



*United States Attorney
Southern District of New York*

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**CONTACT: U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
YUSILL SCRIBNER
REBEKAH CARMICHAEL
JANICE OH
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE
(212) 637-2600**

**TOP TALIBAN ASSOCIATE AND FORMER MUJAHIDEEN WARLORD
SENTENCED TO LIFE IN PRISON ON
HEROIN TRAFFICKING CHARGES**

LEV L. DASSIN, the Acting United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced that BASHIR NOORZAI, a former Mujahideen warlord and strong ally of the Taliban, was sentenced today to life in prison on heroin importation and distribution conspiracy charges. NOORZAI was found guilty of the charges following a jury trial before Federal Judge DENNY CHIN in September 2008. According to the evidence at trial:

NOORZAI, the leader of his namesake tribe, one of Afghanistan's largest and most influential tribes, owned opium fields in the southern province of Kandahar, Afghanistan, and had subordinates convert the opium into heroin at laboratories in Afghanistan's border regions. Heroin from these labs was later imported into the United States, hidden in suitcases and on ships. As early as 1990, NOORZAI had a network of distributors in New York City who sold his heroin.

During the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, NOORZAI raised his own army of Mujahideen fighters, financed and armed with drug proceeds. After the Russian army had quit Afghanistan, NOORZAI ruled western Kandahar, establishing and controlling his own police, border guards and courts.

NOORZAI met MULLAH MOHAMMAD OMAR in the 1980s while the two fought in the same Mujahideen faction. In the mid-1990s, when the Taliban was ascending to power in Afghanistan, NOORZAI used his influence in Kandahar to assist OMAR in securing the position of supreme leader of the Taliban. NOORZAI then provided the Taliban with arms, including AK-47 assault rifles, rocket propelled grenade launchers, and anti-tank weapons, as well as vehicles and a portion of the proceeds of his narcotics trafficking activities. In 2001, after the United States began military operations in Afghanistan, NOORZAI, at OMAR's request, provided the Taliban with 400 of his own fighters to wage a

battle against Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in Mazar-e-Sharif.

In return for his financial and other support, the Taliban permitted NOORZAI to continue his drug trafficking activities with impunity. In addition, NOORZAI and his co-conspirators benefitted from advance knowledge of the Taliban's 2000 opium ban, and used that information to stockpile opium and sell it at a tremendous profit after the ban caused opium prices to spike.

At trial, NOORZAI was found guilty of both counts against him -- one count of conspiring to import heroin, and to manufacture and distribute heroin knowing that it would be imported into the United States, and one count of conspiring to distribute heroin.

NOORZAI, who faced a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years, was sentenced by Judge CHIN to life imprisonment on each count in the Indictment. In sentencing NOORZAI, Judge CHIN found that he led a conspiracy involving hundreds of people, and that the conspiracy helped arm the Taliban with narcotics proceeds.

Prior to his arrest in 2005, NOORZAI had been designated by the Department of Justice to the Consolidated Priority Organization Target ("CPOT") list, a list of the most powerful and dangerous narcotics traffickers in the world. His successful prosecution is the result of a long-term investigation by this Office's International Narcotics Trafficking Unit, the Drug Enforcement Administration's New York Field Division, its Kabul, Afghanistan and Islamabad, Pakistan Country Offices, and the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force, which includes special agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The DEA's Special Operations Division also assisted in the investigation and prosecution.

"BASHIR NOORZAI's worldwide narcotics network supported a Taliban regime that made Afghanistan a breeding ground for international terrorism, a legacy that continues to destabilize the region," said Acting United States Attorney LEV L. DASSIN. "Today's sentence definitively puts an end to Noorzai's long criminal career."

The prosecution was handled by the Office's International Narcotics Trafficking Unit. Assistant United States Attorneys JOCELYN STRAUBER, ANJAN SAHNI, BOYD JOHNSON, and ANIRUDH BANSAL were in charge of the prosecution.

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