

**OPIUM POPPY CULTIVATION  
CENTRAL HELMAND, AFGHANISTAN:  
A CASE STUDY IN BAD PROGRAM MANAGEMENT**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Since at least Max Weber, the social sciences have been examining the function and dysfunctions of bureaucracies and bureaucrats. This paper examines a situation still in process: the annual increase of opium poppy cultivation, the deterioration of regional security, the breakdown of local government, the rampant growth of corruption, and the disillusionment of the rural population of central Helmand province, Afghanistan. A large number of organizations, agencies, bureaucracies, and bureaucrats, most of whom have little knowledge of the social context with which they must work have been involved in this process. There are other factors. Effective bureaucracies function on the basis of consistency and there is little consistency in this situation. The near-chaos conditions over the past five years have included:

- a near complete turn over of central and local government personnel and functions with the fall of the Taliban, and the continuing regional conflict;
- the rushed establishment of teams from the various national and international agencies interested in the narcotics traffic and the reconstruction effort;
- the often times rushed and short term nature of the bureaucratic assignments of individuals within these organizations; the number of organizations involved;
- the territorial disputes [turf issues] and the limited communications and coordination between these organizations. <sup>1</sup>

The result: confusion and bad program management of the anti-narcotics and reconstruction activities in the central Helmand region of Afghanistan...one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country.

This paper examines this situation from the point of view of a long term and still part-time participant, with additional interpretations from the farmers and local residents. Clearly the story is not complete. I have not been privy to most internal, policy-making meetings. As a former USAID Research and Evaluation Officer, this paper contains several key assumptions and value judgments on what needs or needed to be done...based on my own long personal experience working in Afghanistan and other nearby countries in the Region.

## **THE AREA**

Helmand province is the largest province (62,337 sq. km) in Afghanistan equaling ten percent of the country. While the economy is based on agriculture, only 2.5% of the province is irrigated, and agriculture

generally is not possible without irrigation. Most of the province is desert with an annual rainfall averaging less than 4 inches.

Geographically, the province is rocky foothills in the north, with limited water sources. Most water is from *karez* systems that bring ground water to the surface through gravity flow tunneling.<sup>2</sup> The southern two thirds of the province is relatively flat, clay desert with more drifting sand to the south and east. The Helmand River flows from north to south through the middle of the province (see map). The Helmand River represents some 40% of Afghanistan's surface water coming from snow melt in the mountainous center of the country. In the southern part of the province, habitation is along the narrow flood plain and the river is tapped for irrigation from small, locally built intakes. But the central part of the province is irrigated by the largest irrigation system in the country. Beginning in 1946, the system was built over more than three decades with Afghan and US funding. The contract firm Morrison-Knutsen Construction Company of Boise, Idaho (Morrison-Knutsen Afghanistan, MKA) was the primary contractor until 1958, followed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Soil Conservation Service. This system includes the Kajakai storage dam that maintains a near-constant year round flow of water for irrigation. As a result, the farmers in central Helmand are double-cropping, cash crop farmers. The Kajakai dam is also an electric power source for the region, although presently shut down. \_\_\_\_\_

The area of focus for this paper is the three central Helmand districts of Nad-i-Ali, Marja and Shamalan (Nawa), all irrigated off the Boghra Canal. This canal is 94 kilometers long with a capacity of 70 cubic meters per second. The three districts totaled 56,281 hectares of irrigated land in 1990<sup>3</sup>. But this figure is understated as it represents the period between the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban, a period of anarchy, before the return of many of the refugees from Pakistan and Iran, and before rehabilitation work was started on the irrigation system.

Nad-i-Ali and Marja were uncultivated areas of flat clay desert escarpment before the construction of the Boghra canal. Its construction resulted in a massive land settlement program originally aimed at settling sheep herding nomads. Shamalan was flood plain that had been farmed for centuries off small locally built intakes. A branch of the Boghra Canal, the Shamalan Canal, was constructed through the area increasing the available water supply, improving water distribution and bringing new lands under irrigation<sup>4</sup>.

## THE PEOPLE

In the year 2000 an estimated 1.07 million people lived in Helmand province of which 229,133 lived in the three targeted districts<sup>5</sup>. But these figures are also dated. They represent the period before the return of many of the refugees from Pakistan and Iran. A more recent local guesstimate is that some 460,000 people reside in the area. While the real numbers are an unknown at present, the population may have effectively doubled with the return of the refugees.

Helmand province rests in the Pashtun tribal belt that extends down the eastern border and across southern Afghanistan, so most of the people are Pashtun, the largest ethnic group in the country. The earlier settlement program in the 1950s and 1960s in central Helmand brought to the area small elements from virtually every ethnic group found in the country. In addition, the southern regions of Helmand province, bordering the Pakistan province of Baluchistan, are indigenous Baluch with a few villages of Brahui<sup>6</sup>.

The population of both Nad-i-Ali and Marja are products of the settlement program started in the 1950s and are 80-90% Pashtun. The population of Shamalan is mainly indigenous Pashtun with pockets of settlers from the 1970s. Between 1953 and 1973, more than 5,000 farm families were settled in the province. In an accelerated settlement program between 1973 and 1978, over 4,000 more farm families of mixed ethnicity were settled in the province<sup>7</sup>.

