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THE CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR AFGHANISTAN

Let me thank The International Institute for Strategic Studies for hosting this discussion today. And thank you all for coming.

Three UN election workers were kidnapped in Kabul this morning. One of them is a British-Irish dual national. We are in touch with the family; and our Embassy in Kabul is in touch with the UN and the local authorities.

That is a sombre context in which to look today at the challenges ahead for Afghanistan. But I do want to talk today about the remarkable transformation in that country over the last three years. I also want to talk about the threat of opium; and about our commitment to tackling it and to building a better future for Afghanistan, in close partnership with its people.

I first visited Afghanistan in February 2002, and one encounter is still etched on my mind – indeed it is an encounter which will stay with me to my grave. At a shelled but reopened school for girls in Kabul, I asked a teacher what had changed since the fall of the Taleban. In response, she showed me a piece of paper which she kept in her pocket as a reminder: a summons from the Taleban authorities, for the crime of educating girls. They had made her job – her vocation – a criminal offence. So, she said, everything has changed – because we can now look forward to basic human rights for women in our country.

There are thousands of such stories in Afghanistan – of people released from the Taleban's callous extremism, and determined to rebuild their country. The teacher whom I met was one of now over 30,000 women teachers; her pupils were some of the more than 2 million Afghan girls now back at school. Over 3 million refugees and 500,000 internally-displaced people have returned to their homes – Afghans voting with their feet to show the confidence they have in their new country.

And just over a fortnight ago, that remarkable progress culminated in Afghanistan's first ever presidential elections. Over 80% of the electorate turned out. The United Nations did a remarkable job in registering voters and overseeing the elections, and others including Pakistan and Iran helped very greatly too.

Many of us were moved by the images of men and – for the first time ever – of women too, queuing peacefully outside the polling stations to vote. The majority in Afghanistan have literally stood up to be counted.

But the elections are not the end of a process – they are rather the beginning. The new Afghan government faces great challenges. It must – with international help – extend its authority across the country. It has to improve security, and to disarm and demobilise the militias and reintegrate their members into civilian life or into the new, multi-ethnic security forces. And indeed these elections are only the first stage, with Parliamentary elections to be held next spring.

I want today to focus especially on one challenge above all which Afghanistan faces: the menace of opium. Opium is leaving Afghanistan's economy and with it Afghanistan's poorest people increasingly in hock to exploitative and wealthy traders and warlords; and – as it always has done, in Afghanistan as elsewhere – fuelling corruption, coercion and insurgency.

The parallel economy sustained by opium represents half the value again of Afghanistan's non-drugs GDP: it thrives on chaos and lawlessness, and those who profit from it have every interest in undermining the rule of law and the authority of government.

And drug addiction in Afghanistan itself is growing, with at least 7,000 heroin addicts in Kabul alone. Opium is the greatest threat to the modern and successful state and the better future which the Afghan government and people are striving to build.

Let me illustrate the threat and also the complexity of the problem with the story of a barber in Achin – I will call him Abdullah – who spoke to a British-sponsored field worker.

Four years ago, Abdullah took an advance payment of \$400 on 4 kilograms of opium, in order to pay for medical treatment for his sick father. The Taleban's sudden ban on opium cultivation left him unable to grow the opium which he needed to repay the debt.

By this year, the moneylender was demanding 20 kilos of opium or \$7,200 to pay off the loan and the interest which had accrued. That was way beyond what Abdullah could hope to raise. He was forced to mortgage his land against \$4,000 worth of the debt – and his only hope of repaying that mortgage is by growing more opium. And to pay the rest, he had no option but to sell his daughter.

The story is sadly not untypical. And it illustrates how vital it is that we break the cycle of exploitation and human misery which opium feeds in Afghanistan.

There is also a wider imperative. Afghanistan's opium poisons the whole region. One of the main trafficking routes to Europe, for example, passes through next-door Iran: and there, an estimated one in 35 adults is addicted to drugs, and drug traffickers have killed some 3,000 law enforcement and army officers over the last ten years. Pakistan also has to cope with trafficking and with the spread of cultivation across the border from Afghanistan; and surveys estimate that the number of chronic users of heroin in Pakistan has risen from 20,000 in 1980 to more than 1.5 million today.

And here, in Britain, 95% of the heroin on our streets originates in Afghanistan's poppy fields, bringing crime and human misery in its wake. As a former Home Secretary, I am acutely aware of the need to combine our strategy to address the problems of addiction at home with international action, along drug supply routes, from their source to their destination.

