

Kabul Grumbles About Russians in Drug Raid

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Russian counternarcotics agents participated in a NATO-led drug raid that netted \$56 million worth of heroin and morphine, but Afghanistan's president complained that he had not been informed in advance of the Russian involvement, and his administration demanded a formal apology.

Nine helicopters and 70 men were involved in the raid, Viktor Ivanov, head of the Federal Drug Control Service, said Friday, adding that his agency told the United States where the labs were located.

Just a week earlier during a trip to Washington, Ivanov accused the United States of failing to dismantle such labs and slow down the flow of heroin into Russia.

Agents seized about 932 kilograms of heroin and 156 kilograms of opium in the raid Thursday in the village of Zerasari, near the Pakistani border, officials said. It takes about 10 tons of opium to make one ton of heroin.

U.S. officials said the heroin had a street value of \$55.9 million. Ivanov gave much higher figures, saying the seized drugs were worth at least \$250 million and probably even up to \$1 billion.

Ivanov said two Russians were involved in the raid and that Russia may increase the number of its drug agents in Afghanistan in the future.

Photos shot at the scene and provided by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency show men in military uniforms carrying metal canisters across a dusty gray moonscape. The drab landscape is broken only by the occasional tree. Stacks of brown sacks lie near basins with white residue and oil drums painted black.

The level of cooperation between U.S. and Russian forces was significant and suggested an improvement in relations between the former Cold War foes, two decades after U.S.-financed Afghan militias chased the Soviet military out of the country.

Federation Council Senator Mikhail Margelov said Friday that the joint raid showed that efforts to reset U.S.-Russian relations are finally being backed by real action.

But it irked Afghan President Hamid Karzai. He stressed on Saturday that Afghanistan and Russia also have friendly relations but said no country should carry out military operations on Afghan soil without permission.

A Kremlin official downplayed Russia's participation following Karzai's criticism. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject, said, "We were in favor of the operation being conducted, but technically, we did not participate in it."

He would not comment on why Ivanov and the United States claimed that it was a joint operation.

Some observers suggested that officials might have overstated Russia's involvement to boost ties with Washington.

Karzai said the raid breached Afghanistan's sovereignty and international law and ordered the interior and defense ministries to investigate the issue.

"While Afghanistan remains committed to its joint efforts with [the] international community against narcotics, it also makes it clear that no organization or institution shall have the right to carry out such a military operation without prior authorization and consent of the government of Afghanistan," his office said in a statement.

While Afghan forces were involved in the raid, Karzai's national security adviser, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, insisted that NATO had not asked for permission to bring the Russians along. He said NATO had verbally apologized but Afghanistan wanted a formal declaration.

"We want a public apology," said Spanta, a former foreign minister. "The friendship does not allow a friend to do whatever he pleases in the house of the host."

Russian involvement in Afghanistan is particularly delicate because the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and occupied the country until it was forced to withdraw nine years later

by anti-communist mujahedin forces.

These U.S.-backed rebels took power in 1992 when the pro-Moscow government collapsed. The Taliban eventually seized Kabul after a violent civil war, ruling with a strict interpretation of Islamic law until they were ousted by the U.S.-led invasion following the Sept. 11 terror attacks in 2001.

Russia and the United States occasionally cooperate on terrorism and drug issues, but Moscow has offered only lukewarm support for the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan and has limited itself to providing its territory for U.S. military transit, turning down requests to provide helicopters and training for pilots or to train counternarcotics police.

Nevertheless, the export of Afghan drugs is an issue of paramount concern to Russia, which now has 2 million opium and heroin addicts. Moscow had been urging the U.S. military to take action against Afghan drug labs, which process unrefined opium into heroin or morphine.

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