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**Helmand Follow Up XXIV:
Timing is Everything**

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Again we have missed initiating an effective anti-opium poppy cultivation project during the pre-planting and planting season in central Helmand. The purpose of this memo is to mark the key times when action should be taken and what actions are needed. It is a huge blunder to wait for harvest time to take out the coming record opium poppy harvest. Every year we take no action at planting time and allow record poppy crops to be planted, sends the wrong message to the farmers and makes the longer term task of opium control more difficult.

Action in the pre-planting and planting season would include farmer/government dialogue. This dialogue should be combined with an initial eradication action and a large alternative income project that would employ a large number of local farm laborers on their irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it. An announcement about an increase in the price of cotton by the Bost cotton gin should come at this time. The start up of an agricultural credit program would be welcomed. These elements are necessary for an effective fall planting season program to convince farmers not to plant opium poppy. Such a program demonstrates to the farmers that:

- 1.) The government means what it says in the anti-opium poppy dialogue.
- 2.) The government takes well-timed eradication actions allowing farmers to re-plant other crops. (As with past eradication failures in the region demonstrate, harvest time is not the time to take out a poppy crop).
- 3.) The government puts cash in the pockets of the farm laborers and sharecroppers who have just lost their crops through work-for-pay.
- 4.) The government continues to improve the condition of the irrigation system upon which the regional economy depends. (Since 1998 there have been work-for-pay projects periodically improving the irrigation system in central Helmand.) And, with the credit program, the government has an interest in improving this province's agricultural economy.

Another key point to stress in planning anti-opium poppy cultivation programs is that funding should exist for several years, not just for start up phases. The past irregularities in project and program implementation has been a strong element in our failure to eliminate poppy cultivation, and has only supported record opium harvest increases and supported, even promoted, the return of the Taliban in the region.

According to local Afghan observers, another record setting opium poppy crop has been planted in the face of government and international donor community inaction at this most critical time... the fall planting season. During this past planting season, apparently the governor was having discussions with tribal leaders, and Poppy Elimination Teams were in the field in Helmand attempting a new public information dialogue. These teams included some 300 Afghan police and 66 “internationals” under the protection of and supported by NATO forces. (T.A. Schweich, 4 Oct 07) This dialogue included reminders that poppy cultivation is un-Islamic and that there is a growing number of addicts in the country, among other important points.

While this dialogue is important, it would be more effective if combined with the other elements noted above: well-timed eradication and alternative income actions. In central Helmand the dialogue would have more meaning if accompanied by an announcement of an increase of cotton prices to be paid by the Bost cotton gin. As previously noted, cotton production is falling as opium poppy cultivation increases...and there is a direct relationship. Cotton has been a major cash crop in central Helmand since the mid-1960s when the British built the cotton gin in conjunction with an agricultural extension effort.

The local *mullahs*, *shuras* and farmers of central Helmand all know that opium poppy cultivation is un-Islamic and that the number of addicts is growing even in the rural areas. They live with it. The addicts are their relatives. For example, the *Wolis Wol* of Marja was trying to deal with a growing number of local disowned relatives in his district unassisted in 2004. And while “poppy breeds insecurity”, our own unreliable development activities, lack of support for their legitimate cash crop markets, short term nature and sometimes misdirected alternative income actions all have bred insecurity and have fed the Taliban public information effort against us.

Initiate a limited program in one district in central Helmand NOW as outlined above. It may be late but possibly not too late. As the record opium poppy crop for next year is planted and now germinating we should get busy planning the next effective move. Any project would have to be headed by the governor and his staff for the local dialogue and, unfortunately, supported and guarded by the local NATO forces. I say “unfortunately” because anytime the military is involved, it is a reminder that there is still a foreign occupying military force in the country...and through “collateral damage” continues to kill civilians, women and children. The recent fighting over Musa Kala likely complicates this proposal.

Again, the NGO HAFO would be the obvious choice to attempt to field the alternative income element of the proposal since they have past experience with identical projects in the same area, they have the local contacts and they have staff and other small projects already in the area.

