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The beginning of the crunch: A statement and analysis of present village attitudes in the North Shamalan

General: The information presented in this memo was collected over the past 6-8 weeks during numerous visits to the North Shamalan and, as a summary event, at the general meeting between the Land Committee of HAVA and about 12 farmer-owners of the first 150-200 acres on 17 September, 1972. There is further secondhand information on a second meeting between the farmers and the Land Committee on 27 September, mostly from village informants who attended. It should be noted that some of the points being raised by the farmers now are basically the same as those the same men raised a year or more ago. My contact with these men has been on a relatively long-term basis, the initial contact being made, with most, a year ago July in the survey situation which lead to the report, The North Shamalan: A Survey of Land and People. These farmers have consistently been very direct in their questions and answers about the Shamalan Land Development project, and the events and statements made at the Sunday, 17 September, meeting were nothing new but a public and group expression of ideas previously explained to me individually.

Initial contacts: More than a year ago USAID/Kabul was informed that the Governor had made contact with an unspecified number of Khans about the project, and that they supported him. The farmers to be affected by the project now indicate these initial contacts were with four Khans (others say two) who were not from the north end, and the names were given. It is not certain that this information is accurate. They suggested that it would have been useful to have canvassed all the farmers, especially those to be first affected, rather than the way it was done. None of these landowners of the North Shamalan, including one relatively powerful Khan, were contacted about their views. According to Mr. Sultan Omar of our HAVR office, there were numerous meetings between the Governor and his staff and a relatively large number of influential Khans of the Shamalan. In any case, in the recent meetings the landowners have stated an interest in further meetings with the Governor to have him name the men who agreed with him on the project. One Khan of Khalaj, a recent AID participant to Turkey, told me that he had been in the original discussions on the project, that the group had agreed to the building of the new canal but not to land leveling.

The basic stand: To the man, I found no one who wanted the project as it involves land leveling. There are numerous reasons for this position; the most basic being the lack of understanding of the usefulness of the leveling for them as farmers. There has been

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no systematic attempt to explain to the farmers the technical advantages of the proposed system, nor have individual farmers been told how the scheme would affect their holdings. In the 17 September meeting and before, these farmers compared their lands and crops with Bolan government farm and other "developed" areas of the Helmand, and found their own production best. The Bolan government farm comparison should probably be considered unfair since it is an experiment station, and is generally not seriously farmed by the government officials in charge. Generally, the 1970 Farm Economic Survey supports the farmers' views; the Shamalan is one of the most productive areas in the Helmand Valley. They further suggested that the money and development activity be diverted to the Seraj area, the downhill or eastern side of the Shamalan canal, or even the Khalaj area, areas they define as in need of development. But not their own land.

With the leveling activity they expect to sustain considerable crop loss and damage due to the timing of the work as it relates to planting season. They expect to realize a loss of production (fertility) from the shifting of top soil in the process of leveling. They still believe that houses, vineyards and orchards will probably be leveled although this is no longer part of the plan except where it is absolutely necessary. They do not believe they will be paid for their losses, and point out that nothing in the present delays in payment for canal right-of-way land indicates that they may be mistaken. In the rather heated Sunday, 17 September, meeting one farmer stated, after having it explained to him that the law spells out the right to payment, that while the law will compensate him for his losses, the individual responsible for payment would not. This is a rather neutral paraphrase of the original statement. A second farmer suggested that the Government would generate farmer debts to the project in amounts equal to proposed compensation, i. e., no compensation would be paid. There was one apparent accusation of the need for bribery to receive compensation. In short, these landowners believe they will sustain the loss resulting from the project with no real advantage to come of it. There is a general lack of confidence in government motivations and officials. Specifically, they feel they will be required to bribe members of the Land Committee to get what they see as rightfully theirs from the start. In a private conversation, one landowner suggested that the Government keep all its money, the farmers were not asking for it, and the farmers could keep their land in its present condition.

There are numerous doubts about whether their land will actually be returned to them after leveling. This stems from past events in other areas of the Helmand (e. g., land development near Darweshan) and also from recent discussions of the loss of various amounts of unregistered, untaxed land presently being used, as defined in the decree. Apparently in some cases, farmers have gradually edged over into plots of land belonging to the Government. In other cases, there are differences

between amounts of land recorded by the cadastral survey and the amounts upon which taxes are being paid. They will lose the use of all or part of such lands. Basically there is no trust of government officials' statements or motivations which is apparently supported by past experience. One individual suggested, not in the meeting, that guarantees of return should be issued on land to be leveled, before leveling, and that there should be foreign involvement in the process of payment for damages. He further suggested that past debts for right-of-way should be paid before further work is allowed. I agreed with him.

