

High Politics

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The toppling of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada by the popular uprising in Bolivia two weeks ago epitomizes the wrong-headedness of U.S. anti-drug policies around the world and the negative repercussions these policies carry for the war on terrorism. Eradication of illicit crops, sponsored by the United States and frequently imposed on local governments by the threat of U.S. sanctions, destabilizes local governments in Third World countries, strengthens guerrilla movements and terrorist groups, and alienates local populations. At the time when the anti-terrorism campaign should be of the highest priority for the United States, the ineffective and counterproductive crop eradication policy should be abandoned.

Eradication of illicit crops destabilizes local governments in the Third World by delegitimizing them in the eyes of the local population that is frequently dependent on the growth of drugs for meeting basic needs. In conditions of severe poverty, poppy, coca, and marijuana represent not only the most profitable source of livelihood, but frequently the only source of livelihood: 1) they are more sturdy plants than many of the legal crops – try growing tomatoes in winter in Afghanistan; 2) the revenues from them are much less subject to international price fluctuations than legal commodities – the plummeting of international coffee prices is pushing many peasants in Colombia to grow drugs despite President Uribe’s eradication efforts; and 3) producing them is associated with smaller transaction and overhead costs for the

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farmers than producing legal crops. By destroying the drug fields, governments alienate large segments of population by depriving them of means of survival. Local warlords and guerrillas exploit this alienation by serving as protectors of the drug economy from local governments and the United States and against unscrupulous narcotraffickers. Afghan warlords, often connected to al Qaeda, the FARC and the paramilitaries in Colombia, are thus establishing themselves as powerful rivals of the central governments.

Crop eradication is counterproductive to the U.S. war on terrorism in yet another way. Alienated, the local populace stops providing crucial intelligence on guerrillas, especially those who protect their drug fields. In Peru in the 1980s, for example, when military leaders closed their eyes to the coca production in the Upper Huallaga Valley, one of the strongholds of the Sendero Luminoso, the peasants supplied timely intelligence on the terrorists and the military scored several key victories. When the Peruvian government, prompted by the United States, undertook coca eradication, the peasants refused to provide the military with intelligence. Eliminating the remainder of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan requires crucial human intelligence. The populace will not provide this intelligence if the Karzai government, encouraged by Washington, continues with eradication.

Nor is the policy of “compensated” eradication, paying peasants for the destruction of their drug fields, a solution. Frequently, such compensation is far lower than the profits peasants obtain from drugs. Even when the compensation comes close to the price farmers get from the drug traffickers, the traffickers easily outbid the government’s offer. In Afghanistan, despite the financial compensation, crop burning has elicited violent anti-government demonstrations. In Bolivia, eradication policies resulted in the toppling of the U.S. favored regime. In Colombia,

despite President Uribe's claims of success, drugs are only being pushed deeper into the Amazon and across borders to Bolivia and Peru.

Alternative development, including the financing of crop substitution, tends to be problematical as well. Although much less detrimental to U.S. interests than crop eradication, this policy, even when undertaken in fact and not simply promised, tends to be a long-term matter and less lucrative for peasants than drug production.

Of course, warlords and terrorists derive not only political legitimacy from protecting the drug business, but also great financial rewards. They use money to finance their military campaigns as well as to provide otherwise absent local social services, such as hospitals, thus enhancing their political legitimacy. Limiting the insurgents' financial resources, however, could be effectively accomplished, without alienating local populations and destabilizing local governments, by directing U.S. anti-drug efforts against money laundering and toward interdiction of financial flows to these groups.

Combating money laundering should be combined with drug interdiction at U.S. borders and on the seas. Such interdiction is unlikely to reduce drug consumption in the United States. But so is crop eradication. Total drug consumption in the U.S. has been remarkably stable over the years. Unlike crop eradication, drug interdiction avoids weakening governments, strengthening terrorists, and alienating local populations. Moreover, spending money on drug interdiction at borders and at sea can also serve homeland defense, since the same money can be used for searching for both explosives and drugs. Drug interdiction combined with combating money laundering is thus complementary to the anti-terrorism campaign while crop eradication undermines it.