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**TOP TALIBAN ASSOCIATE AND FORMER MUJAHIDEEN
WARLORD FOUND GUILTY OF HEROIN TRAFFICKING**

MICHAEL J. GARCIA, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, and MICHELE M. LEONHART, the Acting Administrator of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA"), announced that BASHIR NOORZAI, a former Mujahideen warlord and strong ally of the Taliban, was found guilty by a federal jury in Manhattan of conspiring to import and distribute heroin in the United States. 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. The heroin 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 had met MULLAH MOHAMMAD OMAR, the eventual supreme Taliban leader, 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.

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 faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison and a maximum sentence of life in prison. NOORZAI is scheduled to be sentenced on January 7, 2009, by United States District Judge DENNY CHIN, who presided over the trial.

Prior to his arrest, 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 DEA'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 supported an extremist Taliban regime with the proceeds of his worldwide heroin trade. With today's verdict, NOORZAI's decades-long criminal career has finally ended, and one of Afghanistan's most prolific heroin exporters now faces a potential life sentence to be served in a U.S. prison. We owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women of the DEA and FBI who made countless sacrifices to bring him to justice," said United States Attorney MICHAEL J. GARCIA.

"BASHIR NOORZAI's illegal activities illustrate the volatile convergence of drugs and terrorism," said DEA Acting Administrator MICHELE M. LEONHART. "Citizens of America and Afghanistan can take great pride in the conviction of this dangerous and prolific drug lord."

Assistant United States Attorneys ANIRUDH BANSAL and DAVID O'NEIL are in charge of the prosecution.