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Helmand Follow Up XXII: A Proposal for Action...Now

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Central Helmand has just completed its second consecutive record setting harvest of opium poppy. It is time to attempt to take positive action in at least one district, perhaps the most productive, to reduce and eventually eliminate opium cultivation in the region. **Now is the time to start.** We have wasted the past two years through misdirection and inaction. This paper briefly outlines what could and should be done before the next opium poppy planting season in central Helmand. Roughly the same proposal was offered last year at this time, No positive action was taken. Result: another record setting crop of opium poppy in central Helmand. In these record years, Helmand province produces some 40-50 percent of Afghanistan's opium and central Helmand produces a sizable percentage of this.

Harvest time is not the time to eradicate opium poppy, at least not in central Helmand. Positive action is needed to keep the farmers from PLANTING opium poppy.

Some Background: The irrigation system of central Helmand, based on the Boghra Canal, is the largest in the country, built with US and Afghan funding between 1946 and 1979. The three central districts alone (Shamalan (Nawa), Marja and Nad-i-Ali) represent more than 60,000 hectares of irrigated land. This is a region of double-cropping, cash crop farmers that did not cultivate narcotics until the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. The traditional cash crops in the region were wheat, corn, melons, vegetables, cotton and more recently, peanuts.

While the US involvement in the region has been long term and influential, the British contribution to the economy has also been important with the construction of two cotton gins, extension, technical assistance and help to establish international markets for the cotton, all of which ended with the Soviet occupation. The British had a continuous presence in Helmand between the early 1960s and 1979 with the Soviet invasion.

Much of the central Helmand irrigation system resulted in the irrigation of new crop land developed on the desert escarpment and a massive re-settlement effort aimed at settling sheep herding nomads. The water source is the Helmand River that is said to represent 40 percent of Afghanistan's surface water coming from snow melt in the mountains to the north. Central Helmand receives less than 4 inches of rain per year.

Since 1997, in meetings that I have attended, the farmers of central Helmand have been asking or help with rehabilitating: (1.) the irrigation system, (2.) the farm roads system

(3.) use hand labor to do most of the rehabilitation work to put the available larger farm labor force to work, and (4.) help with the marketing of their cotton, (increase the price paid for raw cotton) one of their preferred cash crops, in exchange for not cultivating opium poppy.

The farmers have consistently stated that opium is an evil crop that they do not need if they could get help to return to the pre-Soviet economy. But opium has a steady, dependable market with an informal credit system, unlike the traditional cash crops. The growing numbers of rural addicts in the region is certainly becoming a major worry in the region that must be stressed in any government/farmer dialogue.

To date the farmers' pleas for help have not been effectively addressed or ignored by the international community of donors or sporadically addressed with effective project start ups for a few months, then dropped for a variety of reasons. Cash crop farmers in the most productive irrigation system in the country require effective, dependable markets, rehabilitation projects that put the available farm labor to work, and some sort of farm credit system. This would seem obvious but seemingly ignored by the international community of donors.

It is time to take some consistent, dependable, long term actions, focused on stated farmer needs to address the opium poppy cultivation problem.

Some Recent Events: With reference to some recent confusion in NATO statements, development and reconstruction work in this region must always be directly associated with the goal of opium poppy eradication. There must be no confusion in donor community rhetoric on this issue...as recently happened. The farmers of central Helmand have been subjected to a dialogue on the relationship between development work funding and the elimination of opium poppy cultivation over the past 10 years. US project funding was cut and some 3000 men lost work in 1999 because of opium poppy cultivation. They are not dummies. They understand what is going on. Any mixed or confused statements from the donor community on this issue will signal a confused or uncertain policy...a situation in which you do not want to find yourself in negotiations with Pashtun farmers or tribals.

I propose and emphasize **positive action** in close collaboration with local government, the local socio-economic structure (local leaders and innovators) and, of course, the farmers. This does not include herbicide spraying or military intervention. These two sorts of interventions, even as threats, should be considered negative and counterproductive. Under the right conditions they could result in violence.

Herbicide spraying of an opium poppy crop in central Helmand is a bad idea. Whether by air or by ground teams, the spray will affect the local economy and the health of the people and farm animals. Spraying will kill neighboring cash crops to the poppy, like wheat which is a cash crop in central Helmand and planted at the same time as poppy. And with two consecutive record years of opium, wheat prices should be high, an incentive to plant more wheat. This assumes that the World Food Program has not

flooded the market with foreign wheat for the various refugee food programs, which keeps the price low.

Most farmers, their farm animals and flocks in central Helmand get their drinking water from the irrigation canals, ditches and drains, all of which will be contaminated by spraying. The several thousand sheep herding nomads that winter camp around this irrigation system for the water, also drink from this system as do their thousands of sheep, goats and camels. Herbicide spraying of an opium poppy crop in central Helmand is a bad idea. Not harmful? Read the warnings on a bottle of Round Up

A military intervention to forcefully eradicate an opium poppy crop in central Helmand would increase the level of hostilities toward our foreign military occupation forces and likely provide many more targets for our enemies. It would also increase the recruitment of young local men who make up the very large farm labor force locally and from neighboring districts.