The Afghan opium poppy cultivating farmer is commonly pictured in the media as a poor, near-subsistence level farmer who has shifted from wheat to opium poppy to support his family and improve his life. But to generalize about Afghan farmers is to be wrong. Central Helmand farmers have not been near-subsistence level farmers since the construction of the new irrigation system. They are relatively wealthy, double-cropping, cash crop farmers, many with their own cars and the highest concentration of tractors in the country. Oxen are a rare sight in this central region with plowing being contracted out by non-tractor

owners. In these record setting opium poppy cultivation years, Helmand commonly produces between 40% and 56% of the country's opium. In 2002, Nad-i-Ali alone produced 8% of the country's opium<sup>8</sup>.

## **THE CROPS**

Traditionally, the primary crops in Helmand were wheat followed by corn, mung bean and some vegetables. This began to change somewhat in the 1960s with the development of the extension service, the construction of a government cotton gin and better marketing. Although watermelon and vegetables developed as cash crops, with the introduction of high yield varieties of wheat in the early 1970s combined with a drought in other areas of the country, wheat maintained its popularity.

Before the 1979 Soviet occupation, the Afghan and U.S. governments and the farmers of central Helmand had official agreements and narcotics were generally not cultivated in the U.S.-supported irrigation system. But opium was common in the foothill districts of Musa Kala, Sanguine and Nausad under all previous governments.

Cotton became one of the primary cash crops for central Helmand after the mid-1960s when the British built the Lashkar Gah cotton gin accompanied by an extension service. Cotton seed had always been given to the farmers free of charge but it was not a popular crop. The U.S. development aid program in the region could not be involved with the cotton industry because of the U.S. cotton lobby. On the side, however, in the early 1970s an enterprising USAID agriculture technician on loan from the Texas Agricultural Extension Service worked with some of the tractor owners to ridge and row-plant cotton and increase production. Once the results were understood, other farmers began to make the ridges and row plant the cotton by hand.

Initially, cotton prices paid to the farmers were low and the government was taking more than its share of the profits. Thus the crop was not popular with the farmers. The settler population was forced to plant a percentage of their land in cotton. This changed after the 1973 coup when the government began to pay

more for cotton and established a credit system for fertilizer, repayable at harvest time. The farmers also received some of the gin's by-products, depending on the quantity of cotton brought in: cotton seed cooking oil, soap and seed cake. The British built a second cotton gin in Girishk to keep up with production, completed soon after the communist coup and just before the Soviet invasion and the collapse of the economy. For these reasons the international cotton market ended for the Afghans and opium cultivation spread into the productive region of central Helmand. The Girishk cotton gin functioned for two seasons ending when the Mujahaddin took out the power lines.

Before the Soviet invasion, vegetables were cultivated on a small scale primarily for home consumption. There was a small community of Turkmen settlers who cultivated vegetables commercially for the local urban market in Lashkar Gah. Watermelon was introduced into the area in the 1960s and several varieties of melon were cultivated commercially<sup>9</sup>.

Vegetables and watermelons have developed rapidly as major cash crops since the fall to the Taliban. One NGO brought in a fresh supply of Texas watermelon seed in 1999 resulting in a production boom but the rough roads and limited help with marketing have hampered transport and marketing. The new asphalt road from Lashkar Gah to the main highway will help the movement of produce. And there is a plan for a new wholesale market structure in Lashkar Gah to keep the produce out of direct sun during the hot season when it goes above 100degrees F. by mid-May.

Vegetable production also has increased rapidly with the help of an NGO focused on recently introduced but easily shipped vegetables like okra. As regional incomes increased, the local demand for more varieties of vegetables has also increased. Early vegetables were being imported from Pakistan, Iran and the province of Farah. Many local farmers have now moved into the early vegetable market with the introduction of local versions of greenhouses: plastic sheeting spread over sticks in their fields. But early vegetables continue to be imported for the expanding local markets. And some of the same types of vegetables are exported a few weeks later. But with all this produce, the farmers need professional help with marketing. It has been common that farmers produce a bumper crop of top quality vegetables, e.g., cauliflower, only to find very limited markets and low prices.

Peanuts as a cash crop were introduced into the area sometime during or soon after the Soviet occupation. Presently they are being cultivated primarily in one section of Nad-i-Ali, Nakilabad, and are planted at the same time as cotton, mid-March. The farmers say that peanuts can compete with opium poppy for profit because it does not take the massive hand labor of poppy cultivation, or fertilizer. Most of these farmers have added sand to their fields to lighten the soils and increase production. But the primary markets are in Pakistan and Iran. With the recent escalation of fighting along the Pakistan border in the tribal areas, the buyers have stopped coming. In order to avoid Pakistani customs checkpoints, the transport route has been through North Waziristan, a tribal area. Buyers still come from Herat for export to Iran, but in reduced numbers. One NGO set up a peanut press near Kandahar, employing mostly returned refugees to hand-shell the nuts, to produce cooking oil. This helped the Helmand peanut market but recently has been affected by the increased violence in the area.

