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SUBJ: Helmand Follow Up II: A Farmer Cotton Committee

I talked with my contacts in Lashkar Gah over the week end.

The farmers from Nad-i-Ali, Marja and Shamalan (Nawa) have formed a cotton committee to argue their case on low cotton prices with the government. These are the districts that produce most of the cotton. They went to Kabul for discussions with the Ministry for Small Industry. This is the ministry that runs the cotton gin. The results of the discussions were not seen as very productive by the committee but the price of cotton for this season has been increased from 50 afs. per mon (about twelve and a half pounds) to 67 afs. This was not seen as a significant increase. Some of the farmers that can afford to hold their crop off the market indicated that they would not sell at this price to the government gin. The farmers are looking to the government, and that means the USAID funded Cotton Project, for a subsidized price for cotton.

Since the government closed the small private cotton gins in the region last year, there is no alternative market other than the possibility of smuggling unprocessed cotton out of the country. Apparently some of the small gin equipment has been confiscated by the government and move to Lashkar Gah.

Assuming the farmer statements that they are not making enough profit to cover costs are close to the truth, at some point, cotton production will drop. As previously noted, the farmers are threatening to plant poppy this crop season to make up for the short fall with cotton.

The local radio still has not made any strong statements warning the farmers not to plant poppy this year. There have been statements reminding the farmers that opium production is haram (a sin) but this is not the same as a government warning. Mullah Omer of the Taliban declared opium production haram when he banned production in 2000 but the two statements do not have the same significance.

Engineer Dawari, president of HAVA, has monthly coordinating meetings with the NGO's working in Helmand. He has requested that the NGO's attempt to increase their development activities at this time apparently to reduce the dissatisfaction with the economy and cotton prices. I have not talked directly with Eng. Dawari recently but hope to contact him this week.

The Kajaki power has been off for several weeks in Lashkar Gah. It started with periodic power cuts but degenerated to a complete outage. The people in Lashkar Gah think the power is also off in Kandahar. This relates to problems with the generators at Kajaki dam. The Lashkar Gah cotton gin runs off this power but they also have the original, nearly 40 year old diesel generators as back up.

The power outage is a frustration for the people of Lashkar Gah but its greatest impact is the shut down of the central city water system that runs off wells with electric pumps. It was cynically pointed out that the governor and the CADG office have their own power supplies with deep wells but that most of the people have gone back to the shallow wells with buckets used before the

Taliban brought power back to the city. Shallow wells and out houses do not make for the best of health conditions.

The central Helmand farmers are unaffected by the power outage.

Some road work has started on the Lashkar Gah to Marja road but presently limited to work on the culverts and drainage. Marja drainage work has continued but again at a reported low level.

Government action is needed now to address the issues of low cotton prices, a slowing economy and the potential for a resurgence of opium poppy planting in this immediate (November-December) planting season.

Actions needed:

1. An immediate radio blitz with very strong government statements warning the farmers not to plant poppy this planting season.
2. An immediate start up of large scale hand labor development actions that would put several thousand men to work, money in their pockets and give a boost to the local economy.
3. A continuous dialogue with the farmers on government support of the local economy, reconstruction, and the relationship between this support and not growing poppy.

Given the present information on farmer attitudes and dissatisfactions with the agricultural economy, the only economy in this region, and what is seen as government in-action, it will be tantamount to entrapment for the farmers if nothing is done soon.

The farmers of central Helmand are some of the best double cropping, cash cropping farmers in the country, smart, with a good understanding of national and international markets. Lets at least try to keep them focused on legitimate, legal crops. It is not difficult to initiate the simple actions I have proposed. As the ad says, "Just do it!"

The media (Associated Press) has already published one off-season, slightly inaccurate, poppy article by Mark Fritz to which I objected by a-mail. If central Helmand plants poppy this planting season, we will see more.

Dick Scott