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Helmand Follow Up XXVII

**A Proposal for the Annual Winter Maintenance Period for Central Helmand  
Irrigation System**

**Guidelines for a Reconstruction/Opium Control Program in Central  
Helmand, Afghanistan**

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**“Our problem is not that we need a new strategy...we agree on something,  
we do not implement it and we say something must...be wrong with the  
strategy. The problem is in the implementation.” Kai Eide, Kabul, 16 Jan 09.**

The text of this proposal expands on the following critical points in dealing with Central Helmand farmers and administrators – a group of talented people who happen to see the world differently from the west.

- Put the people to work,
- Use hand labor,
- Implement projects that bring immediate and direct benefits to the **rural** people,
- Work on the irrigation system upon which they all depend,
- Focus on one central Helmand district to start: Nad-i-Ali,
- Let the Afghans, local government, do it (with close collaboration and monitoring),
- Contract an Afghan NGO for reconstruction: HAFO
- Support the markets for their traditional cash crops like cotton,
- Initiate an agricultural credit system,
- Support, train, closely monitor **and pay** the local police,
- Eradicate opium poppies just after planting season, not at harvest time,
- Begin talking with our enemies,
- Stop killing our friends,
- Maintain a separation between military operations and development actions,
- Be flexible.

## Guidelines

1. **All reconstruction and development work must be directly related by word and action to the elimination of opium poppy cultivation in the region.** Opium poppy cultivation is closely linked with the region's local economy, security, the people's confidence in and support of their government, and corruption. Keep in mind that Helmand produces some 65% of the country's opium. Because of its modern irrigation system with adequate water, relatively large land holdings and cash crop farmers, central Helmand likely produces most of this.
2. To start, all reconstruction and development work must be focused on bringing **direct and immediate benefits to the target population.** Put the people to work.
3. The target groups are the land owners, farmers, farm laborers and their families of one of the central Helmand districts, probably Nad-i-Ali to start. This is the district in which the same project has been initiated on three previous occasions. They will understand the goals. **Put this large rural work force to work on something other than opium poppy.**
4. The reconstruction work should be focused on the central Helmand irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it, roads. This puts the local farm labor force to work-for-pay on their own irrigation system...direct benefits. **But if the project cannot be carefully monitored in the field, do not expect it to produce the planned results.**
5. The reconstruction work should **use as many hand laborers as can be effectively managed**, and use machinery only where hand-labor cannot be effectively utilized. Laborer body count is important to funding agencies but must not take precedent over working safely and effectively.
6. **The Governor and his staff must take the lead** in local negotiations, farmer dialogue, planning and implementation of the reconstruction program, with close oversight and monitoring. Local government (Helmand Valley Authority, HVA) is responsible for the maintenance and operation of the region's irrigation system.
7. **The Governor and his staff must negotiate with the farmers** this long term reconstruction and opium poppy elimination program. It would include support for the traditional cash crop markets. Again, this

will be an uphill battle since the government representatives have negotiated with the farmers on this same issue in this same area and gotten agreement on two previous occasions but have been unable to follow through because of erratic foreign donor support. **If the international community cannot agree to support this integrated approach on the long term, these negotiations should not be initiated.** The target population has had enough of broken promises.

8. An **Afghan NGO should be contracted** to implement the proposed reconstruction work in collaboration with HVA. The NGO should have experience working in the region on similar projects and if possible with local connections. One with excellent experience is Helping Afghan Farmers Organization, (HAFO).
9. **“Reconstruction” should include immediate (British) support for the Bost Cotton Gin in Lashkar Gah** which would include technical assistance and funding to allow the gin to pay for the 2008 cotton harvest. (The US cannot be involved with supporting the cotton industry without an act of congress. Several US Representatives have been informed of this problem as it relates to opium, but no action resulted.) Earlier in the season the rumor was that the price to be paid for cotton by the gin was to be increased by some 70% to 108 Afs. per *mon*. Wishful thinking. It appears more recently that the cotton gin has no funds to buy what should be the incoming cotton crop harvested in the fall. Again, the British would do well to immediately find the cotton gin to allow them to pay for the 2008 cotton crop. In the past the gin issued the farmers an IOU chit for cotton delivered to the gin. Under the present political conditions, it is not clear what the gin might do and what might be acceptable to the farmers. **“Reconstruction” should also include support for the other traditional cash crops’ markets of the region** in need of support like melons, vegetables, peanuts and, this year hopefully, wheat. Nad-i-Ali represents the center for most of these traditional cash crops.
10. There should be **an immediate start up of a small credit system** for at least one of the traditional cash crops, probably cotton. Cotton seed is distributed free by the government gin. The gin is the primary buyer of the cotton. In the past, the farmers received credit for fertilizer from the gin to be repaid when they brought their cotton crop in for sale to the gin. There were additional benefits for the cotton farmers: cotton seed cake and cooking oil (free or at reduced prices). There are individuals in Lashkar Gah that were involved with this past credit program that could help with a new start up. **Early planting of cotton for greatest production starts in March-April.**

