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**Helmand Follow Up XXIII:  
Comments on “U.S. Counter-narcotics Strategy for Afghanistan”  
And  
Another Call for Positive Action  
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“I think it is safe to say that we should be looking for a new strategy...And I think that we are finding one.” (William B. Wood, NY Times, 26 August 2007)

**Summary:** It is clear from reading the recently produced strategy paper that aerial spraying will be one of the major elements of the coming new strategy to control opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. I believe US officials are erroneously applying South American narcotics program elements to Afghanistan. To justify a more “aggressive” method of eradication (aerial spraying of herbicides) the authors of this strategy choose to highlight only the record levels of opium cultivation and to ignore the failures of past counter-narcotics programs that resulted in the present situation.

There is still time this fall planting season to take some positive development action to reduce opium poppy cultivation in at least one district without the use of herbicides or military intervention.

**Background:** President Karzai (a Pashtun) has consistently rejected the use of aerial spraying for poppy eradication. But given the media coverage, various official US statements and the GOA’s vice-president’s (a Tajik) recent call for a harsher strategy to control opium poppy cultivation including aerial spraying of herbicides, it is clear that aerial spraying will be one of the major elements of the new strategy. The primary area of opium poppy cultivation and the key target is Pashtu-speaking Helmand province and specifically Central Helmand, the most productive poppy growing area. But Helmand province is not a homogeneous economic or social unit. A strategy that works for water-short northern Helmand may not work in the relatively lush modern irrigation system of Central Helmand, assuming it involves more than aerial spraying of herbicides. As in the past, my primary focus is on Central Helmand.

The US has been the primary force advocating aerial spraying but maintains that it will be a GOA final decision. To date, the British have opposed this tactic for political and health reasons. Meanwhile, US embassy staff, including the ambassador, has been fortified with individuals experienced in the US-supported South American narcotics programs that use aerial spraying to combat coca production. I believe the US decision to use aerial spraying of herbicides on central Helmand poppy was made sometime ago. But Pashtun farmers are not Columbians, central Helmand is not Columbia and opium

poppy is not coca. We are going to cause greater trouble. Again, actions that may appear to have worked in South America may not be appropriate for Afghanistan.

The Senlis Council recently completed a survey and report on public opinion in the NATO countries with troops fighting in southern Afghanistan (US, UK, Canada and The Netherlands). Some 74% of the sample of adults opposed chemical spraying of poppies in Afghanistan. (See: "A Lost Mandate: The Public Calls for a New Direction in Afghan Counter-Narcotics Policies", London, Sept. 07) And some 81% supported the concept of legalizing poppy cultivation in conjunction with a program to produce the painkillers morphine and codeine for medical use. The concept of legalizing the cultivation of opium poppy was rejected by the Strategy Paper as being unmanageable. Given the problems I observed with managing a legal poppy crop in a stable Turkey in the 1970s, it would be a difficult undertaking in Afghanistan at this time but it might be worth a pilot project experiment in one of the more stable areas.

**The Rule of Law:** The rule of law, as stressed in the strategy paper, is very important. However, we must keep in mind that in this area of the country, among these people, at this time in history, the rule of law is coming primarily from non-Muslim governments of the present foreign military occupation forces. The Pashtuns have never really supported the outside rule of law, even from the central governments. There are many people that would prefer Shariat law. The more recent increased presence of NATO forces in North Helmand, violence and deaths caused by "collateral damage" (an unacceptable concept to most) has not added to our popularity. Unless we want to provoke more violence, we can achieve more positive results if in our strategy we 1) include negotiation more openly 2) become competitive with the opium poppy industry and 3) be less aggressive in the enforcement orientation.

**Enforcement:** Given the emphasis of the strategy paper, it was strongly influenced if not primarily written by employees from law enforcement (DEA). The emphasis is on enforcement, eradication, justice reform, political will, corruption, extradition, more law officers, more court houses, non-negotiable dialogue (i.e. monologue) and greater involvement of the military forces. The strategy, as noted, clearly includes aerial spraying with glyphosate (Roundup), a method brought from South America.

As a side note, the paper depends heavily on acronyms to the point of confusion. And its strong conclusions are frequently based on unspecified sources.