#### **AFTER THE SOVIET OCCUPATION AND THE PERIOD OF ANARCHY**

Both the U.S. and the UN were monitoring the spread of opium poppy cultivation in central Helmand and Afghanistan as the Soviets withdrew from the country in 1988-89. The U.S. was unsuccessfully negotiating to pay off some of the Mujahaddin commanders (tribal leaders) in Helmand to end poppy cultivation at that time. Opium poppy cultivation continued.

Soon after the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s, an enterprising U.S. NGO began to repair one of the main roads in the province. By the crop year of September 1998-99, the International Narcotics Matters (INM) a State Department Narcotics agency with development resources, funded start-up rehabilitation work on the Boghra Canal, repairing the many damaged control gates and structures and de-silting the most troubled segments of the canal. But by this time the NGO regional representative had rotated out. His replacement stated an open dislike for the Taliban and, when possible, did not involve them in project planning or discussions. This was a pattern common among the NGOs and other development groups at the time. It was a left over from the period of Soviet occupation and communist rule, and the many cross-border projects. This was not lost on the local Taliban government. They frequently complained about the

NGOs and other foreign agencies not including them in the planning and implementation of projects focused on government owned facilities, e.g., central Helmand irrigation system.

This work on the Boghra Canal with agreement not to plant opium was initiated by a signed document with several of the local tribal leaders. However, the Taliban government, and specifically the governor, had not been involved in the discussions and had not signed off on the agreement. And the farmers already had planted a bumper crop of opium poppy. The crop was already planted and maturing as the project work season started in December. According to the farmers, the Taliban collected ten percent of the raw opium as tax on the crop, a pattern that according to some reports may be continuing today. Throughout the project work season, project staff stressed to the farmers and the Taliban liaison officers the negative relationship between rehabilitation funding and continued opium poppy cultivation. The Taliban liaison called several meetings with the farmers and their leaders and explained the relationship during the project work period. Project staff warned the Governor and Taliban liaison that the opium poppy crop would kill the project. But they took no action. It would have been politically and economically difficult to eliminate the poppy crop at that late date.

In virtually all the meetings with central Helmand farmers since the spring of 1997 on reconstruction activities as they relate to the elimination of opium poppy cultivation, there have been a series of points that the farmers have stressed. And all such meetings have always tied reconstruction activities to the elimination of opium poppy cultivation. Several common themes have characterized these meetings:

- Opium poppy is an evil crop with a reliable market. The farmers understood that poppy will be eliminated with the coming of a stable government. But they would need help with the shift back to legal crops.
- Rehabilitation work needs to be done on the irrigation system to return it to its pre-Soviet condition if the traditional cash crops are to return – more available irrigation water.
- The farm roads need major work to allow for easy transport of people and produce.



- Most of this work can and should be done by hand labor using the large local and traditional migratory labor force available in the area during the fall, winter and spring work seasons.
- The price of cotton should be increased to help make up for the high prices of fertilizer.

The rehabilitation work on the Boghra Canal primarily used hand labor, employing more than 3,000 men per day at the completion of that season's work.

The recruitment and organization of this large work force used the traditional system of watermasters. Each district, e.g., Nad-i-Ali, has a chief watermaster (*mirab*<sup>1</sup>) who is selected by and reports to the central irrigation system authority (Helmand Arghandab Valley Authority or HAVA), the government. He controls the water distribution out of the main canal. Each ditch off the main canal has a [sub] watermaster selected by the farmers who receive the water and is normally also one of the landowners along the ditch. There are more than 50 of these *mirabs* in Nad-i-Ali alone. The farmers along the ditch are responsible to maintain and repair their section of each irrigation ditch under the supervision of their *mirab*. He has the traditional authority to call out members of each household to work on their ditch. This is a traditional system found all over Afghanistan.

For this project, the chief *mirab* was contacted to identify, with his staff, the most problematic sections of the canal that needed de-silting or repair. Then the ditch-*mirabs* nearest the work areas were requested to have 100 men at the site the following day. For this work, labor was paid at the going rates for hand labor. The laborers were furnished with picks, shovels and wheelbarrows by the project. Maintenance and repair of the main canals and drains in the region are normally the responsibility of the government. And the farmers do not pay for the water.

INM staff could not travel to Afghanistan after the US bombing of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan in August of 1998. And the NGO representative did not inform INM of the coming opium poppy harvest. When the work season ended with a record harvest of opium, all US funding stopped.

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After this record setting harvest, under international pressure, and some say because of the drop in the price of raw opium, Mullah Omer, the Taliban leader, banned the cultivation of opium poppy as un-Islamic in July 1999, well before the fall planting season. The response in at least central Helmand was virtually complete and without violence. The farmers did not plant poppy for the crop season 1999–2000.

