

## Drug War Chronicle - world's leading drug policy newsletter

# Feature: Hit List -- US Targets 50 Taliban-Linked Drug Traffickers to Capture or Kill

from Drug War Chronicle, Issue #597, 8/13/09



hidden drug cache, Afghanistan  
2008 (from nato.int)

A congressional study released Tuesday reveals that US military forces occupying Afghanistan have 50 drug traffickers on a "capture or kill" list. The list of those targeted for arrest or assassination had previously been reserved for leaders of the insurgency aimed at driving Western forces from Afghanistan and restoring Taliban rule. The addition of drug traffickers to the hit list means the US military will not be capturing or killing criminal -- not political or military -- foes without benefit of warrant or trial.

The policy was announced **earlier this year**, when the US persuaded reluctant NATO allies to come aboard as it began shifting its Afghan drug policy from eradication of peasant poppy fields to trying to interdict opium and heroin in transit out from the country. But it is receiving renewed attention as the fight heats up this summer, and the release of the report from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has brought the policy under the spotlight.

The report, **Afghanistan's Narco War: Breaking the Link between Drug Traffickers and Insurgents**, includes the following highlights:

- Senior military and civilian officials now believe the Taliban cannot be defeated and good government in Afghanistan cannot be established without cutting off the money generated by Afghanistan's opium industry, which supplies more than 90 percent of the world's heroin and generates an estimated \$3 billion a year in profits.
- As part of the US military expansion in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has assigned US troops a lead role in trying to cut the flow of illicit drug profits that are bankrolling the Taliban and fueling the corruption that undermines the Afghan government. Simultaneously, the United States has set up an intelligence center to analyze the flow of drug money to the Taliban and corrupt Afghan officials, and a task force combining military, intelligence and law enforcement resources from several countries to put drug networks linked to the Taliban in southern Afghanistan awaits formal approval.
- On the civilian side, the administration is dramatically shifting gears on counternarcotics by phasing out eradication efforts in favor of promoting alternative crops and agriculture development. For the first time, the United States will have an agricultural strategy for Afghanistan. While this new strategy is still being finalized, it will focus on efforts to increase agricultural production, regenerate the agribusiness sector, rehabilitate watersheds and irrigation systems, and build capacity in the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock.

While it didn't make the highlights, the following passage bluntly spells out the lengths to which the military is prepared to go to complete its new anti-drug mission: "In a dramatic illustration of the new policy, major drug traffickers who help finance the insurgency are likely to find themselves in the crosshairs of the military. Some 50 of them are now officially on the target list to be killed or captured."

Or, as one US military officer told the committee staff: "We have a list of 367 'kill or capture' targets, including 50 nexus targets who link drugs and insurgency."

US military commanders argue that the killing of civilian drug trafficking suspects is legal under their rules of engagement and the international law. While the exact rules of engagement are classified, the generals said "the ROE and the internationally recognized Law of War have been interpreted to allow them to put drug traffickers with proven links to the insurgency on a kill list, called the joint integrated prioritized target list."

Not everyone agrees that killing civilian drug traffickers in a foreign country is legal. The UN General Assembly has called for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. In a 2007 **report**, the International Harm Reduction Association identified the resort to the death penalty for drug offenses as a violation of the UN Charter and Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

"What was striking about the news coverage of this this week was that the culture of US impunity is so entrenched that nobody questioned or even mentioned the fact that extrajudicial murder is illegal under international law, and presumably under US law as well," said Steve Rolles of the British drug reform group **Transform**. "The UK



burning of captured Afghan  
hashish cache, world record  
size, 2008 (from nato.int)

government could never get away with an assassination list like this, and even when countries like Israel do it, there is widespread condemnation. Imagine the uproar if the Afghans had produced a list of US assassination targets on the basis that US forces in Afghanistan were responsible for thousands of civilian casualties."

Rolles noted that while international law condemns the death penalty for drug offenses, the US policy of "capture or kill" doesn't ever necessarily contemplate trying offenders before executing them. "This hit list is something different," he argued. "They are specifically calling for executions without any recourse to trial, prosecution, or legal norms. Whilst a 'war' can arguably create exceptions in terms of targeting 'enemy combatants,' the war on terror and war on drugs are amorphous concepts apparently being used to create a blanket exemption under which almost any actions are justified, whether conventionally viewed as legal or not -- as recent controversies over torture have all too clearly demonstrated."

