

**Testimony of Congressman Mark Kirk
Before the
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Hearing on Afghanistan
February 15, 2007**

Afghanistan: The Rise of the Narco-Taliban

Mr. Chairman, I have spent more time on the Afghan-Pakistan border than almost any Member of Congress. As a close observer of that region, I have become increasingly concerned about trends in that region, leading to the creation of a narco-state.

In the mid-1990s, the Congress took decisive action to save democracy in Colombia from narco-terrorists. In my judgment, we now face a similar crisis along the Afghan-Pakistan border. We need a change in policy to emphasize direct support of counter-narcotic operations to arrest drug kingpins, detain chemists and destroy labs to reverse a new and worsening trend in the region.

In the last few years, I worked to provide the State Department with helicopters to bolster their poppy eradication efforts, to bring the Drug Enforcement Administration back as a full member of the Intelligence Community, to provide DEA with better equipment and intelligence support, to strengthen and reform the Rewards for Justice program, and to focus the attention of senior leadership on the clear links between the drug trade in Afghanistan and terrorism. Chairman Hyde and I worked closely to bring about change in our Afghanistan policy, and I remain committed to working on the Appropriations Committee and with you on the Foreign Affairs Committee to offer support, oversight, and guidance to the administration as they evolve their counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism strategies.

Overview

The security situation in Afghanistan is rapidly weakening and President Karzai faces a growing threat from insurgents. Al Qaeda and Taliban guerillas, funded by record drug profits and operating from a safe Pakistani haven, dramatically increased their attacks on NATO soldiers and the Afghan government. Insurgents claim they have new weapons and tactics to weaken the Afghan government and inflict greater casualties on NATO personnel.

The statistics from the region support many of the Taliban and Al Qaeda's claims. While the number of terrorist attacks increased, Afghan opium production rose by 60% this last year.¹ Pakistan recently approved an agreement with militants in North Waziristan that

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Press Conference, September 2, 2006.

will limit the influence and operations of the Pakistani military and its allies. Clearly, the international community's influence and objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan have suffered a set back. The time has come for a serious recommitment of U.S. and NATO resources to strengthen the Afghan government and deny the establishment of an Al Qaeda safe haven in Pakistan's North Waziristan Agency.

The British-American Counter-Narcotics Strategy Failed

Afghanistan has been a traditional producer of opium and heroin. The size of its crop made it the world's primary source of heroin. Given that most Afghan heroin is consumed in Europe, British Prime Minister Blair asked for and received the international lead on post-2001 counter-narcotics policy and operations in Afghanistan.

Under formal British lead (but with substantial U.S. support), the counter-narcotics program of the international community has failed. The opium economy is now Afghanistan's biggest source of revenue. It amounted to over half of Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product, \$2.7 billion, in 2005.² The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that this amount will increase to more than \$3 billion for 2006. Like other narco-economies, money derived from the production of opium and heroin is destabilizing the government, corrupting public institutions and providing revenue to insurgents. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Administrator Karen Tandy told the House Armed Services Committee on June 28, 2006 that narcotics trafficking "substantially contributes to instability, violence, and lawlessness in Afghanistan." Afghan President Hamid Karzai similarly clearly identified poppy cultivation and narcotics production as "the single greatest challenge to the long-term security, development and effective governance" of the country.

In Afghanistan's southern Helmand and neighboring provinces, drug traffickers and their Taliban allies reportedly order farmers to cultivate opium poppy in areas under their control and threaten individuals who support the government's counter-narcotics policy. Taliban forces reportedly protect some narcotics traffickers and poppy farmers.

Despite the counter-narcotics program of the Afghan government and its international supporters since 2001, Afghanistan has become the source of 92% of the world's opium. UNODC estimates Afghan opium production rose from less than 1,000 tons in 2001 to over 6,000 tons for the 2005-2006 growing season. The area under opium cultivation grew by 61,000 hectares in just one year, now estimated to have reached a record of 165,000 hectares this year. In the "Heroin Heartland" of Helmand province, cultivation increased by a whopping 162% to 69,324 hectares.³

² National Intelligence Council Associates Report, August 29, 2006.

³ UNODC Press Conference, Sept. 2, 2006

For the last two years, the State Department has administered U.S. assistance to Afghan counter-narcotics programs under a “five-pillar” strategy:

- (1) Eradication,
- (2) Interdiction,
- (3) Alternative livelihood development,
- (4) Judicial reform, and
- (5) Public information.

