

SYNOPSIS:

## **AFGHAN HEROIN ADDICTS**

Photography by **Sandra CALLIGARO**

Afghanistan, 2007 - 2008

*"Opium is the largest employer in Afghanistan, its largest source of capital and the main base of its economy"*, said Antonio Maria Costa, Director of UNODC (United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime) in Kabul.

Afghanistan is the leading producer of opium, providing 90% of world production. Last year, 8.200 tonnes were produced. Opium accounts for 50% of GDP, employs 12% of Afghans and contributes in part to finance the Taliban and other insurgents. Beyond its status as a producer, the country becomes a consumer. According to a study by the same office of the United Nations, on the one million regular drug users in Afghanistan, there are 200.000 users of opiates including 50.000 heroin users.

The history of heroin in Afghanistan is primarily a reflection of a country ravaged by 30 years of incessant conflict, it is the history of its refugees. Back in their countries of origin as they were deported in most cases, they have introduced heroin and risky practices that spread now to the rest of the population. While people traditionally continue to smoke opium in the province, injections of intravenous heroin have appeared in Kabul. And with them, the spread of AIDS, hitherto non-existent.

The stories are mixed, and recurrent. All arrive from Iran, all were drawn into the trap of white powder during their exile in the neighboring country through which heroin transits and is ranked as the world's largest opioid consumer (nearly 3% the population). All were expelled because they had no residence permit or it had expired, and because they were drug addicts. Several hundred of them have taken up residence in the ruins of a former Soviet cultural center, in the west of Kabul, since then transformed into a squat. Day after day, they are becoming more numerous. The squat is a true refuge for Afghans that were rejected in their country with nothing, having left their families behind, and with the burden of dependency and more.

Some NGOs are preventing the places with high concentration of drug addicts and provide detoxification treatment. Kabul has a meager total of 40 beds, places are expensive, there are usually several months of waiting and pre-treatment before it can be really committed. To this lack of infrastructure, there is another problem: how to feed one's wife and children during the cure? Only those who have families to support them financially may have a little chance of escape. And because of the short duration of treatment and the virtual absence of psychological support for the patients and their families after the release, the rate of relapse after treatment is huge, approaching 90%.

In a country facing a strong return of the insurgency, the fight against drug abuse appears to be the last concern of the government. And as in response to hopes for peace and better life that fade in the country, the number of users continues to increase year after year, tackling the youth. Because, as well as for users worldwide, the drug is a refuge to Afghans.