But observers on this side of the water were more sanguine. "This is arguably no different from US forces trying to capture or kill Taliban leaders," said Vanda Felbab-Brown, an expert on drugs, security, and insurgencies at the Brookings Institution. "As long as you are in war context and part of your policy is to immobilize the insurgency, this is no different," she said.

"This supposedly focuses on major traffickers closely aligned to the Taliban and Al Qaeda," said Ted Galen Carpenter, a foreign policy analyst for the Cato Institute. "That at least is preferable to going around destroying the opium crops of Afghan farmers, but it is still a questionable strategy," he said.

But even if they can live with hit-listing drug traffickers, both analysts said the success of the policy would depend on how it is implemented. "The major weakness of this new initiative is that it is subject to manipulation -- it creates a huge incentive for rival traffickers or people who simply have a quarrel with someone to finger that person and get US and NATO forces to take him out," said Carpenter, noting that Western forces had been similarly played in the recent past in Afghanistan. "You'll no doubt be amazed by the number of traffickers who are going to be identified as Taliban-linked. Other traffickers will have a vested interest in eliminating the competition."

"This is better than eradication," agreed Felbab-Brown, "but how effective it will be depends to a large extent on how it's implemented. There are potential pitfalls. One is that you send a signal that the best way to be a drug trafficker is to be part of the government. There needs to be a parallel effort to go after traffickers aligned with the government," she said.

"A second pitfall is with deciding the purpose of interdiction," Felbab-Brown continued. "This is being billed as a way to bankrupt the Taliban, but I am skeptical about that, and there is the danger that expectations will not be met. Perhaps this should be focused on limiting the traffickers' power to corrupt and coerce the state."

Another danger, said Felbab-Brown, is if the policy is implemented too broadly. "If the policy targets low-level traders even if they are aligned with the Taliban or targets extensive networks of trafficking organizations and ends up arresting thousands of people, its disruptive effects may be indistinguishable from eradication at the local level. That would be economically hurting populations the international community is trying to court."

Felbab-Brown pointed to the Colombian and Mexican examples to highlight another potential pitfall for the policy of targeting Taliban-linked traffickers. "Such operations could end up allowing the Taliban to take more control over trafficking, as in Colombia after the Medellin and Cali cartels were destroyed, where the FARC and the paramilitaries ended up becoming major players," she warned. "Or Mexico, where the traffickers have responded by fighting back against the state. This could add another dimension to the conflict and increase the levels of violence."

The level of violence is already at its highest level since the US invasion and occupation nearly eight years ago. Last month was the bloodiest month of the war for Western troops, with 76 US and NATO soldiers killed. As of Wednesday, another 28 have been killed this month.

Bookmark/Search this post with:

 [digg](#) |  [reddit](#)

**Drug War Issues** [Heroin](#) - [Opium Production](#) - [Military](#) - [Human Rights](#) - [Interdiction](#) - [Eradication](#)  
**Consequences of Prohibition** [Political Instability](#) - [Government Corruption](#) - [Police-Community Tensions](#) - [Drug Trafficking](#)  
**Funding Terrorists**  
**Politics & Advocacy** [Politics Outside US](#) - [Executive Branch](#) - [Congress](#)

PERMISSION to reprint or redistribute any or all of the contents of Drug War Chronicle (formerly The Week Online with DRCNet) is hereby granted. We ask that any use of these materials include proper credit and, where appropriate, a link to one or more of our web sites. If your publication customarily pays for publication, DRCNet requests checks payable to the organization. If your publication does not pay for materials, you are free to use the materials gratis. In all cases, we request notification for our records, including physical contact where material has appeared in print. Contact: StoptheDrugWar.org: the Drug Reform Coordination Network, P.O. Box 18402, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 293-8340 (voice), (202) 293-8344 (fax), e-mail [drcnet@drcnet.org](mailto:drcnet@drcnet.org). Thank you.

Articles of a purely educational nature in Drug War Chronicle appear courtesy of the DRCNet Foundation, unless otherwise noted.

StoptheDrugWar.org • 1623 Connecticut Ave., NW, 3rd Floor, Washington DC 20009

Phone (202) 293-8340 Fax (202) 293-8344 [drcnet@drcnet.org](mailto:drcnet@drcnet.org) • [Privacy Policy](#)