

October 20, 2003

TO: Ranjeet Singh, INL
Elisabeth Kvitashvili

FR: Dick Scott, Helmand Consultant

SUBJ: Helmand Follow Up III: Time is Running Out"

The news out of central Helmand remains about the same: No government statements warning the farmers not to plant poppy, the road work continues on the Marja road, some work continues on Marja drains, work is underway to repair the Kajaki generators, no apparent PR blitz on present development actions, and the price of cotton remains at 67 afs. per mon as the cotton harvest rapidly approaches if it has not already started. (The price to be paid for raw cotton by the cotton gin in Lashkar Gah is unacceptable to the farmers.) But the rumor is that the Governor is presently in Kabul probably conferring on the status of the coming poppy planting season.

Ahmed Rashid, well known journalist, apparently visited Lashkar Gah and published a not completely accurate article in the Far Eastern Economic Review on 16 October 03, "Drugs are Good for War". He reports on a meeting called by the Governor in early October with his administration, US military, NGO's, the UN and other interested agencies for discussions on increased aid as it related to the coming poppy problem. Apparently attendance was limited.

The article credited the USAID/INL funded Cotton Project with quotes from Steve Shaulis who apparently sponsored the Rashid visit (they both work out of Singapore) but the issue of cotton as THE alternative cash crop for poppy and the low price being offered the farmers for their cotton was not noted. The USAID funded Drainage Project was not mentioned.

Rashid made a very important observation: "The Helmand River Valley is the key to preventing poppy production." (in Afghanistan)

Central Helmand is the largest irrigation system in the country that produced much if not most of the opium before the Taliban ban in 2000. Helmand farmers are smart cash-cropping farmers with political influence. They are seen by many as leaders in cropping practices. Most of the opium produced these days is probably coming out of northern areas like Badakshan but if central Helmand returns to poppy production, it will be a signal that will be heard across the country.

AND TIME IS RUNNING OUT. Poppy and wheat planting starts immediately after cotton/peanut/corn/mung bean harvest...probably early next month. As previously noted, immediate, widely publicized actions and warnings to the farmers of central Helmand not to plant poppy are required. Somebody, please initiate the needed actions now.

I have been making this point for more than a month with periodic up-dates. I have clearly outlined what actions are needed. They are not difficult actions to take if the various offices and agencies would simply focus on this coming problem and support a coordinated effort. I have offered to initiate the actions and act as coordinator for the needed effort. I know what actions are needed and many of the people that must be involved. I know central Helmand and its irrigation system. I now offer to go to Kabul and Helmand without pay for a period of at least 2 weeks (to get the thing started) to initiate the needed actions, if any organization will cover my expenses and give me the authority to act.

As previously noted, central Helmand farmers are not bad people. They are good cash-cropping farmers that must respond to the markets to exist. We must not turn them into the "bad guys" through our inaction.

Dick Scott