## **AFTER THE FALL OF THE TALIBAN**

The Taliban who held most of the key positions of government in Helmand were gone by the month of November 2001. They stayed at home in Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, they went back to their villages in the region, or they returned to their homes in other Pashtun provinces. Some went to Pakistan. In late 2001, the Girishk cotton gin was bombed to rubble by the US as a suspected Taliban hideout. In the chaos and uncertainties connected with the change of governments, many of Helmand's farmers took a gamble and again planted opium poppy. There was a reduction from 44,552 hectares planted in the record setting year of 1999 to 29,950 hectares planted in 2001 but Helmand was still the number one producing province in the country, with 38% of the nation's opium<sup>10</sup>.

Faced with a maturing bumper crop of poppy in the spring of 2002, the British decided to attempt an eradication-for-pay project. The project was bureaucratically delayed through lack of funding until the poppies were beginning to bloom, near harvest time in April. Because of security concerns, the British agreed to allow the field activities to be all Afghan with no field monitoring. The British team remained in a heavily guarded hotel in Lashkar Gah and had meetings with their Afghan counterparts every morning. The farmers were to receive chits from the eradication teams at the time the fields were plowed and be paid by HAVA staff in Lashkar Gah. All the farmers were told to stop irrigating their fields because they would be reimbursed for their crop. Some farmers began to score their plants and collect opium gum before the arrival of the eradication teams. Some farmers had their fields plowed under and received chits and payment. Some farmers and people without land received chits and payment for fields not plowed. Some farmers lost their fields of mature poppy because they had stopped irrigating and the eradication teams never came. The area was large. The project was late starting, rushed, badly organized and not

monitored. Much funding was “lost” and the project can effectively be considered a failure. All the farmers clearly understood the project’s failure.

In the spring of 2002 a U.S.-funded NGO started a Cotton and Alternative Crops Project (CACP)... alternative to opium poppy.

Under the Taliban, the marketing of Afghan cotton was slow. The international markets had been lost during the Soviet occupation, the Taliban knew nothing of international marketing, and the international community generally offered neither help nor assistance to this ineffective religious-based government made up mostly of traditionally educated *mullahs*. The Taliban gave farmers chits for their cotton to be paid after its sale on the “international” market. This market was primarily Pakistani buyers purchasing at bargain prices. After 9/11 and the U.S. invasion, the farmers stopped bringing cotton to the gin. Those with chits from the Taliban worried they would never be paid. And the level of seed being picked up by farmers for planting was very low. In mid-May, the CACP began to pay off the Taliban chits. This was perhaps the most significant positive event for the cotton industry in Helmand since the Soviet invasion. Farmers began again to bring cotton to the gin and obtain new seed for late planting. The project air-freighted in badly needed spare parts for the cotton gin equipment, the first spare parts in more than 20 years. The farmers were beginning to regain confidence in cotton as a cash crop and in the new government...but not for long.

All foreign support for the cotton gin ended at the time of an apparent disagreement between an influential foreign commodities broker, who was associated with the project, and an Afghan buyer over who could bid on the cotton. Various official reasons given for this loss of interest included:

- U.S. funds could not be used to support the cotton industry;
- the cotton industry must be privatized before any outside help could be expected;
- cotton required too much irrigation water compared with wheat;

Even the British, who built the cotton gins, have shown no interest nor offered any help. And the Afghan government has kept the cotton price to the farmers low...at least according to the farmers. In 2004, the government increased the price to 17 Afs. per kilo and began to distribute bags of fertilizer with the seed as an incentive, depending on the amount of cotton the farmer had brought in. And then, in mid-buying season, the government dropped the price back to the previous year's price of 14 Afs. per kilo. This represents an unreliable market to the farmers. The result was that between the 2004 buying season and the 2005 buying season there was a drop in cotton sold to the gin of 36% or 3,100 metric tons: from 8,500 to 5,400 metric tons. While the acreage in cotton was falling, a bumper crop of opium poppy was being planted. This year, in the context of two consecutive record-setting opium poppy seasons, the government price was increased from 14 to 15 Afs. per kilo (not much of an increase) and the farmers have sold only 1,040 metric tons of cotton to the gin, the lowest quantity since the period of anarchy before the Taliban in 1994. This represents a substantial decline of some 87% in production over a 3 year period. The central Helmand districts are the primary producers of both cotton and poppy in Helmand and their production appears to be closely linked. This is an important point, frequently stated by the farmers, and consistently ignored by the narcotics and development aid agencies.

## **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

Since the fall of the Taliban and the selection/election of the interim government, there have been numerous donor conferences beginning with Tokyo in January 2002, and most recently in Berlin in January 2007. Up to 60 countries and agencies have attended these conferences and some \$20 billion have been pledged for civilian reconstruction of the country between 2002 and 2010. The results of these conferences are widely reported and became common knowledge even at the rural levels in Helmand. Initially, the expectations of quick and major reconstruction work were high, especially in areas like central Helmand where the farmers and their parents and grandparents had had long and positive relationships with foreigners and their development programs. And some quick start up projects did happen, as noted below. But the funds generally have been slow in coming, contract teams and projects have been slow in starting, and many projects are not focused on farmers' priorities. The most common complaints from both

urban and rural Afghans are that the funds are being spent on: expensive foreign advisors who continue to make surveys on what needs to be done rather than field obvious, needed projects, renting and setting up expensive project offices and quarters, and purchasing many large, expensive vehicles. All of which tend to be true. There is disillusionment and disappointment among much of the rural population at least in central Helmand.