The question of traditional orientations blocking the process of land consolidation which was expected has never come up as an issue. No one in the project is yet in a position to discuss with the farmers the exact details of how each will be affected. The design activities have been hamstrung by delays in getting basic data from the HAVA Engineering Section, who were to do the necessary field survey work, and apparently by a rather uncooperative Cadastral Survey Office that was to furnish accurate landholding records. Statements of explanation of the project remain at a rather generalized level and it is not certain that what has been said about consolidation has established any real understanding among the farmers.

Government power: The basic stand as outlined above is that they do not want land leveling. On top of this, however, come statements that they know if the Government wants to force the issue, they, the farmers, are powerless. In the 17 September meeting, as before, they were told that whether they agree or not, the land leveling would begin. As a further example, the farmers pointed out that while they are supposed to be paid for losses, except for three men, nothing has been paid and they, the farmers, are helpless to do anything about it. The law, the Shamalan Decree, the National Assembly and King were all noted in the meeting as the base support upon which the project is to be completed.

Of the three men who have received payment, one was paid more than the value of his corn crop last September 1971, as an incentive to cooperate with the project when construction began (discussed on page 4). One man, an employee of HACU, was paid for some trees when the new canal was cut through his orchard. The third man also received payment for a few destroyed trees, mulberry, on the right-of-way but the details are unknown. There has been other damage to vineyards and orchards unpaid. As of November 10, 1972 no one has received payment for land taken by the canal-right-of-way although there have been continuous promises made to the farmers. Not only have the farmers not been paid for their land, they have not been paid for the loss of crops from this land in some cases for more than a year. None of this adds to the already questionable credibility of HAVA vis-a-vis the farmers.

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Although the point was not raised in the Sunday, September 17, meeting, one Khan in the field indicated to me that the line of public information presented to him in recent times was that this project was an American project out of the hands of HAVA who was being forced to carry out land leveling. We must admit that there is an element of truth in this statement, although I am not sure it has a place in a public information effort.

To return to the point of government power versus the farmers, in this context some of the farmers have stated a passive agreement but this should not be interpreted as a cooperative agreement based on any recognition of the need for leveling, as some of our counterparts are presenting it. In none of my numerous discussions in this area has there been the slightest hint of such recognition. While it may be satisfying to accept the more positive interpretation, I have found no basis for it in the field.

Mr. Niyamati, in charge of right-of-way procurement and member of the Land Committee, has consistently stated that as individuals these farmers support the project but as a group they do not. I suggest that as individuals it would be possible to get some of these men to verbally agree to the project, perhaps under pressure, but as a group the negative view is supported. As individuals and as a group, I found that they do not see any use of the project and, as outlined, they are afraid of its results.

Indigenous political factors: One tactical move used in the past by the project to forward its goals was to establish a toehold in an area, after which further resistance by the farmers is pointless. The opening of the construction of the bypass and new lateral on Plot 202 is the case in point. The owner, who is generally not an uncooperative man, was pressured and paid handsomely for a partially lost corn crop last year when the work began. Unfortunately he was blamed for his cooperation with the Government by his neighbors. His position in the community from the start was rather marginal since he had bought land in this area, not being a native, nor of the dominant Baraksai tribe. The project placed him in a difficult position vis-a-vis his neighbors with whom he must live. Since the lateral construction, he has started building a house-compound on the edge of his plot of land with the idea of moving out of the village of Basharan where he presently lives. On a slightly larger scale, the owners of the first 150-200 acres see themselves being put in a similar uncomfortable position relative to the farmers farther down the Valley. Based on statements made individually and at the Sunday meeting it seems likely that there is already some pressure not to allow land leveling to begin in their area. To open, the rhetorical question was asked by the farmers on Sunday if all the Shamalan was to be leveled or only their land. The question to follow was, since all the area is to be developed, why are not representatives from all the areas of the Shamalan present in establishing

the agreement. The statement was made that if all the areas to be developed agree, then they will agree. If there is not total agreement, then land leveling cannot begin. The Government response to this was that whether they agree or not, the project will level the land. The village response to this was: If the Government is to force land leveling, then why the meeting? They should not be talked to about it but it should simply be done. There were further statements to the effect that if the land belonged to them, they should agree before it is done. At a number of points in these exchanges, the tone was heated.

One interpretation of this line of discussion would be in the political sphere. They do not want to be used as a starting point for an unpopular development for the project to gain momentum enough to push through other areas that do not want it. They will be blamed for something they did not want in the first place. I get the impression that we (AID) want to accept village passive acceptance (sometimes presented to us as desire) as a cooperative attitude, which, from all indications I can uncover (implied and expressed), it is not.