There appears to be little emphasis on the economic and political contexts: the details of dealing with economic needs of the farmers who are presently cultivating opium poppy. The farmers' needs should be the primary focus of the strategy and not just be the targets of enforcement. Under the right conditions the farmers would not cultivate poppy. They consider it an evil crop and recognize the growing menace as more and more rural people become addicted. Farmers of Central Helmand will tell you they do not need opium poppy if given some help with their traditional cash crops and they have been

saying this since at least 1997. Here the recent gross increases in opium poppy cultivation are likely as much as a political statement, in response to unfulfilled promises and undependable projects over the past 6 years, as it is an economic decision. The farmers have lost trust and confidence in their own government and the governments of the present military occupation forces - the U.S. This region of the country was (is) perhaps the most pro-American in past years. Virtually everything they have come from US-funded projects: the lay-out and establishment of the town of Lashkar Gah, including the construction of the central mosque, most official buildings and market area; two storage dams; the hydro-power plant that supplied electricity to Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, rural Central Helmand and Chah-i-Anjir; the largest irrigation system in the country based on the Boghra and Darwishan canals; and a land settlement program that settled thousands of landless farmers and sheep herding nomads. Most of the farmers in Central Helmand are (were) not against us. We must try to talk to them again.

**Past Failures:** The strategy paper ignores events that have led up to the two past record years of poppy cultivation: 1) The ineffective, on/off nature of reconstruction work on damaged infrastructure despite continuous promises by the international community of donors of a massive reconstruction effort and funding; 2) the focus on projects irrelevant to most farmers.

On the first point I have written many previous memos on the subject. On the second point, while Helmand has received large amounts of funding over the past years, much did not target Central Helmand farmers. There is a wrongful tendency to equate funds spent in an area with effective programming and impact on target populations. For example:

- Constructing of a women's park/garden in Lashkar Gah.
- Constructing a cobblestone road to a tourist site by a contract team from Bolivia while ignoring needed rehabilitation of some more important farm roads to benefit the cash crop farmers.
- Bringing several cold storage units into Helmand - never made operational.
- Sponsoring a "Helmand Agricultural Festival" held in Lashkar Gah that cost some \$300,000 dollars. (NY Times, 26 Aug 07). And how ironic that for cash crop, double-cropping farmers in the largest irrigation system in the country that commands some 40% of Afghanistan's surface water, there was a demonstration of drip irrigation.
- Planning a future industrial park and apparently more court houses, according to the strategy paper.

Why is there no mention of cotton, one of the major, traditional cash crops in the region since the British built the cotton gin in Lashkar Gah in the mid-'60s, and for which the farmers themselves have been requesting help since 1997 to counter opium production? (The U.S. cotton lobby?) There is a reference on p. 53 of the strategy paper to the fact that 75% of poppy cultivation in Helmand has developed within the two past record years for poppy, and suggests that "...two years ago these farmers were doing something else." If we look at the drop in cotton production as measured by cotton brought and sold

to the government cotton gin, a drop from 8,500 metric tons in '04 to 1,040 metric tons in '07, one might guess that the farmers were producing more cotton before the record poppy years. (For maximum cotton production, fields are left fallow through the fall and winter crop season, and early-planted in March-April, so cotton does compete for land with poppy/wheat.) Cotton is one of the traditional cash crop that the farmers like, still cultivate and for which there is a functioning gin in the region to process it, along with several small privately owned gins, that the international community of donors – and now this strategy paper - tends to ignore. Cotton is not the only cash crop not mentioned in the strategy paper that the farmers would prefer over poppy: melon, vegetables and peanuts.

Why do we not yet have a farm credit program in competition with the informal credit system that supports the opium industry in Central Helmand after these 5+ years of development work and millions of dollars spent?

**Eradication:** The strategy paper does not take into account the importance of the timing of an eradication effort. It does not take into account the effects of aerial spraying on lives of people and animals.

Timing is critical in poppy eradication. It can be effective if accomplished at and/or soon after planting season. Politically, this is the best time especially if the farmers have received advance warning not to plant poppy. If the farmers really think eradication is possible (under the present political situation) only the gamblers will plant poppy. Early eradication allows time for re-planting other crops. Harvest time is the wrong time to attempt poppy eradication, unless your goal is to provoke violent reaction.

Most past attempts at poppy eradication in Helmand have failed primarily because of poor timing and bad planning. This includes the British attempt at eradication-for-pay in the spring of 2002. The three failed attempts in '02, '06 and '07 were attempted at **harvest time** and that doomed them to failure. Politically it is very difficult for local (Afghan) law enforcement officers to eradicate a mature poppy crop (or any other major cash crop) **at harvest time** as it undercuts nearly the total agricultural economy of the region...assuming the eradicators wish to stay alive. It is not a matter of protecting the larger land owners. At present levels of cultivation, it involves virtually all the landowners, farmers, share-croppers and day laborers. This total rural population of Central Helmand is the vast majority there.