## **DELAYS AND INCONSISTANCIES**

The tactics and goals of the reconstruction and poppy eradication program in central Helmand were or should have been:

- Focus first on the districts that are the centers of opium poppy cultivation, with the most developed land and irrigation system, where project impact would be the greatest (Central Helmand).
- Local government initiates a dialogue with farmers about issues and agrees on priorities for development work and the elimination of opium poppy cultivation. All project personnel participate in this dialogue.
- All project funding focuses on the end result of eliminating opium poppy cultivation while rehabilitating the irrigation systems and the infrastructure that supports it.
- The projects put as many hand laborers to work as can be managed effectively and heavy equipment is used only on work that hand labor cannot accomplish. [Employment generation – particularly for unskilled laborers -- should be one of the donors' highest priorities.]
- To the highest extent possible, project staff and contractors directly involved in the work should be local.

- The top quality rehab work must be well managed, monitored, and not develop into a WPA style “make work” activity.

From the start of the U.S. reconstruction build up in 2002, official and contract project-oriented personnel were in short supply and assignments were short, which limited the accumulation of experience, knowledge and interest. After the fall of the Taliban and as the U.S. embassy began to build up the American program, and contract companies began winning project contracts, the demand for warm bodies was urgent. Several key posts were filled as short term, temporary duty assignments by people with limited knowledge or interest in Afghanistan’s development needs. There were also a few outstanding exceptions. Since Afghanistan is and was a danger-pay assignment, a one-year appointment was common for both embassy and contractors. With this continuous turn over and the growing limitations on travel outside the embassy compound (for official staff) project monitoring and management were and remain limited.

Farmers’ priorities and other Afghan personnel views were and still are frequently ignored. Official and contract personnel were drawn in from many parts of the world and as happens in many other development missions, ideas for projects from other countries poured in and were experimented with.

One example of this experimentation is the construction of a cobblestone road out to an ancient ruin on the Helmand River, a tourist site during better times, some five miles from the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. While the road passes through and to a minor agricultural area, other more important farm roads in the area were ignored. The road dead-ends at this site near where two rivers converge. A team of Bolivian cobblestone workers were brought in from Bolivia to teach the Afghans this skill. One of the contractors had just recently come out of Bolivia and knew the people to bring. But cobblestone roads are also constructed in neighboring Pakistan. The process did put a large number of Afghans to work. The road was completed and new cobblestone roads are being planned. But it is a road with limited utility at this time, to an area with limited agricultural production value, in an area that gets less than 4 inches of rain a year where gravel roads would be sufficient...and much cheaper. But in this bureaucracy, one of the

evaluation measures is the level of funding a contractor can move. And this road certainly did move some funds.

By the fall planting season of 2002, USAID, with knowledgeable and experienced leadership, brought in a contract company with long experience in Afghanistan to start the Central Helmand Drainage Project.

The main and secondary drains in this area had seen no maintenance in more than 20 years. The Boghra Canal rehabilitation (de-silting) project had brought more water into the area in 1998, to the farmers delight, but drainage was important in this area of clay soils and the drains badly needed cleaning. Since the construction of the system in the 1950-60s, drainage had been a problem. Most of the projects of the 1970s were focused on drainage. Most but not all the work was designed to be done by hand labor. The operating rule was that if work could be done by hand in a reasonable time, machinery would not be used.

Keeping the very large hand-labor work force working is a very important issue for central Helmand as it is for all of rural Afghanistan. The economy is based on agriculture. There are few other jobs in the region. This means under-employment for a sizable percentage of the population. And agriculture is not mechanized except for the tractors. The region has a very large body of local farm laborers, share croppers, and seasonal migrant laborers coming in from the subsistence agricultural areas to the north. The labor intensive opium poppy crop has likely added to the migratory labor force. All infrastructure rehabilitation/opium poppy eradication projects must employ as many laborers as possible for as long as possible and the use of heavy equipment minimized.

This drainage project, too, was a combined rehabilitation and anti-narcotics project. The work was scheduled to start in Nad-i-Ali. The Governor, the district officer and their staffs made public announcements on the local radio and face-to-face meetings were held with tribal leaders. They were informed of the pending project and told that no opium poppy was to be cultivated this year.

The field team responsible for implementation of the project was made up of elements of local government, an Afghan NGO and representatives of a U.S. contract company. The participants and the

organization of labor were the same that fielded the Boghra Canal rehabilitation project under the Taliban in 1998–99. One hundred laborers were working on a mid-sized drain within 3 days of the arrival of the team. The project's opening ceremony at the work site was initiated by the Governor and his staff and covered by local radio and the VOA/Pashto Service. Within another 3 days, the government construction/maintenance unit, Helmand Construction Unit (HCU) had one of its old draglines (dating from the 1950s) working on one of the main deep drains at one of the busiest cross roads in the district and near the hand labor force, with a crowd of villagers watching. HCU had been established by MKA on their departure in the late 1950s, as a semi-government organization with the responsibility for maintaining the main Helmand irrigation systems. This was the first major drainage work the farmers had witnessed in more than 20 years.

