf), to great acclaim in drug enforcement circles. This year, however, the new security chief for the Ministry of Counternarcotics, Maj. Rahmatullah Alokozai, whose main duty is opium eradication, has declared there will be none in 2016. With the Taliban in full control of five of Helmand Province’s 14 districts, and more than half of its territory, it would not be possible, Major Alokozai insisted.

“This year is totally out of control,” the major said in an interview. “Last year was not like this. Now that we don’t have security, we can’t do anything. It’s obvious.”

But Major Alokozai’s critics say he is clearly not interested in trying, complaining that he is not only unqualified for such a crucial position, but that the large amount of money he paid for his job suggests there is money to be made by canceling eradication.

When an official letter from Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry proposing Major Alokozai as the eradication czar in Helmand reached the desk of police General Dawlatzai, the general said he scrawled a note across it saying, “He shouldn’t even be in the police force, let alone in counternarcotics.”

“That guy bought his rank — he’s not even really a major — and his position for $100,000, and he can’t even read and write,” the general said of Major Alokozai. (Literacy is an official requirement of the post.) His account was confirmed by the new representative of the attorney general’s office in Helmand, Fazal Sultan Safi.

Major Alokozai confirmed that his only previous experience was working as a guard for contractors moving goods in and out of Helmand — work that has dried up because it is too dangerous. But he insisted he could read and write, and said he had gone to school until “10th or 11th grade.”

As General Dawlatzai put it: “Saying things are getting better in Helmand is like trying to blot out the sun with two fingers. I don’t do that. What I’m telling you is the honest picture of the way things are.”