This 17 September meeting ended with the statement that these farmers would themselves canvass the landowners of the Shamalan on support, or lack of it, for the project. As the second meeting proved, this was basically a process of consolidating the front of larger landowners of the Shamalan against the project. Rather than having waited for the farmers to make these consolidating efforts, the project, long ago, should have attempted a similar action but in an effort to gain support. This approach of attempting to consolidate local elements (even some elements that locally may be in conflict) against an outside force is a traditional political mechanism found, at least, consistently throughout the Muslim world.

Other aspects of the Sunday meeting - 17 September 1972: The meeting was originally scheduled for Sunday at HAVA at 4:00 P.M. Landowners as far away as Basharan and Babaji were ordered to attend via letter delivered by the police. The location of the meeting was changed as was the time, to 4:30. The villagers were on the spot by 3:00. The meeting opened around 5:00, after Mr. Niyamati, the chief speaker, sent a note that he could not be present due to illness. The Mustifi, the tax officer, also a member of the Land Committee, sent for him. Among others on the committee, it seems useful to note some of the more negative characteristics of three members as these likely affect Government-village relations. This may appear as trivia but in the context of attempted cooperation on an unpopular project, it may be important. The Mustifi is a Farsi speaker only and carried on conversations during the meeting. He was not working with a translator. During the meeting, Mr. Niyamati, who is from Nangahar, was informed on three occasions that his Pushto was not the same as theirs (the farmers') and that he should say no more. A third member was

apparently an ex-army officer stationed in the area several years before, now with HAVA Land Settlement, who was highly respected as an enforcer of the law, authority. None of these men are noted locally for their reputations of honesty. I suggest that the make-up of a committee with the duty of settling relations between farmers and the project should be of a more local nature. I doubt that the Land Committee has a job description of attempting to convince farmers to cooperate with the project. Given the composition of the committee, they may be doing more harm to the project than good.

The last point of significance in the gathering of useful information relative to project developments, before the meeting started the Mustafi asked what the two foreigners, Mr. Long and myself, were doing at the meeting, and said that my interpreter was not to translate the details of the exchanges with the villagers. During the meeting, a second member of the committee, Mr. Niyamati, emphasized the need for him not to translate the details. On the basis of this interference with my observations of the events associated with the farmers' reactions to the project, Mr. Levintow and myself had a meeting with Mr. Assifi and submitted an official memo to him spelling out my role as AID observer, requesting cooperation in these observations and to allow me to attend the Land Committee meetings as an official observer. I suggest that the official rejection of this request in mid-October by Mr. Assifi, at the time Acting President of HAVA, on the basis that the decree made no allowances for a foreign observer, supports my earlier statements that HAVA officials have continuously either misinformed AID on villager-project relations to their own advantage, or have made other attempts to insure that AID officials have remained uninformed about such events. The events at the meetings with villagers and villager informant statements are in complete contradiction to HAVA official statements. Relative to this, it seems more and more apparent, as I have emphasized in previous memos, that we should pay at least as much attention to the social aspects of the project as we do to the technical aspects. And we cannot depend on our counterparts to keep us informed. There is much oral support of this idea in meetings but little actual direct involvement. A perfectly constructed system of ditches and drains do not necessarily produce an effective project.

The 27 September meeting: I was informed by the villagers that there were delays in calling a second meeting because of difficulties of contacting some of the larger landowners who were away. During the time between the meetings there was continual activity and discussion of the farmers in the tea houses of Lashkar Qah. During the morning of the 27th and afternoon at the mosque, the groupings were much larger than usual.

The Land Committee apparently has daily meetings after

regular working hours (after 3:30 until recently, now 4:30). This arrangement is probably necessary since all members had other full time jobs to fill. This alone probably limits the effectiveness of the activity of this committee.

At about 4:30 a large group of landowners went to the Land Committee meeting. I did not attend but was informed later of statements made. We can only guess at the tone of the meeting.

Basically, the answer was that they (the farmers) do not want the land leveling project and that they will not cooperate with it. They said they now have the support of the entire Valley behind them. They did not want to discuss this any further with the committee but would like to meet with the Governor on his return, mainly, as noted above, to learn from him who among the landowners had previously accepted the project. If the project was to be forced, then they would await this meeting in the fields, meaning a confrontation.

The group of farmers apparently decided that they would petition the King on the issue of leveling. The Mastifi suggested that the petition be channeled through his office. The farmers rejected this, saying that a few of them would personally go to Kabul.

