

To: Ranjeet Singh, INL
Elisabeth Kvitashvili, USAID

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From: Dick Scott, Helmand Consultant

Subj: Helmand Follow Up: Need for a Clear Policy Statement

Greetings,

I was just wondering what the thinking is around INL and USAID on my message of last week. I received an immediate response from Shah Mahmood (Miakhel) in Kabul. He has shared the message with Ali Jalali. But no response on the content. My guess is that they will wait to see the reactions on our side.

According to my friends in Lashkar Gah, DAI has re-started some limited work in Marja on the drains with some 80 men using apparently funds left over from the past but HAFO was left out on this round, (Afghan politics) and no foreigners. Keep in mind that Afghan staff members with what ever organization are reluctant to discuss poppies with local farmers and tribal leaders on their own. They are never certain what the reaction might be among the people involved in the marketing of opium.

Cotton, peanut and mung bean harvest season is to begin next month. Some new mung bean seed was distributed in Shamalan (Nawa) this past planting season and the results are apparently not good but at this point the farmers are looking for things to complain about. The same is true with the late spraying of the wheat crop last spring after the damage was done. Many are apparently holding wheat that cannot be sold.

But the big issue will be what the cotton price is to be this fall. This is the major cash crop in this region with the established market being the government cotton gin. They associate the price with the government's (and our) support of the economy, which becomes politics. And they have learned to play the poppy card well.

Apparently there has still been no statement from the government on the radio warning the farmers not to plant poppy this year. Farmers are aware of the government's position and control actions on poppy last year but they need to be reminded again...frequently. Silence on the part of the government may be interpreted in many ways; one being uncertainty or weakness and these are not elements you want in the political poppy equation when dealing with Helmand farmers. And the bottom line with these, as with all farmers, is income. Income from their crops and income from working on projects in the region. In both cases at present, the farmers see the bottom line coming up short, and associate this shortage with the government and the US.

A month or so ago, CADG apparently bought some second hand road building equipment and brought it to Lashkar Gah for work on the Lashkar Gah to Marja and the Lashkar Gah to Darwishan roads. But no work has started. Everyone will appreciate the roads improvement but timing and work methods are key to aiding the political situation. Most road work can be accomplished using machines but in Helmand it is important to put large numbers of hand-laborers to work as well. And the work needs to be started now, well before the fall harvest and planting seasons. Politically, it would have been helpful to support the Helmand Construction Unit (HCU) with some spare parts for their aged heavy equipment. They are the organization with the responsibility for maintaining the Central Helmand irrigation system and infrastructure that supports it. And they have the mechanics and equipment yard necessary to maintain heavy equipment although in great need of some help after the war years.

This is an up-date of my understanding of what is happening in Helmand at this time. I would like to be a part of the action. The key to success in Helmand and the elimination of poppy in the region is timing and methodology. Income to the farmers through their cash crops and hand labor on projects. But it has to be at the right time and accompanied by talk, lots of talk. And the government must not continue the present silence on the poppy issue. Strong and clear statements are necessary at this time from the government.