When the US media addresses the narcotics issue in Afghanistan, the assumption is that it is just a matter of "enforcing the law". But with 15 years of communist rule combined with Soviet military occupation and anarchy, followed by 6 years of Taliban strict rule, who were in turn overthrown by yet another foreign invading army, the concept of the "rule of law" by a very distant sometimes almost nominal central government is vague. The eradication of opium poppy in central Helmand is a matter of negotiation – not a matter of the enforcement of non-existent laws. And the Governor must have something tangible with which to negotiate, such as jobs and projects<sup>11</sup>. The general understanding is that the governor must give advanced warning of coming eradication, before planting time and he must have projects to compensate the very large hand labor force needed to cultivate the crop.

Opium production in Nad-i-Ali dropped 85%. This was the result of a combination of local government and farmer dialogue, involvement and warnings, followed by eradication teams both before and after germination and a project that paid local labor the going unskilled daily wage rates, employing thousands of men to work on their own irrigation and drainage system. While Nad-i-Ali was number one in the list of most opium productive districts in the country the previous year it was not even listed for the harvest season of 2003. The system of eradication again used the indigenous system of *mirabs*. During and immediately after the planting season the eradication teams contacted the *mirabs* and told them to point out the fields that had been planted in poppy which were then plowed under. The *mirabs* were told that the team would return after germination and if any fields of poppy were found, the *mirab* would go to jail.



The *mirabs* are local men generally with land and relatives in the same area. In a place like central Helmand, among local people, there are no secret crops. The farmers were warned not to plant poppy. Some gambled and lost. There were no violent responses to the eradication.

By March the labor force grew to more than 5,000 men. Additional draglines were added and the work expanded into the neighboring district of Marja. But by mid-summer 2003, for whatever reason, a decision was made to change the US contractor. All work stopped by mid-August just as the fall planting season was approaching. The farmers warned that they would plant poppy again if there were no work. The Governor begged the donors for help. Nothing happened. While the reasons for the long delay are not clear, it takes time to negotiate a new contract and recruit field staff. The timing could not have been worse.

At this time the farmers of central Helmand organized a cotton committee and went to Kabul to request an increase in the price of cotton from the ministry. They were rebuked. Local radio continued to remind farmers that cultivation of poppy was *haram*, a sin, but the official threats like the previous year were missing. There was also an official statement over Kabul radio that opium production in Afghanistan would be eradicated over the next 10 years. Ten years could be a lifetime to Pashtun farmers. This statement coming at planting time, in effect, told them to plant poppy...and they did. Another bumper crop of opium poppy was produced during the crop year of 2003-04. And farmer confidence in government and the donors was waning.

By 2004, The US military had established a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) just outside Lashkar Gah in a fortress-type compound. The PRT concept was borrowed from Vietnam where apparently it had limited success. It is difficult for Pashtun farmers to understand that a foreign military occupational force that periodically bombs and kills your neighbors, by accident or not, is there to help you. As the French put it when they pulled many of their aid agencies out of Afghanistan after years of service during the Soviet period, anarchy and Taliban rule and war, to have the military involved in development activities blurs the lines between military and aid agencies, increasing the dangers. In Lashkar Gah, the PRT expected local leaders to come to the PRT office and apply for various projects. This put individuals in

danger of being labeled collaborators. And at least in the beginning, the process of project approval was long and complex. The U.S. military is not trained or experienced in rural development in foreign countries. In Lashkar Gah they had a USAID representative to help with the process. And the project work was usually contracted out to local organizations and NGOs. Quick action projects, like grading a road on the rare occasion of a rain, were an unknown.

By the fall planting season of 2004, a new U.S. funded contract team was in the field. Officialdom had labeled the activity the Alternative Income Project (AIP). One staff member had participated in both the 1998 Boghra canal rehab project and the 2002 drainage project. Another was an American-educated Afghan PhD whose father had worked in the area in the early days of the development forty years earlier. But most knew little or nothing about Helmand or Afghanistan. Although the project was to focus on cleaning the drainage system with a start up focus on central Helmand, there were two weeks of bureaucratic delays in going to the field, relating to meetings and signing agreements with all involved parties. Again local government began its dialogue with the farmers about no poppy cultivation this year. When all official agreements were signed, the same procedures for labor organization and recruitment were used as in 1998 and 2002. The chief *mirab* of Nad-i-Ali was contacted and he arranged to have work crews at the work sites at the lower end of the system, the same location the 2002 project had started.

The usual official mix-ups on policy then ensued. The concept of AIP was directly related to “alternative incomes” for the large regional hand labor force that would have been working in the poppy fields. Contract project management decided that project staff should not discuss the relationship between the reconstruction work and the goal of eliminating opium poppy cultivation with farmers in the region for fear that it would reduce farmer participation and turn them against the project. Apparently USAID staff agreed with this policy. This remained the project policy for several weeks. But, as noted, this dialogue between the farmers and project staff, as well as local government, had been going on since at least 1998. And it was one of the key elements in local government poppy cultivation reduction that was occurring at that time. Subsequently, the policy was dropped and it was agreed that all project participants should be involved in this dialogue.

