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HELMAND FOLLOW UP XVII: POPPIES, CASH-FOR-WORK AND COTTON...AGAIN

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This past week has been busy in Helmand. The opium poppy harvest season is ending. The opium poppy eradication activity is ending. The British army has taken over the military occupation of Helmand from the U.S., as shown on BBC World TV: the changing of the guard. And the Washington Post visited Lashkar Gah.

This paper will outline some of these events in Helmand, draw some conclusions and make some recommendations on what should or could be done next. You have seen most of these recommendations previously. They are still valid.

This was a record setting bumper crop year for opium poppy in Helmand and the international community did little to help local authorities to suppress its cultivation. Rather than suppress and eradicate the crop at planting time, the eradication started just days before the poppies were in bloom, very poor timing. This is the second time an attempt was made to eradicate the poppies in Helmand at harvest time. The eradication-for-pay program of 2002 was also at harvest time and met with a similar lack of success. A mature crop is too valuable.

The provincial eradication teams began work in the south of Helmand (Deshu/Khanashin) around 6 March. The farmers were clearly unhappy with events but were happy about the slowness with which the eradication was moving. According to the media, there was little violence associated with the eradication: a couple of vehicles blown up in Deshu and some shooting in villages of Kajakai. But the eradication teams apparently did not go into the northern districts, north of the main highway...probably for security reasons.

The reason for the lack of major violence in response to the eradication efforts was the result of finding alternatives to violence and to the destruction of much of the poppy crop just at harvest time: delays, negotiations and pay-offs. By the end of the March, the teams were apparently still in the southern regions of Helmand (Khanashin/Garmsir) and some poppies were in bloom in central Helmand. As the eradication teams slowly and unsystematically moved north, opium harvest started in earnest. The bazaars were full of young men coming in from other regions to help with this crash program, much like the spring of 1998 with the record setting bumper crop before the Taliban banned its cultivation. Some farmers lost their crop and some farmers did not. The poorer and less influential farmers were the primary losers. In some cases, apparently, the payments were made by groups of farmers en bloc to save their fields, paying as much as 750 Rs per jerib. This does not appear to be a large sum given the total value of a jerib of opium poppy but adds up when it involves several hundred

farmers in one block. And combined with the other expenses associated with opium production, it is costly but a reasonable expense for the farmer.

The eradication program cannot be considered a success in Helmand. Some poppy fields were taken out: 9,000 acres according to the Washington Post. Assuming this official figure is correct, it represents a small percentage of the total but a sizable amount of opium. It will be interesting to see what the UN reports for Helmand opium production this year. As noted, the international community did little to support the local authorities in the suppression of opium poppy cultivation although we knew well ahead of the fall planting season what was in the mill. There are no secrets among Helmand farmers, if you take time just to ask. A crash cash-for-work program putting thousands of farm laborers to work on the irrigation and road systems in at least central Helmand would have helped, combined with a government media blitz with threats for planting and promises of additional income. And fall poppy/wheat planting is just after the cotton harvest, one of the primary traditional cash crops in the region since the mid-1960s. The prices for cotton to the farmers announced by the government cotton gin were the same as the previous year and which were unacceptably low for the farmers. And there were to be no subsidies of sharing the cotton by-products with the farmers, like seed cake or cooking oil, as before the war. There was a drop of more than 3,000 metric tons of cotton sold to the gin by the farmers between crop years 2003-4 and 2004-5, as of 20 February 06. What will happen to cotton this crop year? With support, cotton could become one of the primary cash crop replacements for opium.

As a side note, while the Washington Post (WP) article of 6 May 06 focuses on some Helmand vegetable farming, there is no mention of cotton production, past or present, or the two government cotton gins that the British built in the 1960s and 70s to process this important crop. (The U.S. bombed the Girishk cotton gin in 2002.) This suggests that the donor representatives in Helmand for the WP visit did not mention cotton as one of the obvious alternative cash crops to poppy, well known to the farmers. As previously noted, in virtually all official and unofficial meetings with the farmers of central Helmand on opium production and eradication that I have attended since 1997, the farmers have always requested an increase in the price paid for their cotton. Nothing can compete with the price of opium on the international market. The buyers could likely double the price paid to the farmers without affecting the international market. But the farmers consider opium an evil and illegal crop that involves too much labor and good management of funds. They say they would switch to cotton and other crops given the opportunity, reasonable prices and government support. Most do not like to consider themselves as criminals.

