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Senators press officials on Afghan drug trafficking

By Andrew Seidman

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After representatives of the Drug Enforcement Administration, State Department and Defense Department touted the success of U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan for more than an hour Wednesday, lawmakers aggressively questioned them about a subject that forced panelists into near silence: corruption in President Hamid Karzai's government.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), chair of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, noted that in April 2009, Karzai issued a decree to release drug traffickers who were caught with more than 260 pounds of heroin.

"True or false?" Feinstein asked.

Thomas Harrigan, chief of operations for the DEA, paused and answered: "I believe they were pardoned."

Feinstein, apparently dissatisfied, continued: "To what extent is Afghan government involved in drug trafficking?"

"We're concerned with levels of corruption ... but the bottom line is we don't know what we don't know," Harrigan responded.

Feinstein pressed Harrigan again: "You're the head of the whole thing. Do you believe the Afghan government is involved in drug trafficking?"

"If the evidence is there, we'll pursue it to the very end," Harrigan said.

So while officials noted that after reaching a peak cultivation level of 193,000 hectares in 2007, nationwide poppy cultivation fell by more than one-third in 2009, they couldn't offer satisfactory answers about corruption, an issue that may only be magnified as the United States begins its troop drawdown.