Based on “windshield surveys” of areas in central Helmand that had been monitored for opium poppy cultivation since 1997, the reduction in poppy cultivation for the crop year 2004–05 was as dramatic as in 2002–03. However, U.N. data was not available by district for that year. Security problems were developing in the region and U.N. field workers could not field-check satellite findings.

At the time AIP was expanding, UNOPS managed to send mixed signals to the region on the importance of the use of hand labor related to opium eradication. At this time, UNOPS let a contract to an NGO to de-silt large sections of the S-10.7 lateral, an important mid-sized branch off the Shamalan Canal that irrigated much of that district. All this work was done by heavy equipment belonging to the NGO. One of the points of using hand labor and the local construction unit (HCU) was to insure that most of the development funds would remain in the local economy, and go directly to local laborers. A different Afghan NGO had written a proposal several years earlier to de-silt the entire lateral with hand labor at a fraction of the cost. But in Helmand, there were 20–25 NGOs (foreign and local), ministries, foreign donors and contract teams working on or competing on various projects in 2004. For a variety of reasons, these organizations tend not to communicate or coordinate activities with each other. Competition for projects and funding does not promote communication. The deteriorating security situation in recent months has greatly decreased the numbers of these organizations.

The AIP was expanding across the province rapidly and employed nearly 15,000 laborers by May of 2005. Then tragically, 11 Afghan project staff were shot and killed within a 12 hour period in two different locations. All project work stopped and AIP has never regained its previous level of work or influence in the region.

In hindsight, the project expanded too rapidly into some of the more marginal areas in the foothills to the north, areas that are now the centers of NATO resistance. Supervision, management and paydays for this labor force were problematical. This expansion no doubt got the attention of the anti-government elements in the region. Security was spread thin. The place of attack was not distant but they were in a more marginal area off the primary routes of transportation.

The fall planting seasons of 2005 and 2006 were not addressed with any large hand labor infrastructure reconstruction projects or strong local government dialogue with the farmers about opium poppy cultivation. There was little to negotiate. The governor was replaced twice during this deteriorating period. Less respect for local and central government and the donor community were evident. A suicide bomber blew himself up at the office gates of a U.S. - funded contractor. Today, more violence continues in both the northern and southern regions and more civilians are being killed by NATO bombings in their attempt to pacify the region so development activities can continue. The NATO forces and their tactics are more and more being compared with those of the Soviets. There is a general loss of control. The District officer of Nad-i-Ali abandoned his residential compound in Nad-i-Ali where he resided with his family back to the relative safety of Lashkar Gah.

By the end of fall planting in 2005, it was clear that the opium harvest of 2006 would be record setting. No action was taken. Because of security, major projects were not initiated. Foreign development workers mostly stayed in their fortified compounds, and U.S. government officials mostly stayed in Kabul. The British were about to take over the military occupation of the region. Bureaucratic uncertainty and inaction reigned. And then by early March 05, as the poppies were about to bloom, the decision was made to field an eradication effort. The eradication started in the more remote southern districts (Deshu and Khanashin), under the watchful eyes of foreign military security. This is not the center of major production. By the end of March the eradication teams were still in this southern area, the result of long delays, negotiations and pay-offs. Some farmers lost their fields of poppy, many did not. The poorer farmers were the primary losers. Apparently in some cases, the payments were made by groups of farmers en bloc to save their fields, paying as much as 750 Rs. (\$12.50) per *jerib*, about one half acre. This does not appear to be a large sum but given the numbers of farmers, it was a lot of money for the eradication teams to pocket.

By the time the eradication teams worked their way into central Helmand, harvesting had started and soon the eradication effort was stopped. There was virtually no violence associated with this botched effort because an acceptable solution was found for the farmers through negotiations and pay offs. Certainly the farmers assumed that the foreign military was associated with the pay offs.

Lesson: Planting season, not harvest time, is the time to eliminate opium poppy cultivation. By harvest time, landowners, farm labor and sharecroppers have too much time and money invested in the crop. Additionally, many of the farmers have taken loans from the local opium buyers in order to produce the crop.

Again, by the end of the planting season of 2006, it was clear that this year would be another record-setting year for poppy. Again no action was taken at planting time because of bureaucratic uncertainty, indecision and insecurity. There was open discussion about spraying herbicides via aircraft. But the government of Afghanistan has always rejected the idea because of potential contamination of soils and water sources. In central Helmand most of the people get their drinking water from the open ditches and drains of the irrigation system. Despite hundreds of shallow wells having been drilled in the area since the drought, ground water tends to have an alkali taste. Locals perceive running water as "pure." The several thousand sheep-herding nomads that winter camp along this system also use irrigation water. It is the source for water for all the farm animals and sheep herds. On 9 November 06, in planting season, BBC/Pashto Service announced an agreement was in place to spray the present poppy crop. The U.S. embassy repeated the statement a month later. There was a rumor in Helmand that USAID had budgeted for 500 men to become ground spraying teams. When the British were contacted in Helmand, they said there was no serious consideration of herbicide spraying. But they have budgeted for 1,000 water wells in the region. And the U.S. embassy recently added personnel with experience in herbicide spraying of coca plants in South America, including a new ambassador. Herbicide spraying may be coming next year.

