

## HELMAND FOLLOW UP XIII

### OPIUM POPPIES IN HELMAND THIS YEAR?

21 SEPTEMBER 2004

This question was raised just over a year ago based on rumors coming out of Helmand that there was a consensus among the farmers to plant poppy on a grand scale. I outlined a program to address this issue but no action was taken by the various national or international development or narcotics agencies with the responsibility and funding to do something. Most farmers in central Helmand planted some poppy that resulted in a bumper crop harvest in the spring of 2004. This harvest represented a major change from 2003 when virtually no opium was produced in central Helmand, a point generally ignored by the media.

The most recent rumors out of Helmand parallel those of last year: Poppy will again be planted on a grand scale. The government is seen as too busy with other things to pay attention to the coming planting season. We might assume this includes the coming election, the increase in security breaches and other political issues like the situation in Herat. There are no strong, threatening statements coming from the government that would put doubts in the minds of the farmers about planting poppy. There has been no change in the price of cotton to be paid to the farmers for the crop about to be harvested. There are no major labor intensive projects in the region nor have there been for almost a year. And there is no break in the long term drought in the foothill areas in north Helmand resulting in a deterioration of that economy. These foothills people have always been one of the major sources of agriculture labor in central Helmand and will be put to work on the labor intensive planting and cultivation of opium poppy this fall and winter, if there are no alternatives.

As previously noted, these foothill areas are mostly dependent on *korez* systems for their water sources. The *korez* systems have been having problems with reduced water tables since at least 1971 when a USGS team surveyed the area. Presently, it was noted, some of the areas are having problems with getting even drinking water from the *korezs*. (This may be an over statement.) In short, it would appear to be a prime time to initiate major labor intensive projects for the rehabilitation of the central Helmand irrigation system and the infrastructure (roads) that supports it as a drought relief action in conjunction with the previously proposed anti-narcotics program. The positive side of the drought is that opium poppy cultivation is difficult without rain or *korez* irrigation in these marginal foothill regions. But the central Helmand irrigation system will produce a bumper crop of opium poppy again this year with hand labor from the foothills, if no action is taken.

On a positive note, the peanut crop, primarily confined to the Nad-i-Ali area, appears to be a major one and in good condition. Peanut harvest coincides with that of cotton. The peanut farmers have frequently noted that they can make more off peanuts than poppy. They do not need fertilizer and peanuts are less labor intensive. This assumes a good

market. And it would be useful to carry out a “windshield survey” next spring through the peanut producing area to observe the level of opium production. Like cotton, peanuts and poppy have overlapping growing seasons.

It was noted that the central Helmand economy was down as reflected in the closure of some shops in the bazaar. While this may be an overstatement of the situation supporting the gloom scenario, the economy was booming during the fall and winter of 2002-03 when there were hundreds of laborers working on the Nad-i-Ali drains and farmers were being paid for their cotton harvest. And that was the crop season when no opium was produced.

I propose again to the national and international agencies, their contractors and the various involved NGOs to take immediate action to field the anti-narcotics program that I have been proposing frequently since last year. It is a program that worked during the crop year of 2002-03. The funding is available. The organizations and people that put the program in the field in 2002-03 are available. The governor and local government is virtually unchanged and has been asking for help for at least a year. The cotton gin is functioning. On the negative side, with the national and international agencies inaction of last year, the narcotics trade is a bit more entrenched and the security situation has deteriorated.

The regional impression that the government is too busy to focus on the opium poppy issue in central Helmand must be changed. This is one step away from the impression that the region is being ignored and that it is not important. This is not the impression that the government (any government) wants to leave with this politically important region (or any other region). They are important politically and for the growing Afghan economy that is primarily agricultural. Central Helmand is the largest irrigation system in the country. **We must not continue to fail them.**

The immediate steps needed are:

1. A media blitz (radio) with strong government statements to the farmers not to plant poppy.
2. Local government face-to-face contacts with tribal, local leaders and councils on the same issue plus assurances of continued reconstruction work employing hundreds of the local labor force. Re-state the relationship between reconstruction funding and opium cultivation.
3. Follow up this information campaign with an eradication program fielded by the local government, as in 2002.
4. Immediately field a series of highly visible reconstruction projects with an emphasis on the use of hundreds of hand laborers: useful, productive work that puts cash in the hands of the local populations.
5. Increase the price of cotton paid to the farmers by the government cotton gin. Important.
6. Release the small local cotton gins that were confiscated last year with the right to resume work..

All of this has been detailed in my previous e-mails over the past year.

In the double-crop, cash-crop region of central Helmand, the alternative crops to opium poppy are already present and understood. We need not search for new, unknown and exotic crops (the silver bullet, as it were) for central Helmand if we would simply support in ways already outlined the present cash crops: cotton, wheat, vegetables, melons, peanuts, to mention a few. Just do it!

As in the past, I offer my services to help plan, organize and field the cash-crop, hand labor intensive anti-narcotics program I have been detailing over the past year. I was responsible for similar actions in 1998 and 2002. Please, let us not let another year of inaction pass on this most important issue. Each year of inaction simply compounds the problem and gives support to our enemies. **The solution is obvious. ACT NOW!**

**Only you can do it. I can help.**

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