Of internal political interest, it was reported by the villagers and by Mr. Miyazaki that the Mastifi made statements in the meeting to the effect that the project was not in the best interests of the farmers and that they probably should not agree to it. HAVA and HACU officials are now stating that he is working against the project and should be stopped or eliminated, a point to be taken up with the Governor on his return.

With all the negative aspects of this meeting, however, there were still statements coming from the farmers of the need for written guarantees that their land would be returned and payment in advance (apparently a new twist) for property to be destroyed. I think they realize that if the Government forces, the project will go through even in the face of a confrontation. They remain basically farmers and do not want to lose their land or property. And the project remains a threat in their minds.

Conclusions: An awareness of the socio-political implications of our projects is of major importance in terms of the implementation and evaluation of our overall performance and impact. While we appear to be aware of this important aspect, we rarely do anything to make it an integral part of our projects. While we have elaborate systems for the technical monitoring of construction activities we rarely are interested in the socio-political monitoring of project-people relations upon which, in the final analysis, a successful project (an efficient operating system) rests.

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There is no reason to assume that our counterparts will be any more efficient at managing a public information program than they are at maintaining a piece of equipment. Presently this aspect remains fully in their hands.

After 6-8 weeks of periodic contacts with farmers in the North Shanalan with whom we have been in periodic contact over the past year and a half, I find the farmers' attitudes toward the Shanalan Land Development project little changed from what it was a year ago. They are more aware of what the project involves and realize the construction activity is upon them, in the final stages of preparation, none of which has done anything to sell the scheme to them. In short, they do not see the usefulness of leveling but see it as disruptive and economically negative to their farming system. They would prefer it to occur somewhere else. They realize, because it has been impressed upon them, that they are for the most part powerless to stop the process. They also realize that they are being used politically as the starting point for construction. There are statements being presented that represent the project as an American project, out of the hands of HAVA. I find few of these developments in the better interests of USAID. Given the limitations of time and the line of public information already started, unfortunately it is too late to institute any sort of an effective public information program for the first 200 acres outside of attempting to monitor and redirect project implementation and payment for past losses in an attempt to establish some level of credibility. This will mean close watch on land payments, field boundaries, destruction of property and repayment, and quick response of field technicians in getting the fields back into production with minimum delays. This involves not only construction technicians but probably more important those from agriculture in irrigation, soils and water management.

To date the meetings between officials and the farmers have been at a very generalized level. It is not certain that even at this most general level the farmers understand or believe what they are being told. Until the farmers can be given some specific information about their particular pieces of land, preferably explained on the spot using markers, etc., we should not expect to get even passive cooperation. The need for this sort of information being made available is of long standing. It must be presented considerably before the construction equipment appears on the scene. Given the content of recent meetings it is approaching a point where the farmers may stop listening.

I think more joint HAVA, HAVR and HAGU meetings specifically on the social aspects of our project would be useful. I do not see that wide distribution of this memo among our counterparts would serve any constructive purpose.

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Postscript:

The events of the meeting of 23 October 1972 between the Governor and his staff, and the U.S. Ambassador, Dr. Hannah and USAID/A management may be interpreted as an outgrowth of the situation outlined above. The Governor stated that the costs of the project have increased to the point where land development (leveling and consolidation) is uneconomical, that he could no longer expect farmer support for the project. The technical details of the increased costs of the project are so complex that the figures presented (said to have been compiled in 2-3 days) could not be refuted in the meeting. Several weeks will be necessary for BuRec to develop a reliable estimate of increased costs. The main issues of the meeting were effectively confused by the tactic. The between-crop period (between corn harvest and wheat planting), when land development was scheduled for the first 150-200 acres at the north end of the Shantalan, has been lost for this year.

The Governor has returned to his original proposal of reorienting the project (a view that has periodically re-emerged over the past one and a half years), an emphasis on completing the new canal and perhaps some leveling to begin at the south end of the project area where there are high rates of government land. This land development could not begin before next summer, if then, due to the necessary preparatory field surveys. These are the same type surveys that have faced delays at the north end because of lack of transport, personnel and complete cadastral records.

As noted, I have found no indication that the Governor ever had farmer support for land development. There has been consistent verbal opposition. The fact that there has never been any systematic attempt to inform the farmers about the project or its goals and methods suggests that perhaps HAVA has never seriously planned to implement the land development aspects of the project. The detail of increased costs is not the real issue. I am not certain that farmer opposition is the real issue, either. I question the original intentions of HAVA officials to carry out the proposed plan as defined in the loan agreement. Certainly the socio-political opposition to the project by the farmers is a major barrier which has not been squarely faced.

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