The most difficult element in the proposed action would be the eradication of the planted and germinated crop. No doubt the farmers were warned not to plant by the earlier dialogue. But given the present political and security situation in the region and the lack of any other action, no one took the warnings seriously. As with past anti-poppy projects

in this region, this effort would be non-negotiable. (The failed negotiated eradication effort in Oruzgan, Jon Anderson, The New Yorker, 9 July 07, was the result of bad planning, poor timing (harvest time) and little coordination with local government.) This proposed effort would be a government action with contracted local tractors to do the plowing, assuming any can be convinced to work. There is still time for late planting of wheat or early planting of cotton and peanuts.

The project would need to focus on a limited area, like Nad-i-Ali, where the farmers already understand the process from experience with 3 past identical projects. Nad-i-Ali is one of the centers of successful cash crop farming and cotton (and opium) production. While our past promises and actions have proven to be unreliable, farmers may be still willing to listen. They consider opium poppy an evil but reliable cash crop with a reliable market and an informal credit system....something we have been unable to establish for the traditional legitimate cash crops over the past 4-5 years.

And as previously noted (Helmand Follow Up XXIII), the total process would have to receive agreement from local tribal and representative leadership from the region with guarantees of project security (not an easy task but also not impossible).

The next critical time for potential action in central Helmand is during the annual maintenance shut-down period for the Boghra canal....o/a 15 January to 1 March. If negotiations were to start now between government and local leadership, there would be plenty of time to address the details of the project and see if the action might be put in the field. I would be happy to help plan and initiate the proposed action in collaboration with local government, HAFO and any other organizations that might be involved. In the past, I have initiated three other almost identical projects in the same area in close collaboration with Afghan staff and government. I think I know some of the buttons that have to be pressed to make the proposed project happen. The project may not be possible under the present conditions. We have turned many people against us in the region. **But we must continue to attempt to re-establish the positive working relationships we have had in the past in this most productive cash crop region and, in the process, eliminate opium poppy cultivation.**

Finally, harvest time is the worst time to attempt elimination of a major opium poppy crop. It undermines the local cash crop economy, turns the people of the region against us and insures some level of local government non-cooperation. Most local government people and police must continue to live in the area now and after we are gone. Many, if not most, are local people with the necessary kinship/friendship contacts to meet basic government expectations in this semi-anarchical Pashtun society where many “official” actions are accomplished on the basis of long term personal relationships.

Many outsiders criticize Afghan locals and government officials for the level of corruption and thus various failures in the region. It's easy to understand the growing corruption in at least local government under the present conditions. Government jobs pay very marginal wages with frequent long delays in payment, and we still cannot

subsidize salaries. After the demise of the Taliban in '02, the international donor community made grand promises for a major reconstruction program for the damaged and destroyed infrastructure. Initial large scale projects were started but soon the projects were stopped or delayed and it became clear that some of the foreign groups with many new vehicles, office equipment and western-acceptable housing were benefiting more from the projects than were the farmers. In some cases funds were being spent on things the farmers considered irrelevant and not of direct benefit to the rural population...the vast majority of people in the province. Opium poppy cultivation was allowed to return through donor inaction, beginning in 2003. At one point, early on, the governor of Helmand begged for donor help with funding, in writing, but the request fell on deaf ears. Without effective reconstruction projects that bring direct benefits to the farmers in the area the governor has limited power. He must be able to take credit for and play political games with reconstruction projects in much the same way our congressional "pork barrel" projects function. The governor found himself losing influence. And the local and central governments had/have no real funds of their own. The farmers lost confidence in local government and local government lost confidence in us. Under these conditions, including the massive expansion of the drug trade, local government began to fall apart and become involved in the growing basis of the economy...opium. To some great extent, we have produced the security and political problems we are faced with in at least central Helmand through misdirected actions or inaction.

A perhaps related question on corruption: Why can't we in the US with all our resources, funding, ethics, long established laws and courts, control the drug trade on the streets of our nation's capitol? **Money.**

Much of what I have written here is a repeat of my previous memos. But few of these proposed actions have been attempted over the past three years, and the security, opium and economic situation in central Helmand continues to worsen. What I propose has been effective in the past to reduce opium poppy cultivation on the short term but has not had the opportunity to continue on the long term. Why not try? It may be too late - but it is never too late to try.

An appropriate quote: **You can do it. I can help.**
Or, reversed,
I can do it. You can help.

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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.

Pashko Service Chief, VOA, 1984-90.

USAID/DAI/Pakistan, Chief-of-Party, Kala Dhaka Area Development Project, 1990-93.

JNL/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/Chemconics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004.