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Drug Tsar Wants Poppy Map

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A U.S. platoon conducting a briefing before going on a mission in the Afghan province of Wardak on Thursday. **Umit Bektas**

CHICAGO — U.S. efforts to eradicate Afghanistan's opium poppy crops, which cover an area about the size of New York City, have been "unsatisfactory," Russia's top anti-drug official said.

Russia is the world's largest per capita consumer of heroin and is coping with an epidemic of HIV/AIDS spread by dirty needles.

Afghanistan has long been the world's leading producer of opium, used to make heroin, and a quarter of its production traverses its porous border with former Soviet states and supplies as many as 3 million Russian addicts.

Viktor Ivanov, director of Russia's Federal Service for the Control of Narcotics, in Chicago for meetings with his American counterparts, said Thursday that he agreed with the dim assessment of U.S. poppy eradication efforts by some members of the U.S. Congress.

"Their words were that the efforts are unsatisfactory," Ivanov said through an interpreter. He

referred to Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein and Republican Senator Charles Grassley, who co-chair a caucus on international drug trafficking.

Russia has said the United States made a mistake in 2009 by phasing out crop eradication efforts to focus instead on intercepting drugs and hunting production labs and drug lords.

President Barack Obama has committed to turning over security to Afghan control by the end of 2014. The United States launched the war weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, targeting al-Qaida and the Taliban.

Joint Russian-American anti-drug operations have appeared to tail off since a raid in October 2010 seized a ton of heroin and destroyed four drug-producing laboratories.

There were four more joint raids conducted between December 2010 and February 2011, but Ivanov said it was cumbersome to obtain military approval quickly, given time-sensitive intelligence.

Despite concerns that the Taliban and other insurgent elements were financed by illegal drug profits, Ivanov said absentee landowners and traffickers who reap the bulk of the $7 billion in illegal drug proceeds did not have an ideological stake in the decade-old war. The Taliban earned $150 million annually from drug trafficking, he said.

But the traffickers have hijacked the military's transportation infrastructure in Afghanistan to help them ship their product, he said.

The rising number of violent clashes in Afghanistan worked against any effort to persuade farmers to grow legal crops instead of opium poppies, Ivanov said.

"Ask any farmer whether he's growing wheat and at the same time his country is torn by all sorts of military clashes. How safe will he feel about the future of his crops and the eventual sale of his crops?" Ivanov said.

"That's why we think the most efficient and effective measure is to destroy the product, the drug plantations and the drug laboratories," he said.

The United Nations said land devoted to opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan rose 7 percent this year to 1,310 square kilometers, much of it in the less-secure south and east.

"This tremendous amount of heroin is produced on a relatively small territory ... about the area of New York City," Ivanov said.

He lobbied for creation of a digital poppy map that would identify poppy plantations and show where eradication was working, or not. The publicly accessible map would use surveillance data gathered by American drones and possibly a Russian-American satellite dedicated to the task.

Ivanov said Russia, which fought its own costly war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, had also embarked on a concerted effort to treat its own addicts, which critics say it has often failed to do up to now.

Scientists were working on a new pharmaceutical approach that would suppress the urge to use while not substituting one drug for another. Russian officials have rejected methadone, saying it merely exchanges one addiction for another.

U.S. addiction rates were also on the rise, Ivanov warned, with many users smoking or inhaling purer Afghan heroin.

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