So for all these reasons – the impact of drugs on the UK, the region, and most of all on the Afghan people themselves – we must reduce opium cultivation. The UK, our international partners and the Afghan Government are determined to do so.

But our effort has so far been hampered by two major obstacles.

First, our capacity to respond has been limited by the absence of a strong state. To crack down effectively on the opium trade in this vast and sparsely-populated country requires strong central authority, backed by a fully-functioning judiciary and properly-trained and –equipped police to enforce the rule of law.

It's worth remembering that the Taleban were not at all consistently anti-opium: far from it. Production in their penultimate full year in power reached record levels. In the following year, they were remarkably effective in cutting cultivation – though the best assumption is that they did this to drive up the value of their opium stockpiles for their own profit. But they did so by means which no democratic society could contemplate, enforcing their authority through arbitrary imprisonment, torture and death. And because of the lack of alternatives to opium, the consequence of the Taleban's actions was an increase in poverty, debt and misery for thousands. The challenge for us, in contrast, is to deliver reductions in opium-growing which are sustainable, and which avoid those terrible human consequences.

The second obstacle we face is that production is currently increasing. This is not unusual: two countries that have a very good track record on drugs-reduction programmes, Pakistan and Thailand, both also saw increases in production early on in their successful anti-drug programmes. Debt can force farmers whose crops were eradicated to grow more next year, to pay off the moneylenders – as it did for Abdullah the barber. As reconstruction continues in Afghanistan, better roads and better irrigation are allowing farmers to grow more crops and transport them more easily to market – including opium. And the end of Afghanistan’s international isolation has made wheat and other staples reliably available in local shops. With the certainty that they will not lack for basic food, some farmers have decided to grow more opium and less wheat.

It takes time to implement programmes offering viable alternative livelihoods to those used to living off opium. The coincidence in Afghanistan of the size of the problem, the post-conflict situation, warlords, corruption, poverty, and the lack of skills to develop alternative livelihoods is uniquely challenging. I expect the figures for this year to show a large increase in the area under cultivation, and a significant increase in opium production.

But despite all these difficulties, the context is changing in our favour.

First, after successful Presidential elections and with Parliamentary elections to follow next year, the Afghan state is building its strength and its resolve to tackle the opium problem.

And meanwhile, our understanding of this complex challenge has grown – as has the international resolve to work with the Afghans to tackle it. The UK leads the international counter-narcotics effort in Afghanistan. We have a dedicated team of counter-narcotics staff in the British Embassy in Kabul, and many more British consultants and advisers working alongside the Afghan authorities. We have earmarked more than £70 million over three years for this specific task, with significant development funding available in addition; and put counter-narcotics at the heart of all our work in Afghanistan.

So together with the Afghan Government and our international partners, we are now moving to a new phase of our counter-narcotics effort in Afghanistan: implementing a strong and comprehensive strategy which tackles every aspect of the problem, and can deliver real and sustainable change.

That work combines five main elements: eradication; alternative livelihoods; law enforcement; criminal justice; and information and treatment campaigns to raise awareness and tackle addiction in Afghanistan itself. Pursued together in an integrated and co-ordinated way, these elements can make a lasting impact on the problem. Let me take each element in turn.

First, we must provide viable alternative livelihoods. Without these, law enforcement action simply fuels opium debt and human misery. We must work in the context of often acute poverty, with nearly half of all Afghans still living on less than \$1 per day.

We are therefore providing farmers with credit, tools, training, funding, and seeds to grow alternative crops, in a programme worth £20 million over three years. We are funding research on the most profitable crops. We are making micro-credits available to the poor, and fostering the wider economic conditions in which small-scale private-sector business can develop.

Experience elsewhere shows that alternative livelihoods programmes work: in Thailand, farmers who switched from opium poppies to cut flowers increased their profits per square metre by 50 times; and in Pakistan, onions have proved to be more profitable crops than opium. But getting these changes – both practical changes and changes in mindsets – will take time.

Second, in conjunction with that work, we must eradicate opium poppy crops – without paying compensation which would encourage farmers to grow opium again the next year. An Afghan Central Eradication Planning Cell is now in place, with UK support, to target, monitor and evaluate the eradication campaigns, and with the technology to identify where poppy is grown. A Poppy Eradication Force, supported by the United States, has been created and trained to carry out eradication across the country.

Thirdly, we are disrupting the market in drugs and tackling the traders through better law-enforcement, working with the Germans who are building Afghanistan's policing capacity. The Afghan Special Narcotics Force, established by the Afghan Government and supported and advised by the UK, is destroying opiates and laboratories, and arresting those who are trading and refining opium. In a single operation last month, the Force seized 17 tonnes of opiates and 16 tonnes of precursor chemicals, and destroyed 47 opium presses.