The U.S.-funded program provides the bulk of support to the Afghan counter-narcotics policy which also receives support from other NATO allies, especially the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy. Since FY2002, the Congress has appropriated over \$2 billion to specifically support this program.⁴ Unfortunately, this program has not proved effective by any significant measure.

U.S. and Afghan authorities reported that the eradication program was effective in deterring and reducing some opium poppy cultivation in 2005. However, given the record opium crop and recent fighting between Afghan police and farmers, the program has clearly failed. During the 2006 season, Poppy Elimination Program (PEP) teams operated in 19 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. PEP teams reviewed the coming crops and directed early season, locally-executed eradication.

The Afghan Eradication Force also directed eradication activities in three provinces. The State Department’s bureau of International Narcotic and Law Enforcement Affairs reports that 15,300 hectares of poppies were eradicated, less than 10% of the record crop.⁵

Afghan police and the international teams that assist their operations are poorly supported. These teams must rely on truck transport across Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain, giving drug lords and farmers ample warning of an impending operation. DEA provides Foreign Advisory Support (FAST) teams to the Afghan government to train Afghanistan’s National Interdiction Unit (NIU). Nearly all joint DEA/Afghan NIU operations have little to no NATO military support, including little support from the U.S. military Combined Joint Task Force 76 (CJTF-76). Last year, CJTF-76 supported only three DEA requests for air support of interdiction operations. DEA made 23 such requests before realizing that DoD has very little interest in supporting the counter-narcotics mission in Afghanistan.⁶ To help stabilize Afghanistan and reduce the cultivation of opium, CJTF-76 should increase its helicopter lift and Combat Search & Rescue (CSAR) support for DEA/Afghan NIU missions directed against drug kingpins, heroin chemists, labs and drug convoys.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, September 1, 2006.

⁵ State INL Correspondence, Feb. 8, 2007.

⁶ Drug Enforcement Administration statistics.

Because the Defense Department needs to focus on counter-narcotics missions, I joined Chairman Hyde in a request encouraging the development of a “ride-along” program that would allow DEA agents in Afghanistan to accompany US military mission against mutually agreeable targets to gather evidence against drug kingpins and intelligence that will help dismantle heroin trafficking organizations. DOD responded that they already had the authority to embed DEA agents when they are operating “in areas of known or suspected drug-related activity.” Mr. Chairman, if this is the case, given that Afghanistan produces 92% of the world’s heroin, it seems to me that a DEA agent should be aboard every US helicopter that flies in Afghanistan. The reports I get from soldiers on the ground indicate that there is no distinction between counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics missions. When a Taliban hideout is raided, the Kalashnikovs and RPGs are found to be stored right beside bags of raw opium. For the Defense Department to maintain that counter-narcotics is not a military mission is absurd and illustrates a major disconnect between the “boots on the ground” and their senior leadership in CJTF-76, Central Command, and the Pentagon.

There is some hope, however, for military support of DEA/Afghan NIU operations. Just last month ISAF supported a DEA FAST Team deployment in Kunduz province. ISAF support allowed the FAST Teams and the Afghan NIU to dramatically extend their range and conduct operations against drug kingpins DEA knew about, but had previously been unable to target. I believe this should be the model for ISAF and CJTF-76 support for DEA operations in Afghanistan, and that these missions should be far more frequent than they are currently.

Despite substantial appropriations approved by the Congress, internationally supported alternative livelihood development efforts have barely gotten off the ground. In addition, the Afghan judicial system is plagued by corruption while radio and press efforts in support of the counter-narcotics program failed to connect with any significant portion of the Afghan citizenry. According to UNODC’s Director, Antonio Maria Costa, insecurity and corruption among “members of the local administration, police officials ... and even politicians and members of parliament” are among the most important enabling factors of ongoing narcotics production and smuggling. President Karzai agreed in a recent interview and formed a new anti-corruption commission to vet national and provincial government officials for involvement in corruption and narcotics. Unless these centralized efforts actually reduce corruption among national-level leaders, Afghan government programs to reduce drug trafficking and terrorism will not be effective.

Most Communities in Afghanistan are Becoming Less Secure

Local community insecurity is growing in most towns, including Afghanistan’s capital of Kabul. Because American troops primarily focus on Afghanistan’s border with Al Qaeda sanctuaries in Pakistan, the Afghan government and NATO relies on tribal militias. The choice of one group’s militia makes potential enemies of its rivals. Afghan militia leaders often inflate their control and direct NATO air strikes against rival groups, claiming they are actually Al Qaeda or Taliban. In many communities, NATO troops are

now seen as foreign occupiers, rather than as supporters of the new democratic government.