This year's eradication program cannot be considered a success in Helmand. The timing for the program at harvest time could not have been worse. It would have resulted in a major economic loss to the farmers and the sizable farm labor force had the delays and payoffs not occurred. Apparently at least some of the eradication teams were accompanied by foreign troops for security purposes. The farmers will assume that the foreign community was involved in or at least knowledgeable of the payoffs and did nothing. The combination of these events will not improve the farmers' confidence in the government or the donor community. It will only support the impression of uncertainty and bungling policies

developed over the past 5 years. It will also support the narcotics trade and the insurgents. A guerrilla movement in a region like central Helmand can only function with some level of local support. Perhaps we are too late.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. In the future, do not attempt to field an eradication effort at harvest time. Work with the farmers and the local government at planting time, as was done in 2002 and 2004, to suppress the planting of opium poppy, to provide a very visible and major alternative source of income, a program of reconstruction and rehabilitation, a media blitz about what is happening and face-to-face meetings between farmers and local government, a continuous dialogue, on the seriousness of the planned activities. Given our off-and-on policies and actions over the past 5 years and the growing hostilities, this will be an up-hill battle to convince the farmers that things have changed...if they can change. For the anti-narcotics program in Helmand to work, the local government and the donor community must work with and regain the confidence of the farmers.
2. Increase the price of cotton paid by the government cotton gin to the farmers and in the noted dialogue relate the price increase directly to the narcotics eradication effort. Share the by-products of the cotton gin with the farmers who sell cotton to the gin. Develop a credit program associated with the gin and the cotton industry with the loans to be paid back at harvest time. Apparently only the narcotics trade has a credit program at present. There are still individuals residing in Lashkar Gah that helped implement this credit program before the Soviet invasion.
3. Work with the farmers on the endemic cotton diseases that re-appear on a regular basis and can be controlled by spraying. These include the White fly, order: Homoptera, family: Alcyrodidae and Aphids, order: Homoptera, family: Aphididae.
4. During this period of increasing hostility, focus virtually all development activities on central Helmand, the region irrigated by the Boghra canal and its ground water. This is an area of cash crop, double crop, knowledgeable farmers with reasonable sized land holdings, perhaps the best irrigation system in the country and with a good source of water, the Helmand River. This is the area that produces most of the opium during the bumper crop years, know and understand many other cash crops like cotton, peanuts, vegetables and melons. Security may be somewhat better in these areas when compared to the more marginal and outlying areas like Sangine, Musa Kala, Kajakai and Nausad, areas that produced opium poppy long before the Soviet invasion. Central Helmand did not cultivate opium poppy before the Soviet invasion.
5. Begin planning **now** for the anti-narcotics activities that must be initiated in the late summer to early fall. Where possible, begin to put projects in the field now that can affect the problems noted above. For example, work with the cotton industry. Opium poppy cultivation must be stopped this next year, not 5 years from now. And it must be stopped at planting time not harvest time. A major effort must be made to regain

and maintain the confidence and trust of the Helmand farmers. Our recent past policies and actions have undercut this confidence. Again, perhaps we are too late. It is unclear what will develop with the introduction of the larger numbers of foreign troops into the region: better security or more targets?

6. Take attention-getting actions in support of the vegetable industry. The wholesale vegetable market is badly organized and difficult to access. Originally there was a plan to build a major wholesale vegetable facility in Lashkar Gah that apparently was forgotten. If the farmers are to be convinced to go into vegetable production big time, they must have a clear understanding that there will be a wholesale market to support them.
7. Finally, have the DAI 1992 satellite study of Helmand land use repeated. For planners, it would be useful to know how much land is presently being farmed in Helmand. Unlike the findings of 1992, we can be certain that there is much more land being cultivated today than before the Soviet invasion, more land that the irrigation system was designed to irrigate. What is the future for the Helmand irrigation system? A very knowledgeable contact for planning and doing such a study is: Prof. Jack Shroder at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, (402)554-2770.

I would be very interested in helping to plan and implement any of the points noted above, and/or discuss any of the issues. You, the donor community, can help do it with the Afghans. I can help...if it is not too late.