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SUBJ: HELMAND FOLLOW UP V: OPIUM POPPY CULTIVATION MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO RETURN

Ramadan has slowed communications with Lashkar Gah somewhat but it has now been two months since I raised the alert on Helmand farmers' renewed talk of returning to opium poppy cultivation. During that time, little has happened in Helmand to discourage the farmers from planting opium poppy this planting season, presently underway.

To generalize about opium production in Afghanistan is to be wrong. The political and economic conditions in Badakshan, for example, are not the same as in Helmand. Badakshan is a relatively poor region with limited land scattered throughout mountain valleys. To my knowledge, they can plant one crop a year. They are very distant from any sizable cash crop markets. Road transport is slow and poor. Opium production and marketing are perfect for these conditions.

Central Helmand, on the other hand, is the largest irrigation system in the country, where transport is relatively quick and good, and cash crop markets are well known and available. Helmand farmers have been into profitable cash crops for half a century. And they get two crops a year. Helmand farmers could out-produce Badakshan farmers in opium with a very small percentage of their land in that crop. In 1998, Helmand farmers were producing some 40 percent of all the opium produced in Afghanistan. They were also producing more than enough wheat, during the same cropping season, for local consumption. In most areas, I estimated in 1998 that only about 40-50 percent of the land was in poppy. By last year, Helmand farmers had moved out of opium production and into the legal cash crops of cotton, peanuts, vegetables and melon, with some help via government pressure and an effective eradication program put in the field by the local government.

Helmand farmers must not be allowed to return to opium production. If poppy is allowed to remerge as one of the primary cash crops in this region again, it will be very difficult to eradicate at some point in the distant future. To allow poppy to again emerge as one of the primary cash crops will send the wrong signals to all donor countries already hedging on support of large scale development activities. To allow poppy to re-emerge in Helmand will be to give support to the anti-central government elements in the country through indifference or default.

I have been outlining the necessary actions to be taken to stem this re-emergence of opium poppy production in Helmand for the past two months and have offered to field the activities without charge. The actions are relatively simple and direct. They would not have been that difficult to implement. Apparently the focus in that region has primarily been on the security situation. With the re-emergence of opium poppy production, you can be sure that the security situation will worsen.

According to my contacts in Lashkar Gah, the local radio continues to remind the farmers that opium production is *haram*, a sin. But absent are strong statements from government not to plant poppy or statements that if poppy is planted that it will be eradicated as happened last year. At the same time, there was an announcement from Kabul radio that opium poppy production in Afghanistan will be eradicated over the next ten years. The next ten years. This statement was not missed by Helmand farmers. For Helmand farmers, ten years could be a life time. This statement basically allows the farmers to plant poppy this season.

UNOPS continues to bring in truck loads of cement for some future work on the washed out sections of the Shamalan canal. Again, with the usual delays, their work should be well underway by the time of the winter flood season that originally took out the Shamalan canal, rather than having started the work at the beginning of the dry season.

The work on the Marja-Lashkar Gah road continues but the work on the Marja drains has apparently stopped.

The cotton price to be paid at the gin to the farmers remains at the low Afs 67 per mon which has been unacceptable to the farmers from the start. Cotton harvest season is well under way. This cotton price must be increased as part of the action to stop the re-emergence of opium poppy production. Not to increase the price paid to the farmers is to support the growing dissatisfaction with the present government. This increase must be funded by the donor countries. This does not involve a great deal of money in donor terms but it is very important to the farmers of the region and future security in the region. All of these things are related.

The peanut harvest also is underway and there will be a bumper crop of peanuts this year especially in Nad-i-Ali. So far the buyers from Herat, Kandahar and Ghazni have not appeared so the price remains low. Hopefully the buyers will appear and CADG will make another large purchase of peanut this year. CADG's purchase last year kept the market high and gave a boost to increased planting this year. Farmer expectations for peanuts are high but it involves primarily one district: Nad-i-Ali. The primary regional focus must be to support the legal cash crops.

Please. Somebody do something along the lines that I have been outlining for the past two months to stem the re-emergence of opium poppy in central Helmand. Central Helmand is the key to the elimination of opium poppy production in the country. Opium poppy must not be allowed to re-emerge as one of the primary cash crops in the region. It is not that difficult to do. We are dealing with rational people and good farmers. Actions required:

- 1. Media blitz with strong statements from the government not to plant poppy and that those who plant will be punished and have their crops taken out with an eradication program.
- 2. Increase the price of cotton to be paid by the cotton gin. And insure support of the peanut market through CADG.
- 3. Return the small privately owned cotton gins to the farmer/owners and allow them to resume their businesses.
- 4. Start large scale hand-labor development work on the irrigation system and the support infrastructure in the region putting thousands of men to work.
- 5. In this context, initiate a face-to-face dialogue with the farmers on the interrelationship of all these actions. This would also be included as part of the (local) media blitz noted above.

I have put out some additional inquiries in the farm districts to get additional feed back on developing attitudes. I should hear more within the next few days.

Scott