As of 2005, U.S. commanders believed that the combat, coupled with overall political and economic reconstruction, weakened the insurgency. Over the last year, this trend has reversed, with insurgent attacks escalating substantially in 2006. Taliban insurgents now use suicide and roadside Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), particularly in Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, and Zabul provinces. These are also provinces where NATO's ISAF assumed responsibility for security in July 2006. Fighting was particularly intense during May - August 2006 as U.S.-led forces repulsed 300-man Taliban formations from villages around Kandahar, such as Panjwai district. From 2001 to 2005, there were only five suicide bombings in Afghanistan.⁷ From November 2005 through July 2006, there were 41 suicide bombings in Afghanistan.⁸ General Karl Eikenberry reported that for all of 2006 there were 139 suicide attacks. The number of remotely-triggered IED attacks jumped from 783 to 1,677. In all, the number of armed attacks against coalition and Afghan security forces nearly quadrupled from 1,558 in 2005 to 4,542 in 2006.⁹

The security situation in southern Afghanistan, particularly in Helmand, continues to deteriorate. On July 17, 2006, the Taliban captured and took control of two districts in Helmand province. They controlled the center of Garmser district for two days before NATO troops forced them out. On September 7, 2006, the Taliban recaptured Garmser district along with Arghandab in Zabul province, flying the Taliban flag over government buildings.

The Musa Qala Surrender

Perhaps the most galling failure in southern Afghanistan is the negotiated "truce" between the British Army, tribal elders, and the Taliban in Musa Qala in Helmand province. After months of intense fighting and enduring siege-like conditions, the British were concerned that the threat to their Chinook resupply helicopters was so great they would be forced to retreat to avoid losing one to enemy fire. Local tribal elders approached the British and negotiated a cease-fire that, surprisingly, held for more than a month. At this point, the elders negotiated a withdrawal of British soldiers, Afghan police, and the Taliban from the Musa Qala district. Although the British claimed this experiment brought peace to the area, American officials remained rightly skeptical. U.S. officials report that immediately after the Musa Qala agreement was reached, opium cultivation and trade flourished, and remains active there today.

The agreement completely collapsed within the last few weeks, as the Taliban has seized control of Musa Qala, running the tribal council out of town and

⁷ Congressional Research Service, compiled from wire services.

⁸ Congressional Research Service, compiled from wire services.

⁹ Washington Post, Jan. 16, 2007.

forcing thousands of residents to flee their homes. At best, the Musa Qala experience was a failed experiment aimed at finding a novel way to empower local Afghan authorities. At worst, it represents a capitulation to the Taliban, effectively ceding control over an entire district in the heart of Afghanistan's largest poppy-growing province to drug lords and terrorists.

Fighting between NATO troops and the Taliban intensified in 2006. The Taliban operates in more provinces and in larger formations than it did in 2005. While funded with hundreds of millions of dollars from record opium production, the Taliban may also see NATO troops as weaker and less aggressive than exclusively American units, particularly after the withdrawal at Musa Qala. The Taliban's number of attacks, the size of their units and the numbers of casualties they suffered all are significantly larger than in the past. It is also clear that most of the Taliban's strength is focused on provinces that border Pakistan.

As part of the NATO/ISAF takeover of the south, a British/Canadian/Dutch-led 7,000 person "Regional Command South" formally took over responsibility for southern Afghanistan on July 31, 2006. In building the force, Britain is contributing 3,300 troops, Canada is deploying about 2,200, and the Netherlands is fielding about 1,700. There is U.S. participation in this force in the south, with those U.S. forces serving under NATO/ISAF command. In conjunction with the restructuring, NATO/ISAF force levels are increasing to about 18,000, from previous levels of about 12,000.

In December 2005, NATO adopted rules of engagement that allow NATO/ISAF forces to perform combat missions, although not as aggressively as the combat conducted by the U.S.- led Operation Enduring Freedom forces.

In response to the stepped up Taliban activity in the south, U.S. and NATO forces launched "Operation Mountain Lion" and "Operation Mountain Thrust" in June 2006. These operations were intended to clear the Taliban from areas of the southern provinces in advance of the NATO assumption of responsibility. The operations formally ended on July 31, and, as evidenced by the continued high level of Taliban military activity, appear to have been tactical successes but strategic failures. This trend continued in NATO's "Operation Medusa" in southern Afghanistan, which resulted in more than 420 Taliban killed.¹⁰

Taliban Safe Haven in Pakistan

In 2001-2002, many leaders of Al Qaeda and related personnel fled to Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) province, joining with indigenous ethnic Pashtuns who maintain their independence from the Pakistani government in Islamabad.

