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## Karzai pardons five Afghan heroin traffickers

By Sayed Salahuddin  
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KABUL - Afghan President Hamid Karzai has pardoned five heroin smugglers, at least one of them a relative of a man who heads Karzai's campaign for re-election next month, a source and a government spokesman said.

A spokesman for Karzai Thursday confirmed the pardons, which he said came after the intercession of tribal chiefs, long a tradition in such matters in Afghanistan.

A source with knowledge of the case said one of those released was a close relative of Deen Mohammad, who is running Karzai's campaign for re-election in the August 20 presidential poll.

The man was jailed for more than a decade in 2007 for smuggling more than 100 kg of heroin. The source spoke to Reuters on condition that he not be identified.

Deen Mohammad belongs to a powerful family from eastern Afghanistan. One of his brothers served as a deputy for Karzai before he was assassinated in 2002.

Karzai's spokesman, Siyamak Herawi, said the president had ordered the release of the five men some months ago and said it had no link with the election or Deen Mohammad's job. Herawi gave no other details.

"The tribal chiefs had sought their release and the president ... acquitted them," Herawi said.

Herawi said more than 3,000 people have been tried or imprisoned over drugs in Afghanistan in recent years. He said the pardons were the first ordered by Karzai.

Karzai has been leading Afghanistan since the removal of the Taliban after a U.S.-led invasion in 2001 and won the country's first presidential poll three years later.

He has been under fire from Western leaders over poor governance, endemic corruption and for the booming drugs trade since the Taliban's fall.

Afghanistan is the biggest opium poppy producer in the world, with opium also funding the Taliban-led insurgency.

U.S. Secretary for State Hillary Clinton has accused Afghanistan in the past of being a "narco-state."

Karzai had been seen as a weak leader in some Western capitals and at home earlier this year, but in recent weeks has managed to consolidate his position.

Some of his former cabinet ministers who are among the 40 candidates standing against him in the election have warned that a second term in office for Karzai would further destabilize Afghanistan, which already faces a resurgent Taliban.