Except for a potential source of additional funding, the PRTs' direct involvement in this proposal should be minimized. As noted in numerous media interviews with local farmers in Helmand and Kandahar, Pashtuns have difficulty understanding that a foreign military occupational force with on-going combat actions that kill their relatives and neighbors in a region is there to help reconstruct the local economy and infrastructure. The recent increase of killing civilians in air strikes (collateral damage is an unacceptable concept) is making more enemies and compounding the image problem. To some great extent we must assume that in the minds of many Pashtuns in Helmand, we have replaced the Soviet occupation.

WHAT: Do the obvious. Focus on the reconstruction work the farmers have been requesting. The proposed actions would include a major labor intensive rehabilitation effort focused on the central Helmand irrigation system, the Boghra Canal, and the infrastructure that supports it, employing as many laborers as can be effectively supervised. (In planning, keep in mind that the annual maintenance shut down of the Boghra canal occurs around 15 January every year for a period of about 40 days.) The work should be a WPA/CCC sort of activity, putting as many people to work as possible, and at the same time accomplish useful (to the local population) rehabilitation work. Local farm labor would be paid the going day labor wages for working on the irrigation system upon which they depend for life.

The proposed project would be similar in content to that that was successful in 1998, 2002 and 2004 but more flexible in terms of targets of opportunity for the rehabilitation work. For example, the project should include primary school construction, needed farm tractor bridges and land improvement and development in contiguous areas that are known as "out-of-project-areas", and generally ignored by past projects. Apparently the school system in at least Nad-i-Ali is functioning under the control of the region's elders.

WHEN: It is time now to begin planning and organizing for the fall planting season of October/November 2007. The proposed work should begin no later than mid-September and the preparation dialogue on the local political scene should begin as soon as possible. Given the inaction, irrelevant actions and negative actions over the past two/three years in the region by the international donor community and military, any level of “success” for this proposal will be an up hill battle.

WHERE: The project should start in Nad-i-Ali where similar projects were started in '98, '02 and '04. It is a district of at least 20,000 hectares of irrigated land with successful cash crop, double-cropping farmers who have been leaders in the cultivation of traditional cash crops like cotton, melons, peanuts and green revolution wheat since at least the 1960s. They have also been among the recent leaders in opium cultivation.

The farmers of Nad-i-Ali will understand the goals and methods of the proposed project. They have done it before. Nad-i-Ali is an area where the activities are most likely to succeed because of this past experience and the level of face-to-face contacts with key players in the area. This is not a subsistence crop region where the farmers are dependent on the extra income from poppy cultivation. These are cash crop, double cropping farmers with a long history of successful farming, and until recent years with a long history without opium poppy. Again, opium poppy was not cultivated in the central Helmand region until the Soviet occupation. Most of the farmers consider opium poppy an evil crop that requires too much hand labor (cost of production). There are a growing number of local addicts in this rural region resulting from the growing association with the raw opium produce. For these traditionally oriented farmers, this is a worrisome development.

Nad-i-Ali should be the starting point for the project, through the first crop year, because it is the area where a successful project is most likely to occur. The farmers are experienced in the methods and goals of the proposed project. They have been long associated with foreign planned and implemented development projects, mostly US. Their irrigation system, the largest in the country, their farm land development and their settlement on the land resulted primarily from US funding. And they are not dependent on opium poppy as a cash crop if they receive some help with their traditional cash crops which they still cultivate. Nad-i-Ali, for what ever reason, is one of the most secure districts in the province with the least violence to date.

If this project is successfully implemented in Nad-i-Ali, we can be certain that other districts will soon request similar interventions, as in the past. But the goal is the elimination of opium poppy cultivation in exchange for extensive hand labor rehabilitation work on their irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it.

WHO: Helping Afghan Farmers Organization (HAFO) should be contracted to implement this project. This is an Afghan NGO that has been working in the region on development and rehabilitation projects since before 1998. The head of HAFO, Eng. Sayed Jawed, is a local man who graduated from Lashkar Gah high school and the engineering faculty of Kabul University. He is an experienced civil engineer with an

effective staff. He has critical kinship ties in the region and important project working relationships with farmers and leaders in the Nad-i-Ali area where he successfully implemented two near-identical projects in '98 and '02. He has the staff, the experience and the needed contacts to successfully implement this project. He has reviewed this proposal and has indicated HAFO's ability and willingness to put it in the field.

If support heavy equipment is needed at any point in the project, HCC in Chah-i-Anjir would be contracted. It is a local long term organization staffed mostly by local men who have their homes in Chah-i-Anjir, and headed by Mr. Farouq of a Lashkar Gah family. The goal is to keep as much of the funding in the local economy as possible.

HOW: Discuss the proposed action with the governor and the local government officials, and get their agreement and complete cooperation. Local government will likely have several suggestions for improving the process of implementation or they may reject the total concept.

Together with local government, discuss the proposed action with Nad-i-Ali elders, tribal leaders and the most innovative farmers. Get their agreement and complete cooperation. They too will likely have suggestions for improving the process.