¹⁰ The Guardian, London, September 11, 2006.

A November 2005 follow-on report by 9/11 Commissioners warned that Pakistan “remains a sanctuary and training ground for terrorists.” In a February 2006 review of global threats, Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte told a Senate panel that Pakistan “remains a major source of extremism that poses a threat to President Musharraf, to the United States, and to neighboring India and Afghanistan.” In June, State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator Henry Crumpton told a Senate panel that elements of Pakistan’s “local, tribal governments” work in collusion with the Taliban and Al Qaeda -- but the United States has “no compelling evidence” that Pakistan’s major intelligence agency is assisting militants. The Commander of the U.S. Central Command, Gen. Abizaid, reiterated this point last August, saying he believed the Pakistani military and Musharraf are fully committed to combating regional terrorism.

Two cases of actual or planned major terrorist acts — the July 2006 serial bombings in Bombay, India, and the alleged August 2006 plot to destroy passenger aircraft flying out of Britain — both had apparent links to Islamist militant groups based in Pakistan. Disturbingly, *New York Times* correspondent Carlotta Gall was assaulted by Pakistani intelligence agents at her hotel in Quetta after she uncovered “anecdotal” evidence that the Pakistani intelligence service is supporting the Taliban in the FATA. The agents broke down the door to her hotel room, punched her in the face, and seized her computer, notebooks, and cell phone. Pakistani officials are investigating the incident, but it is clear that Ms. Gall uncovered information that was of great concern to Pakistani intelligence.

Pakistan’s FATA includes seven tribal agencies traditionally beyond the full writ of the Pakistani state. The mountainous FATA is home to about five million people living in an area slightly larger than the state of Maryland. To date, with some 80,000 Pakistani troops now deployed to the border areas, military operations have met with only mixed success. Pakistani press reported on hundreds of militants killed, along with 700 Pakistani soldiers and several hundred civilian casualties.

In late 2003, the Pakistani military began mounting major operations in the FATA, concentrated mainly in the South Waziristan, which abuts Afghanistan’s Paktika province. After months of sometimes heavy fighting, the five most-wanted Pashtun tribesmen “surrendered” to the government authorities in April 2004. The leaders were immediately granted amnesty in return for a promise that they would not provide shelter to Al Qaeda members or their supporters. This “Shakai agreement” and later agreements appeared to have largely ended overt conflict in South Waziristan by 2005.

As Pakistani officials declared victory over “unwanted foreigners,” their focus shifted to North Waziristan, where terrorists continued to operate. Sporadic fighting continued through 2005 and into mid-2006. The most dramatic insurgent attack included a March 2006 attack by hundreds of armed militants who seized

control of government buildings in North Waziristan's capital of Miram Shah before being repulsed by Pakistani troops.¹¹

Pakistan's Waziristan has become Talibanistan

On June 25, 2006, Islamic militants in North Waziristan called a unilateral 30-day cease-fire to allow for a "jirga," or tribal council, seeking resolution with government forces. Subsequent jirgas have been held with government authorities present and Islamabad has released hundreds of detained militants and reportedly abandoned some army checkpoints in a show of goodwill. One month later, militants extended the cease-fire for another 30 days to allow for continued dialogue. In mid-August, Pakistani officials claimed to have arrested more than two dozen Taliban fighters as they recuperated at a private hospital in Quetta.¹²

On September 5, 2006, representatives of the Pakistani government and tribal elders signed a "peace agreement" negotiated by the jirga. The agreement appears to provide government approval to nearly all of the requests of militants in the FATA. Pakistani military forces, which have suffered a series of losses, will withdraw from important checkpoints, release hundreds of imprisoned militants, and will offer compensatory payments to militants. The government will also allow foreign militants to remain in the tribal region provided they "vow to obey" the law.

This represents a major reversal from the government's previous insistence that foreigners register with authorities or leave the country. It appears that this arrangement will free the Islamic militants to increase their attacks on U.S.-led forces across the border in Afghanistan. Immediately after the agreement was signed, a spokesman for the militants denied that any foreign fighters were present in North Waziristan, and spokesmen for the Pakistani government were forced to clarify that Osama bin Laden would still be arrested if located in Pakistan, despite the September 5 agreement.¹³

Despite a three-year campaign by the Pakistani military, there appears to be a new "Pakistan Taliban," allied with Al Qaeda remnants and Afghan insurgents, which has consolidated control over large tracts of the border area.