Meanwhile the British and German-trained Counter-Narcotics Police is now expanding nation-wide, with 7 provincial bases being established around the country. One British-funded mobile detection team, operating at the Kabul City gates, has already seized 125 kilos of heroin and 185 kilos of opium, and made over 20 arrests. Nine more such teams are planned in the coming year; and the UN, US and France are helping to train an additional 150 officers to conduct interdiction operations.

The fourth area of work is the fast-tracking of counter-narcotics within the criminal justice system. We must ensure that arrests lead to effective investigations and prosecutions, even where the influence of rich traffickers puts the integrity of the new systems under particular pressure. Basic anti-drug laws are already in place, and arrests should be taken through to prosecution by early in the New Year. We are working closely on all of this with Italy and other partners such as Canada, and with the UN.

And fifthly, we are working to increase public awareness of the illegality of the opium industry, and of the dangers of addiction. Alongside the strong lead from President Karzai's Government, the religious council of Afghanistan has issued a *fatwa* condemning narcotics. Regional leaders and elders are discussing how to tackle opium production in the provinces, and specialist training will raise their awareness of the problem, which they can then pass on to others. Radio broadcasts, posters and other forms of information are spreading the message across Afghanistan. We are also undertaking drugs rehabilitation work with refugees returning from countries such as Iran, which have high levels of drug addiction; and supporting the development of treatment centres for drug addiction, which should be up and running in every province within 3-5 years.

None of this will be easy; and there are no instant solutions to reverse the trend of cultivation, and attack the web of trafficking, corruption and coercion which sustains the opium trade.

But the Afghan Government's firm commitment to tackling the problem; the international community's resolve to help it to do so; and this strategy for sustainable change – all those give us a good foundation on which to work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this issue and across the board, the international commitment to Afghanistan's future will remain firm.

Already \$3.5 billion in international reconstruction aid for Afghanistan has been disbursed, with a further \$9 billion committed for the coming years. Our G8 partners and international institutions such as the World Bank and the European Commission are fully engaged. Afghanistan's neighbours are also building their cooperation, including on counter-narcotics through sharing intelligence on drug traffickers, improving border security and training, and co-ordinating their tactics.

And all those efforts are paying off. Almost 20,000 Afghan police have been recruited and are being trained. Kabul is now free of heavy weapons, and 80% of such weapons nation-wide have been removed from militia control. Over 20,000 militia personnel have been reintegrated into the regular army or civilian life. The International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, counts 9,500 troops from 37 nations, and has extended its presence across the North as the first step in setting up Provincial Reconstruction Teams around the country.

I am determined that the United Kingdom continue to play our part in the international effort to tackle the challenges ahead in Afghanistan.

We are committing £500 million over the five years to 2007 to the country's reconstruction. We were the first country to lead ISAF, and today some 800 British troops are deployed. And the Prime Minister has announced that in 2006 the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps Headquarters will be deployed to Afghanistan to command ISAF again.

That commitment is part of our plans to enhance our relationship with Afghanistan across the board.

We want in particular to help Afghanistan to create and sustain stronger relationships with regional and international organisations, and build the capacity and authority of President Karzai's government.

We also want to help make the Parliamentary elections to be held next year a success – building on our support for the Presidential poll, which included over £15 million for registration and organisation, and a strong contribution to the EU and OSCE monitoring missions and to the international security back-up.

The Prime Minister, I and my colleagues in Government will be working closely with the Afghan authorities over the coming months on all those issues.

None of us underestimates the challenges which Afghanistan faces – least of all Afghans themselves. But much has already been achieved. And as the new government works to stamp out drugs, to extend its authority, and to rebuild a country shattered by a generation of wars, it has above all one enormous asset: the will and determination of the Afghan people.

Last year, when Hamid Karzai addressed the Labour Party Conference, he talked of a group of Afghan children whose school had been burnt down by the Taleban. The morning after the fire, he said, the children had returned to sit among the smoking ruins, waiting patiently for their lessons.

That story shows the same resilience that I found in the teacher I met at the girls' school in Kabul, and in many other Afghans whom I have had the privilege of meeting before and since. I am in no doubt about the Afghan people's commitment to making their country a success. Our task, in the international community, is to support them in every way that we can.

We saw in the outrages of 11 September 2001 the price of state failure in Afghanistan, a price paid both by the United States and by many other nations around the world. Our own interests, and our firm commitment to the Afghan people, should give us renewed determination to help Afghanistan to succeed today.