

HELMAND FOLLOW UP XI: OPIUM POPPIES IN HELMAND THIS YEAR?
U.S. MILITARY INTERVENTION IN CENTRAL HELMAND?
HOPEFULLY NOT

20 August 2004

The central Helmand irrigation system does not need the deployment of US military for the control of the opium poppy cultivation and trade. It does need some well timed, effectively implemented and consistent, long-term rehabilitation initiatives focused on the irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it. And it needs some marketing help. The methodology should include an emphasis on the use of massive hand labor to put this very large but disadvantaged element of the population to work. I have outlined the needed, proven and successful methodology several times over the past year. I have frequently offered to plan, organize and field the necessary actions in collaboration with the farmers, tribal leaders, local government groups and NGOs that successfully eradicated opium production from the region in 2002. To date, inaction is the by-word for the various national and international agencies that purport to have an interest in suppressing opium production and rehabilitate Afghanistan's infrastructure and markets. But recently there appears to be some tendency to bring the US military into the situation, a task for which they are not trained nor understand. Hopefully I am wrong in this interpretation of events and the media.

With the recent surprise visit of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to Kabul, a series of reports were broadcast on National Public Radio about the coming involvement of the US military in the suppression of the opium trade in Afghanistan. A new policy. We might assume that this includes some involvement in the suppression of the cultivation of the opium poppy but the statements were somewhat vague on details. They referred to a coordinated attack in the war on drugs and referred to the connection between the war on drugs and the war on terrorism. These reports seemed to echo the commentary about the same time by Jim Hoagland in the Washington Post on the change of policy that would bring the US military into the war on drugs as this trade also gives support to the warlords that tend to ignore the present Afghan government.

In the media, if not in the bureaucratic mind, there appears to be an assumption that there is homogeneous pattern that applies to Afghanistan in political structure, economy and social organization. More specifically, subsistence farmers turning to the opium cash crop ruled by warlords or Taliban terrorists who control and benefit from marketing the opium. To generalize about Afghan farmers is to be wrong.

To a great extent, this change of policy and this stereotype of Afghan farmers do not relate to the situation in central Helmand where a very high percentage of the Afghan opium, perhaps 40-50 %, is produced in bumper crop years. There are no ruling warlords in Helmand of the kind we find in areas like Herat and Mazar-i-

Sharif, although the governor comes from a family with a history of mujahadin commanders at the time of the USSR. In recent times however, I have witnessed a reasonable level of dialogue and exchange between the local and central governments. The Taliban did not appear to control the opium trade when they were in power. They took a tith in raw opium (according to some farmer contacts), but the trade seemed to be primarily in the private sector: well-off merchants and landowners, people with money to invest. If correct, it is not likely that the remnants of the Taliban control the opium trade presently as the media periodically suggests.

As the farmers in central Helmand will tell you, they do not need opium poppy. It takes too much hand labor (cost), the farmers' profits from the crop are not that high when everyone plants poppy and opium is an evil crop. As previously noted, British analyst David Mansfield has shown that bumper crop years for poppy makes wheat very competitive on the market. The two crops compete for land use. More opium poppy planted results in less wheat planted which drives the price of wheat up. Wheat being the staple of the diet is an important crop which everyone plants.

Free wheat programs for the refugees returning from Pakistan and Iran have tended to drive the price of wheat down as some of this wheat always gets onto the local markets in this wheat producing region.

To complicate the problem of wheat prices, over the past two or so years an insect infestation has re-emerged, known as kafshak locally. I do not know the English name. It may not kill the wheat plant but makes the produced wheat uneatable. Two wheat seasons ago, Steve Shaulis' Central Asia Development Group (CADG) received some late funding for insecticide spray for this infestation and reduced the damage. But this past year this funding was not made available and the infestation caused more damage which would have resulted in higher wheat prices, especially when combined with a bumper opium poppy crop. I did not see the market prices for wheat and opium soon after harvest time for this year but we might assume that it would have been more profitable to grow wheat than poppy if the farmer had not experienced the kafshak infestation.

As a side note, it would be useful if a donor agency would provide CADG with the funding for insecticide and a spraying program for next wheat crop season, coming up. They have the personnel in the field to reduce the infestation. But with all things agricultural, timing is everything.

Central Helmand farmers do not need opium poppy as their primary cash crop nor do they need a US military intervention to eliminate poppy from the region. They need the simple, direct and relatively inexpensive interventions. This includes re-thinking the price paid to the farmers for their raw cotton that is presently maturing in the fields. Pay them a fair price. If this had been done last

September along with a few other interventions, we would not have experienced the bumper crop harvest of opium this past spring. And in terms of costs, how much will this crop cost in terms of trying to unsuccessfully police its distribution throughout the western world? This ignores the human costs that will result. But again, timing is everything. Unfortunately, poor timing along with inaction seems to be our forte.

We do not need US military intervention into central Helmand at this time, if it is being considered. But we do need some timely reconstruction and marketing actions as we did last year, and the farmers will not plant poppy. I have outlined these needed actions at least ten times over the past year. I would be happy to outline the needed actions again if needed...and help put them in the field. They would be much less expensive both economically and politically than US military intervention into central Helmand.

Only you can do it. I can help.

Richard B. Scott
2598 Big Thompson
Drake, Colorado, 80515 USA