What Lies Ahead?

Given that elements of the tribal governments are widely acknowledged to be in collusion with al Qaeda and the Taliban, the "peace agreement" Pakistan signed effectively cedes control over a part of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border to the Taliban. Operating from this safe haven in the FATA, the Taliban will be able to

¹¹ Christian Science Monitor, June 8, 2006.

¹² New York Times, August 16, 2006.

¹³ Associated Press of Pakistan, September 6, 2006.

escalate its attack against NATO and Afghan government targets. It will also have a haven to process and transport weapons to and heroin from Afghanistan.

It is also clear that Pakistani agents may know more about the whereabouts of key Taliban and al Qaeda leaders, which is why I plan to reintroduce the Terrorist Rewards Enhancement Act. Under current law, the U.S. cannot pay a reward to an officer or employee of a foreign government, even if they provided key information leading to the capture of Osama bin Laden. My legislation authorizes payments from the Rewards for Justice program to employees of foreign governments if the information they provided leads to the location of a high-value target. The Secretary of State will have the discretion to determine if the circumstances dictate paying such an award.

The Rewards for Justice program has been very successful in generating information leading to the apprehension of key people including Mir Amal Kansi, a terrorist who had murdered two CIA employees and injured three others in a 1993 shooting outside CIA headquarters in Virginia. If there is anyone, anywhere, even if they work for a Pakistani government agency, who has information about the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden, we should be doing all we can to elicit that information from him.

NATO's deployment to the "Heartland of Heroin" in Helmand represents a danger to the drug economy of southern Afghanistan. The British and others deployed troops into the economic engine of the Taliban where the U.S. has had few assets to support this critical mission. While these troops have explicitly rejected a direct role in counter-narcotics, well financed drug smugglers would like to see them depart and can use Taliban soldiers to attack NATO troops. Given the hundreds of millions of dollars earned in the opium trade, the new Taliban probably has an operating budget that equals the resources used to support NATO and Afghan military operations.

With the apparent capitulation of the Pakistanis to the militants in the FATA and the disaster at Musa Qala, the U.S. and Britain must develop a more effective counter-narcotics program in Afghanistan. It is clear that the Taliban and al Qaeda are encouraging farmers to grow opium poppies and offering protection to farmers in exchange for a fee. Implementing an effective eradication program is vital to reducing the world's supply of heroin and ending this source of support to the Taliban.

To do this successfully, the U.S. will have to employ CJTF-76 direct support to DEA/Afghan NIU counter-narcotics missions, rather than pay lip service to it. DoD assets will be needed to support DEA FAST teams with intelligence, transportation and, if needed, close air support. Last March, the U.S. and Britain established a joint counter-narcotics intelligence fusion center in London to focus on the heroin flowing out of Afghanistan. Although intelligence is being gathered, no direct action is being taken to apprehend major Afghan traffickers or destroy heroin labs.

The U.S. was successful in dismantling the Colombian Medellin and Cali cocaine cartels because of an aggressive eradication and interdiction program that had the full support of

DoD. The steps taken by the President Alvaro Uribe to ensure democratic security have resulted in an 80 percent reduction in kidnappings in the past year. In addition, terrorist attacks have decreased by 63 percent, and homicides have been reduced by 37 percent. Colombia seized more assets of drug traffickers, and extradited more kingpins to the United States, than has any other country in the world.

The FY 2007 Department of Defense Appropriations Act contained \$100 million specifically to fund Afghan counter-narcotics efforts. Using Colombia as a model, we should mandate that all funds allocated for the counter-narcotics mission in Afghanistan be used as part of a unified campaign against both drugs and terror using all U.S. assets, including military equipment. This money should be used by DoD and DEA to support operations against high value targets, drug kingpins, heroin labs, and interdiction missions against convoys smuggling chemicals into Afghanistan and heroin out of the country.

In Colombia, we learned that drugs and terrorism must be fought simultaneously. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, we must take the lessons learned in Colombia to understand counter-terror programs will not work unless there is an effective counter-narcotic program to eliminate the Taliban's new source of funding. If we do not do this, Afghanistan will descend into its former status of becoming a failed narcostate.