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HELMAND FOLLOW UP XXI: Eradication and Cotton Again

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Near harvest season is not the time to eradicate opium poppy.

Eradication: The opium poppy eradication teams went into the field about a month ago. They focused on central Helmand because of security concerns. Periodic shoot outs are occurring to the south in the Darwishan irrigation system (Garmsir), and to the north in the Sangine, Musa Kala, Nausad and Kajaki areas. Central Helmand itself, has been relatively quiet.

There has been little violence associated with the eradication effort in central Helmand because the farmers arranged pay offs to the eradication teams in exchange not to plow poppy fields – all under the watchful eye of NATO troops. For farmers, this happenstance does not instill a great deal of confidence neither in the representatives of the central government nor in the integrity of the military occupation forces. For farmers it tends to meet their present expectations of both groups – which are low.

If the present (bumper) crop of opium poppy had been destroyed at this late date in the growing season; the eradication teams would likely have been attacked in the process. And it would have been an economic disaster for the farmers and the regional farm labor. As I have pointed out numerous times over the past 4 years: **the time to begin to take out an opium poppy crop is at or before the planting season.** This is before all the time and money has been invested in the crop, before the farmers have gone into debt and while there is still time to plant other crops.

To date, there have been three attempts to destroy the poppy crop in central Helmand near harvest time: 2002, 2006 and 2007. All three attempts, including the attempt to pay the farmers for their crop, have been failures.

There have been two attempts to reduce opium cultivation at planting time in conjunction with irrigation system rehabilitation, local government pressure and dialogue: 2002-03 and 2004-05. Both were relatively successful in central Helmand. The only solid data we have is for Nad-i-Ali in 2002-03 where opium poppy cultivation was reduced by 85% in that one crop season. This was the result of an integrated irrigation drainage rehabilitation and eradication effort at planting time.

This should suggest the methods to be used the next time the security situation allows. Opium poppy cultivation can be eliminated in at least central Helmand without violence and without herbicide spraying. The farmers in that area are some of the best in the country. They are not criminals. They are cash crop farmers responding to an ineffective, unreliable government and international donor community, and market problems. They produce between 40 and 50 percent of Afghanistan's opium.

It would be criminal to herbicide spray the next poppy crop from the air, as it was criminal to spray Agent Orange in Vietnam to clear the underbrush. Most of the people and livestock, including several thousand sheep and goats of the winter camping nomads, get their drinking water from the open canals, ditches and drains of the irrigation system. Herbicides are hazardous to their health. If it will kill poppy, it will kill people but it may take longer. Ground spraying could be better controlled but when you spray 60,000+ hectares of crops, the surface water will become contaminated. Ground spraying teams likely will meet violence if they are perceived to be effective and impervious to bribes.

Cotton is one alternative crop to opium poppy

Cotton: Since at least 1997, central Helmand farmers continuously have stated that they do not need opium poppy as a cash crop if they get some help with the markets of their traditional cash crops from the government and the international community of donors. Continuously, this has not happened. Again we have been ineffective in our efforts. One of the cash crops that has been mentioned in every meeting that I have attended during this period (perhaps 20) is **cotton**. The farmers understand how to grow cotton effectively and have been growing it as a cash crop since the mid-1960s. They liked the crop when there was a reliable market. The government cotton gin is functioning in Lashkar Gah to

process the crop. It was a convenient and reliable market. As I have outlined in past memos, the present market for cotton is not good and it is not reliable. The price being paid for raw cotton by the gin is too low at 15 Afs. per kg. This is an increase over the 14 Afs. that the government has been paying for the past 3-4 years. While opium poppy cultivation has been increasing rapidly during this period, the production of cotton has been shrinking, if we use the quantities of cotton the farmers have been selling to the gin as a measure. In 2004 some 8,500 metric tons of cotton were sold to the gin. In 2007, some 1,040 metric tons of cotton were sold to the gin. This is a drop of about 87 percent. The central Helmand districts are the primary producers of both opium and cotton and their cultivation would appear to be linked. This is an important point frequently stated by the farmers but seemingly ignored by the various narcotics and development aid agencies. **Is it not time to listen to the farmers that we are trying to change?**

Our Mission should begin to work with the Lashkar Gah cotton gin now. They need help in at least management and marketing. Raise the price of cotton paid to the farmers a couple of Afs. It would be much cheaper than the ineffective things we have been doing and continue to do relative to our mistimed efforts to eradicate the production of opium poppy and the people that support that industry. And cotton, like opium, also has an international market.

I realize the limitations the US cotton lobby places on our activities, and the limitations our political biases of the need to privatize the cotton industry blinds us to the reality of the situation in Afghanistan. Perhaps cotton cannot compete with opium for price to the central Helmand farmers but according to some of these farmers, cotton can be one of the replacement crops for poppy with some reliable and continuous help from the government and the international community of donors. Given the labor intensive nature of cultivating an opium poppy crop and the ever increasing cost of farm labor, the farmers do not get bonanza incomes from it. And they prefer cotton.

Our efforts, mostly ineffective, in controlling opium poppy cultivation have mostly failed, have resulted in a major increase in poppy cultivation and very likely have supported our enemies economically and in their goal of undercutting the present central government. For a change, why not attempt to repeat the tactic that succeeded in 2002 and 2004, noted above and in some 22 other memos in this series, and

support the markets of the competing cash crops in central Helmand: cotton, peanuts, vegetables and melons?

Over the past 3-4 years, HAFO has offered to attempt to field projects like those of 2002 and 2004 at poppy planting time, a task that they have successfully accomplished on two other occasions. And they have field projects in Helmand at this time.

Or we can herbicide spray the next poppy crop and, on the long term, kill a lot of people and animals. And if successful, we will make even more enemies in that region that we helped to develop over a period of some 40 years.

As in the past, I would be happy to discuss any of the points made in this and past Helmand Follow Up memos with anyone interested in reducing opium poppy cultivation in at least central Helmand...the center of opium cultivation in the country.

For a change, let us try to do something right in central Helmand.

- **We should attempt to eradicate opium poppy at or before planting season with dialogue and positive development actions.**
- **We should listen to the farmers and support the cultivation of cotton and the other cash crops already being produced.**