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**HELMAND FOLLOW-UP XVIII
OPIUM POPPY IN HELMAND AGAIN THIS YEAR?**

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SUMMARY:

Time is running out as the 2006 fall planting season rapidly approaches.

The international community of donors must attempt to eliminate the cultivation of poppy in at least one district this year and support a program that would keep poppy out of this district indefinitely. This would be a phased program expanding geographically and in scope as funding and security conditions allow. This can be achieved through a combination of local government pressure, enforcement and negotiations and donor support of carefully selected projects to benefit the full range of economic classes in the district and in the region. At base, the program must use labor intensive methods (large numbers of hand-laborers) to rehabilitate, develop and construct the primary irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it. The program must begin with a focus on the district where success is most likely. I recommend the start-up phase begin in Nad-i-Ali for a variety of reasons detailed below. For security and political purposes, this program must be implemented by Afghan organizations (like HCC) and Afghan NGOs (like HAFO). Virtually all the staff should be from Helmand and most of the work force (but not all) should be from the district of focus.

Now is the time to begin planning and organizing for the fall planting season. Farmers will plant wheat, opium poppy or leave some fields fallow for the early planting of cotton or peanuts. Present talk in the region suggests that the farmers are planning another bumper crop of opium poppy. Unlike last year, as noted above, the international community of donors **must** field large, labor intensive infrastructure rehabilitation projects focused on the irrigation, drainage and farm road systems that will benefit the full range of this rural, agricultural, cash crop based economy. With this focus, the likelihood of violence to disrupt the development work will be less but cannot be certain. Given the present circumstances, the task will be difficult. This project will be politically difficult to implement and there are no guarantees that attacks on project staff will not occur. Under present conditions, it seems likely that attacks will occur. But given past experience with similar projects, it is important that as many of the critical variables as possible be controlled.

Since 2002, the donor community has had a "hit and miss" policy of supporting rehabilitation projects one year followed by a year of relative inaction. The farmers of central Helmand had great expectations based on donor community and local government statements and promises, and the successful large scale rehabilitation program initiated during the winter of 2002-03. To the farmers' dismay, most project activities ended by the fall planting season of 2003. In short, we lost the confidence

of the farmers in at least central Helmand and we gave support to the narcotics trade and our enemies through our inaction. Since the fall of the Taliban we did not follow through on our promised plan: the major rehabilitation of the cash crop infrastructure and, just as important, markets for their legitimate cash crops.

RECOMMENDATION:

The steps for a program that needs initiating **NOW** for fall 2006 planting season are:

1. Discuss the plan in great detail with the governor of Helmand province and his district staff for their input and full agreement on the program. The level of direct government involvement in the activities would be a major part of the discussion and agreements. The governor and his staff will have to take the lead in supporting this program. It must be an Afghan government program with international donor long term support. Would major government involvement in the project make the project an important target? Perhaps.
2. A radio media blitz should be considered at the beginning of the campaign announcing the ban on the cultivation of opium poppy, the district to be targeted, the actions to be taken and the rehabilitation program planned. However, the final decision on the programming would be left to the governor and his staff. Again, too much official public attention on the project could be a political mistake: the kiss of death.
3. I recommend starting the program in Nad-i-Ali, the most central and perhaps most secure district of some 15,000 hectares of very productive land with intelligent, innovative farmers.
 - The farmers grow the full range of Helmand cash crops, including, periodically, opium poppy.
 - They have experienced two crop seasons of opium poppy reduction with similar projects to that being proposed here, in 2002 and 2004 when opium poppy cultivation was reduced by some 80-85 percent in one season.
 - They will easily understand the plan and the goals. Nad-i-Ali farmers did not cultivate opium poppy before the Soviet invasion.
 - And they have frequently stated over the past 10 years that they do not need opium poppy as a cash crop **if the international community would help rehabilitate the infrastructure of the irrigation system and the markets for cash crops. To a great extent we have failed them.**

Politically, Nad-i-Ali is important. If project benefits are major and long term, it is possible the insurgents would leave it alone. We must assume there is considerable dialogue between the insurgents and the local population and that

some of the insurgents and their relatives are of the local population. Certainly many key figures in the narcotics trade are local.