Attempts to eradicate poppy crop at harvest time will alienate the farmers and the remaining area population, especially with herbicide spraying. Programs must be fielded to keep the farmers from planting poppy, followed by eradication soon after planting and germination. There must be time allowance for farmers to re-plant a second crop. In central Helmand, wheat and some cotton are about the only other major crops competing for land use in the fall. And the configuration of the irrigation paddies tells you which crop is planted even before it germinates. (see photo below) There are other crops planted at the same time, like winter vegetables (cauliflower, carrots, etc) and alfalfa for the farmer's

animals. Aerial spraying will kill these crops along with the poppy. Eradicated fall planted fields can be held fallow for early spring planting of cotton or peanuts Why are we ignoring all of the traditional crops?



**Wheat on the left.**

**Poppy on the right**

In 2002, farmers were warned well ahead of planting season that opium poppy was not to be cultivated and that labor intensive work was underway or soon to be started. Soon after planting season, eradication by plowing began in Nad-i-Ali under the system of irrigation system water-masters (mirabs). The mirabs were told to indicate the fields planted in poppy in their irrigation zones, which then were plowed under. There are no secrets from the mirab on what is planted. The mirab is normally a local man with land in the area he controls. The mirabs were told that the eradication teams would be back after germination and if any poppy fields were found, the mirab would go to jail. Eradication continued through the germination time. Between 3,000-5,000 men were employed to work on their own irrigation system for pay, about \$2 per day. The result was that opium poppy cultivation was reduced by 85% in this one growing season in Nad-i-Ali, according to UNODC statistics. There was no violence. Unfortunately funds were cut the following summer just before planting season and all work on the irrigation system stopped. Farmers' pleas to re-start the development work were ignored, so they again planted poppy. This strategy worked but the project failed on the long term through bureaucratic inaction.

The British experience of an eradication-for-pay program in 2002 also failed. This time there were bureaucratic delays right up to harvest time. There was bad and rushed planning. And the crowning blow was a lack of field monitoring or any direct involvement of the British who remained in a fortified hotel in Lashkar Gah. The British did hold meetings in town with Afghan local government implementers each morning. Much funding was misappropriated and did not reach the intended farmers. Many of the farmers who lost their crops and received no compensation felt cheated. If you cannot directly control or field-monitor your project, do not expect it to function.

Aerial spraying will affect drinking water sources. State Department and Monsanto assure us that Roundup is a safe herbicide...if used properly. Wikipedia gives mixed reviews. We must consider the context in which the herbicide will be used in Central Helmand. Most of the farmers and their livestock in the region use the open system of canals, ditches and drains every day for drinking water as do the several thousand sheep herding nomads and their flocks that winter camp in the area. This is an issue that to my knowledge has not been addressed by the herbicide advocates. Do we really know the effects of contaminating a drinking water source for thousands of people and animals with Roundup? Would the EPA approve this action under these conditions in the US? Would you allow your children to drink water knowing Roundup is in use in the drainage area of your water source? The planned training programs for the farmers and officials about how safe the proper use of Roundup is may convince some. Although the US denied doing so, the secret spraying of areas in Nangahar a couple of years back had negative health and political effects and received wide coverage (Nangahar increased opium poppy cultivation by more than 200% this record year). The farmers in Helmand know about Nangahar. These farmers, without great knowledge of and experience with herbicides, will suffer mistakes and misunderstandings. Insurgents will take full advantage of the U.S. use of herbicides that will kill plants but not affect people and animals. Who will believe that? Not me and not Pashtun farmers. Aerial herbicide spraying of a poppy crop in Helmand is a bad and immoral idea.

In a recent CNN report on poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, "Narco State," the primary emphasis was on the US involvement in enforcement activities. The authors of the Strategy Paper could have been the script writers for the CNN report. The existing cash crops were not even mentioned. The security problems associated with eradication were stressed. Given the limited focus of this CNN report, aerial spraying of herbicides next spring seems justified.

**Wrong Assumptions:** Wrong it is to assume that only 10-12% of the farmers are cultivating opium poppy in an area like Central Helmand. Virtually every farmer there has some poppy and great social and political pressures exist on all the farmers to present a unified front. Pashtuns operate on consensus especially when it comes to opposing the government and more especially in areas of tribal homogeneity. There was little or no violence in Central Helmand over the last two years' eradication campaigns because a consensus was reached between the eradication teams and the farmers...pay-offs and limited eradication. And foreigners were not directly involved in those local decisions. A

“successful” effective eradication program of opium poppy in Central Helmand at harvest time **will** turn the local population against their government (and the foreign governments that support them), undercut the regional economy, give support to the insurgent movement and result in higher levels of violence. It is not simply a matter of enforcing “the law”. It is better to counter opium poppy cultivation with more positive developmental actions as I have outlined previously and will repeat below.