Following standard government practice, it is clear that in U.S. Mission staff meetings on issues like reconstruction and poppy eradication, every interested agency will have its say. However, some, like the military, will have more influence than others. At least, State, USAID, INL, DEA, other narcotics agencies, CIA, the branches of the military, and someone from the Agriculture Department will attend and comment. Perhaps they will act like Pashtuns and search for a consensus...or perhaps not. There are and will continue to be disagreements on methods to eliminate opium poppy cultivation.

By early February 2007 a decision was made to again try to eradicate the poppy crop in Helmand by plowing. The British NATO military force is now responsible for the region. Rumor has it that the central

Helmand farmers requested the teams to again start in the south, but the eradication effort started in central Helmand, in Nad-i-Ali, with military escorts for security. To date there has been no major violence associated with this effort. And again the rumors and media reports are that the eradication teams have come to some agreement with the farmers concerning pay offs, and that the amounts have increased to 1,000–2,000 Rs. per jerib<sup>12</sup>. There is apparently no plan to go into the northern or southern districts because of security concerns.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The rehabilitation of the central Helmand irrigation system, the largest in the country, was started at the time of the Taliban with U.S. funding, and has always been carried out in conjunction with an opium poppy eradication effort. Soon after the fall of the Taliban in the spring of 2002, activities were started that focused on economic elements that were farmers' priorities: the cotton industry, the irrigation system and the roads. But since the violence of 2005, project activity has been narrowed by security. The work has been miss-timed and ineffective as it related to the opium poppy eradication effort. The combination of bureaucratic uncertainties, too many bureaucracies and agencies involved in decision making, rushed and short-term personnel assignments, contracting procedures, poorly conceived projects, not giving adequate consideration to farmer priorities and local staff input, and a breakdown of security in the region have all contributed to the inconsistent and ineffective reconstruction and poppy eradication program.

In the meantime, the farmers have lost confidence and respect for the government and the donor community. They understand that the inconsistencies in word and action reflect uncertainty, indifference and disorganization. The opium buyers continue to offer credit and a good market. Violence increases and the farmers continue to cultivate ever increasing crops of opium poppy.

Richard B. Scott - Background in Afghanistan and with Pashtuns:

USAID/Afghanistan, Research and Evaluation officer, 1971-78.

USAID/Pakistan, Project Manager, Tribal Areas Development Project 1982-84.

Pashto Service Chief, VOA, 1984-90.

USAID/DAI/Pakistan, Chief-of-Party, Kala Dhaka Area Development Project, 1990-93.

INL/MCI, Project Manager, Helmand Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, 1998.

USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002.

USAID/DAI, Officer-in-Charge, Helmand Drainage Rehabilitation Project, 2002.

USAID/Chemonics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004.

**Footnotes:**



<sup>1</sup> For a recent first-hand account of contractor frustrations working in the area see: Holly B Higgins, "The Road to Helmand", 4 Feb. 07, Washington Post.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Dupree, Afghanistan, Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 40-41. Also see: Paul W. English, "The Origin and Spread of Qanats in the Old World, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 112, No.3, June 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Development Alternatives Inc. and Earth Satellite Corp., Helmand-Arghandab Valley Irrigation System: A Change Assessment: 1973-1990, Bethesda, 1993, p.50.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the geographic features of Helmand province see: Helmand River Basin Soil and Water Survey Study Report, USAID/SCS Afghanistan, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Helmand Planning Group, Helmand Initiative: Joint Strategy Development, United Nations Development Program, Islamabad, 2000, p. 13

<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Scott, Tribal & Ethnic Groups In The Helmand Valley, Occasional Paper #21, Afghanistan Council, The Asia Society, New York, 1980, 36 pp.

<sup>7</sup> Ghulam Farouq, Socio-Economic Aspects of Land Settlement in Helmand Valley, Afghanistan, M.S. Thesis, American University of Beirut, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Helmand Planning Group, op. cit., p.20. Afghanistan: Opium Survey 2002, p. 26. Afghanistan Opium Survey 2003, p. 38, UNODCCP, Islamabad, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Frydoon Shairzai, Ghulam Farouq and Richard Scott, 1975 Farm Economic Survey of the Helmand Valley, USAID/DP, Kabul, Afghanistan.

<sup>10</sup> Afghanistan Opium Survey 2002, op.cit., pp. 28 & 34.

<sup>11</sup> See: New York Times, 23 May 06, for an exchange between State Dept and Pres. Karzai on blame for record setting opium poppy increases in 06, with Karzai pointing to the lack of Western support...(projects for negotiation). This year's crop will likely be larger. For local government and farmers views see: "Helmand Heads for Record Poppy Harvest", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, ARR No. 241, 9 Feb 07.

<sup>12</sup>

For more detail on the present situation with farmer quotes see "Afghanistan's Poppy Conundrum", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, AAR No. 245, 13 March 07.