The most critical step in this process is to get the Nad-i-Ali elders and other influentials to go back to their villages and hold local discussions about the project, its goals and procedures. The final conclusion would have to be that they would agree not to plant poppy in exchange for the proposed rehabilitation work **and** guarantee the safety of the operation and those working on the project. Virtually all the workers and supervisors must be local. This would have to be agreed to by HAFO in the initial discussions of staffing. This process of organization would follow the lines followed in the same area, Nad-i-Ali, with the re-opening of the schools in the area under the supervision of the district elders. This process may not appeal to some in the international community of donors but it is perhaps the only way to implement a large project in an outlying rural area without violence. There must be general local agreement and support for the project.

COTTON: The goal of this project, as with past similar projects, is to eliminate the cultivation of opium poppy in this most productive region. The methods to do this are to rehabilitate the irrigation system, and the support infrastructure putting a many people to work as possible and at the same time supporting the markets for the traditional (replacement) cash crops. This includes support for the main traditional cash crop in the region, cotton, for which there is an established local market at the government cotton gin and the established facility to process the raw produce. The fact that the cotton gin is not privatized is irrelevant except for the US policy in favor of capitalism. **The goal of this project is to eliminate opium poppy cultivation.**

As previously noted, cotton, one of the traditional cash crops in the region since the mid-1960s, has been losing its importance in the context of local pressures on farmers to

cultivate opium poppy, low cotton prices being paid by the local government cotton gin, and the lack of any support or interest by the international donor community. As the farmers will state, if asked, cotton is one of the most obvious alternative cash crops to replace opium poppy. It is a crop the farmers understand and prefer with a dependable near-by market center at the local cotton gin where the cotton can be processed for the international market. But the gin, the government, needs help in management and marketing...at least. I propose a direct subsidy for the price of cotton through the government cotton gin. The starting point would be to contact the small local cotton gins in the region to find out what they are presently paying for top quality cotton. They have always been paying slightly more for cotton than the government has been paying. Set the price to be paid at the government gin at or slightly more than the local private gins are paying. This would be a direct subsidy to the farmers regardless of the international market. The results will be cheaper for the international donor community than what is presently happening.

It is difficult to understand why the US can subsidize US cotton farmers to the point that we drive the international cotton prices so low as to make most third world countries' cotton farmers uncompetitive, and at the same time refuse to support the Afghan central Helmand cotton farmers when we know it would be a step in eliminating opium poppy cultivation. We groan about the growing opium poppy cultivation but refuse to do the obvious counter actions. Perhaps our friends the British who originally established the cotton industry infrastructure in the area can do the obvious.

The early cotton planting season is not until March. Before that time, a limited credit system should be established through the government gin in support of the cotton industry. Opium poppy has an informal credit system through the local buyers. To date, the international community has been unable to develop a competitive system for critical, for the farmers, crops like cotton. Following the loan procedures like those of the pre-war credit system, this should not be too difficult. There are people in Lashkar Gah that were involved with the previous credit system and could help.

The goal is to make cotton competitive with opium poppy as a cash crop. Opium poppy will always result in a greater income than cotton or nearly any other crop but it does not represent a gold mine for the farmers. Production costs (hand labor) are high, and supervision and management are demanding. Cotton can compete with opium poppy as the **preferred** crop by the farmers.

CONCLUSION: This is the outline of a proposed project to start again the reconstruction effort in central Helmand where a sizable percentage of the country's opium is being produced. It follows a procedure that was used in the fall of 2002 that resulted in a reduction in opium poppy cultivation in Nad-i-Ali of some 85 percent. After these two consecutive record setting opium poppy crop years, it is time to try to again reduce opium production through positive, effective reconstruction actions that will put a sizable portion of the available farm labor to work on their own irrigation system. There must be a surplus of raw opium on the local market or is being hoarded in anticipation of better days. The price of wheat should be up and the price of opium should be down. The

cultivation of cotton has been dropping drastically over the past two years in the context of the bumper opium crops. The problem can be addressed in a positive manner. Violence is not an acceptable part of cash crop, double cropping farmers' lives. By nature they are not criminals. They are hard working farmers. We should attempt to support these farmers in getting out of opium poppy cultivation through positive action, not potential violence or poisoning them with herbicide spraying.

I believe this proposal will work. Again, I offer my services to help plan, organize and implement this proposal. Along with Engineer Jawed and HAFO, I have the experience, knowledge and contacts to make it happen, if it can be done. But the key will be what happens in Nad-i-Ali when the elders of the district return home for discussions of this proposal with their friends, neighbors and relatives.

I would be happy to respond to any questions about this proposal and welcome any responses. Please feel free to forward this document to anyone you think may be interested in reducing opium poppy cultivation in central Helmand. For background, I would be happy to forward any or all the other Helmand Follow Up memos written since 2003.

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Pashto Service Chief, VOA, 1984-90.
USAID/DAI/Pakistan, Chief-of-Party, Kala Dhaka Area Development Project, 1990-93.
INL/MCI, Project Manager, Helmand Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, 1998.
USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002.
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