The argument against starting with Nad-i-Ali will be that they have already benefited greatly by past projects and yet returned to opium poppy cultivation. The major argument for starting in Nad-i-Ali is that a successful project is more likely there than in any other area in central Helmand, given its location, history and makeup. But unlike the last 5 years, the project must be designed, planned, implemented and funded for the **long term** to insure poppy cultivation does not return.

4. To start, focus on central Nad-i-Ali, the irrigation and drainage system, roads and bridges. Allow the mirabs (watermasters of the irrigation system) both past and present, and local leadership to identify the start up activities. These people know what needs to be done. The roads needing work will be obvious. New bridges should be built where traffic patterns have obviously changed over the past 50 years as suggested by locally built foot bridges and fords developed across main drains, for example. While several large schools have been built in the larger population centers, many of the village level schools have been ignored and are in need of repair or reconstruction. Although USAID funding cannot be used for the rehabilitation of mosques, other funding should be found for such needed work, like the mosque at Khoshal Kale. Project staff should stay out of the more marginal areas where they may be more easily be targeted. There are no guarantees of safety in the region but common sense should dictate where security is most likely. And the work force should be concentrated, not scattered in several locations.

5. Project work must be mainly labor intensive, employing men from the specific work area. As found in the past, this requires a continuous dialogue with the work groups and their leaders, balancing some level of work experience with localized demands for employment. The numbers to be employed will be decided as the project develops with a start up target of perhaps 1,000 men. Proper supervision is very important and from past projects, there are numerous experienced supervisors in the area. Politically, it is important to have an Afghan NGO (like HAFO) field the project. This organization must hire virtually all its staff locally. Most project skills are locally available. An exception might be made for a key project administrator but politically he should be Pashtun, preferably of the local dialect. HAFO is ideal for the work since they have implemented numerous projects in the region over the past 10 years, 2-3 projects very similar to the present, with many local contacts and a director from central Helmand.

6. As in the past, the rule on the use of heavy machinery must be that if work can be done by hand, machinery must not be used. The machinery backup organization in the region is HCC of Lashkar Gah and Chah-i-Anjir. Heavy machinery contractors from outside the region must not be brought in for work, as occurred in the recent past. HCC has the capability to do virtually any work needed and their prices are reasonable. Virtually all HCC employees are local.

7. Of the foreigners involved in the project, it would be useful to have people with knowledge of Afghanistan, a proven ability to work with Pashtuns and the ability to listen to their local project staffs.

8. In the minds of most central Helmand farmers, the price of cotton at the government cotton gin in Lashkar Gah is one key element in the opium poppy elimination equation, as I have outlined in many of the “Helmand Follow Up” memos over the past 3 years. To date the international community has generally ignored the importance of the price of cotton to these farmers, focusing instead on the importance (to the international community) of privatizing the cotton industry. If we are truly interested in eliminating opium poppy cultivation from the Central Helmand region, and in the process help undercut the insurgency, the simple act of **increasing** the price of cotton to a reasonable (farmer definition of “reasonable”) level would help. This does not mean to increase the price to an unrealistic level but one based on the international market that would give both the government and the farmers a reasonable profit. If this means some level of subsidy from the international community to the government, so be it. No matter what the cost, it will be less costly than the present situation or the direction in which we are going. The cotton crop is maturing now. The most common pattern for farmer delivery of cotton to the gin is after the fall planting season. They generally harvest the cotton, clear the fields, plow and plant the winter crop of wheat or poppy, and then deliver their cotton crop to the gin. The announcement of a reasonable price for cotton by the government would go far to start a more positive view of the government. The announcement could be combined with the anti-opium poppy campaign. It would give the governor a strong bargaining chip argument in his continuing negotiations with the farmers over a poppy ban.

Time is running out. Opium poppy planting season, October/November/ December is fast approaching. The planning for a project to eliminate opium poppy cultivation at planting time in at least one district is needed **now**. To attempt to eradicate an opium poppy crop at harvest time has been proven on two occasions (2002 and 2006) to be ineffective.

On a positive note coming out of this year’s record setting opium poppy crop, as David Mansfield has pointed out in the past, a bumper crop of opium commonly undercuts the price paid to the farmers making even wheat sometimes competitive with opium. Present opium and wheat prices in Helmand should be monitored.

As always, I offer my services in the planning, organizing and implementing of all the required actions noted above. These actions must be taken this crop year if we are not to further undercut the local and central government, further alienate this gifted region of cash crop farmers and give support to the international narcotics trade and our enemies. Are we already too late? Maybe.

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