There is an implied assumption in the strategy paper that short term (seasonal) cash crops are somehow more temporary or less important than longer term tree crops and that the seasonal crops will fill in until the tree crops can mature. Central Helmand, unlike the grape producing areas in Kandahar, is a seasonal cash field crop double-cropping region. And to start, we should be focusing on the traditional cash crops of the region already known, liked and cultivated. With help in marketing, combined with eradication and enforcement, these crops can compete with opium poppy as the **preferred crops**. Opium poppy is not a gold mine crop for most of the Helmand farmers. It involves too much work and very high labor costs.

Temporary effectiveness also seems to be implied in discussions of alternative income projects. Their temporary nature to some degree is the result of sporadic funding from the donor community. The irrigation system in central Helmand and the infrastructure that supports it is the largest in the country that had received no serious maintenance for 25 + years. It will take years of continuous work to return it to a pre-Soviet condition. And then it must be maintained. While much of this can be done by machine, the use of hand labor is better, politically. In addition to the original system, there are thousands of settlers that have moved into the area during this period, developed land and irrigate off variations of the old system or from wells and pumps. But much work is needed, especially in drainage, to bring these areas up to acceptable standards. Alternative income projects in the area of the irrigation system should not be considered short-term or funded on a short-term basis. Alternative income activities in the irrigation system help keep the massive farm labor force working. And this is an important element in any counter-narcotics strategy for Helmand: direct benefits for the local farm population. This work should be focused on the irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it, e.g., roads. This work should benefit directly the farmers and labor force presently involved in poppy cultivation. This work should be used as a bargaining chip for the governor in the counter-narcotics program...yes, negotiations. Pashtuns have always been involved in negotiating “the law” and we will not change them.

**The Future** Our new strategy in at least Central Helmand must be:

- Reconstruction work first. Establish a consistent, long term and dependable program of reconstruction development on infrastructure that is important to the farmers, putting as many of the large farm-labor force to work as possible.
- Hire reputable Afghan Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) to field work; an additional “nation-building” opportunity. There are NGOs working in the region now with experience in similar projects.
- Focus on one district to start.

- Establish direct and obvious support for the traditional cash crops still being cultivated, including cotton.
- Maintain a clear and open dialogue with the farmers about not cultivating poppy in exchange for the above: continuous, effective reconstruction program and help with marketing legal cash crops. (This dialogue does not mean the delivery of a series of ultimatums).
- Establish an effective farm credit system.
- Create a media blitz before the planting season about not planting poppy and emphasize plans for an effective eradication program to follow; announce a reasonable price to be paid this year by the cotton gin for cotton.
- Eradication action taken at and just after planting and germination time...**not at harvest time, and not including aerial herbicide spraying or military involvement.**
- Maintain a distance between the development work and the military operations. Given the number of civilian deaths through collateral damage to date in Helmand, it will be difficult for the farmers to accept the relationship. It will remain a potential source of conflict.

The Good Performer Initiative is an interesting and innovative concept but in the field it must be certain that the funds get distributed to **the farmers** who do not cultivate poppy and do not get side tracked into government pockets. It is a good incentive for the government people to perform but the farmers must also be compensated/rewarded for not cultivating a major cash crop...poppy. The opportunity for misappropriation of funds is great and the farmers know it. Close field monitoring is necessary.

All of the above components are needed now as a strategy. They have been needed since 2002 but have frequently been absent, as I have been outlining for the past 4 years. It is the failure of our counter-narcotics program in at least Central Helmand through our delays and blunders that has now resulted in the two years of record opium cultivation, not the insurgents. The insurgents have simply taken advantage of the situation we helped to create.

How long do we need to wade in the mire of our own mistakes? Let's use a positive strategy to reduce opium poppy in this area this year. See "Helmand Follow Up XXII" (23 July 07) for a proposal that does not include aerial herbicide spraying or military intervention. It is getting late but it may still be possible to do something positive this poppy planting season. I agree we need to be looking for a new strategy because our past "strategies" have failed and helped to create the two past record years of opium poppy cultivation in Helmand.

As always, I would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this or past e-memos and respond to any questions. I would be happy to help plan, organize and implement the strategy that we successfully implemented in 2002. 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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**Experience:**

USAID/Afghanistan, Research and Evaluation officer, 1971-78.

USAID/Mali, Project Manager, Mali Rural Works Project, 1979-81.

USAID/Pakistan, Project Manager, Tribal Areas Development Project 1982-84.

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.

USAID/DAI, Officer-in-Charge, Helmand Drainage Rehabilitation Project, 2002.

USAID/Chemonics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project,  
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