11. **Increased wheat production should be stressed for this next year**, given the present high wheat prices resulting from national shortages. But free wheat seed programs should be viewed with skepticism as past wheat seed (feeding) programs put cheap wheat on the local markets, lowering wheat prices in this wheat surplus producing region. Generally the wheat farmers in this region do not need wheat seed. They need a good market as with all cash crops. WFP should reconsider their policy of not buying wheat in countries that are receiving WFP wheat. While rain fed wheat regions in northern Afghanistan have crop failures, central Helmand can produce bumper crops of wheat as they did in the drought of the early '70s. There was a free wheat seed and fertilizer program initiated in Helmand for the fall of '08 but to my knowledge it focused on the more marginal areas of Helmand and not on the most productive districts of central Helmand that produce most of the opium, cotton, peanuts and all the other cash crops. My guess is that central Helmand will produce more wheat and less opium this crop season, even without the free wheat seed program, than they have in the past. They should be responding to the prices on the open market. The success or failure of the free wheat seed and fertilizer program will depend on the ability of project staff to carefully monitor the program in the field and what happens to the wheat seed.
12. **The local rural police force must be legitimately brought back into the equation.** This can likely only be done with the replacement of some of the present key actors and the governor's direct involvement. This would include training, re-building an esprit décors, and regular, on time, adequate salary payment. People who do not receive adequate compensation in a timely manner cannot be expected to do their jobs in an effective manner, especially in a bribery-prone situation. If the regular, adequate salary payment system cannot be assured, then outside intervention may be necessary. And those police who insist on acting unlawfully must be punished...jailed. Confidence in the local police must return to the rural population.
13. At some point, **opium poppy eradication** is necessary to stress follow up and ensure compliance. The time to eradicate is soon after planting/germination after the governor has come to some agreement to initiate large scale hand-labor projects for not cultivating opium poppy. Negotiations. This gives the farmers the opportunity to re-plant a legal crop of wheat or, in March/April, cotton or peanuts. Beginning in the spring of '02 when the British attempted an eradication-for-pay program at harvest time, there have been several other failed attempts at eradication at harvest time. By harvest time, the farmers, their share-croppers and farm laborers have too much invested in the crop to see it destroyed. The alternatives have been: negotiated settlements

with the eradication teams (payment), threats of violence or violence. **The best time for opium poppy eradication is soon after planting time. The worse time for eradication of opium poppy is at harvest time.**

14. **Maintain a separation between military operations and development actions.** While the military seems to have access to a relatively high percentage of the development funds, in the eyes of most of the rural Pashtun population, especially in areas where there has been violence, the military from what ever country still represents a non-Muslim foreign military occupational force...an enemy to many. And to expect to “win the hearts and minds of the people” in areas where local people, friend and foe, have been killed by accident or on purpose, is wishful thinking. They do not think like that. And as the French pointed out some six years ago, to have the military involved in development work is to blur the lines between development groups and the military whose primary task is security. Security is necessary for serious development work to go forward but the rural population must not see development workers as spies against the insurgency, which includes some of the local population, or a potential threat to peoples’ lives...a difficult balancing act.
15. **The key to the success** to any long term program **is flexibility.** While this program is focused primarily on the rehabilitation of the irrigation system and its infrastructure, as noted, there must also be support for the traditional cash crops and a credit program. A single-theme project will not effectively address the problem. In addition, along with the irrigation work, the project field staff must have the authority to address other smaller construction projects that the farmers request and basically meet project criteria. Village schools, culverts, small foot and vehicle bridges and drainage work in “out-of-project” areas are examples from the past that could not be addressed because of the limited scopes of work for funding.

**A good time to start rehab work on the Boghra Canal:** The middle of January began what has been the traditional shut-down/maintenance period for the central Helmand irrigation systems based on the Boghra and Darwishan canals. This period lasts some 40 days between mid-January to the end of February when there would be no water in the canals and maintenance work can best be initiated in the deep drains and main canals without having men standing around in water. This period could be extended in to mid-March, depending on weather conditions. This is the coolest time of year when cloudy skies and the limited rainfall can be expected, when irrigation of the winter crops, hopefully mostly dormant wheat, is not needed. (At best, central Helmand gets just over 4 inches

of rain per year.) According to the media, there have been some early December rains this year. **This is the best time of year to work on the irrigation system**

**It is not too late to try** to organize a sizable work force of local farm labor to start work on at least the mid-sized drains in Nad-i-Ali, assuming security guarantees from local political leaders, tribal leaders and elders can be obtained by the governor. Greatest impact of reconstruction activities comes through putting as many of the sizable local and migratory farm labor force to work as possible on this irrigation system upon which their lives depend...and more money in more of the involved peoples' pockets.

It seems unlikely that HVA would have an official maintenance shut-down period this year. It may not be possible to do anything presently because of security problems but it is time to attempt to organize work crews from Nad-i-Ali to start work-for-pay on their own irrigation system and drains, as has been done three times since 1998. It may not be possible at this time but it is worth a try. The last serious work on this system was in the fall/winter of '04/'05. Silt has been accumulating in the system, and I would expect some damage from the recent fighting in the area. Given the approaches used in the past to quickly organize such a labor force to work on the same system of drains, it could likely be organized in a matter of days rather than weeks or months. Again, what I propose has been done on three previous occasions in the same area among the same people.

It is not clear how directly involved in the field the personnel of HVA are in the maintenance and operations of this the largest irrigation system in the country at this time but the system is still functioning, as it did under Soviet occupation, without much government involvement. This region produces more than 65% of the country's opium. This means that the now traditional system of *mirabs* (watermasters) made up of local men (farmers) are still doing their jobs of water distribution and maintenance of their farm ditches. This was the system the U.S. used to organize the work crews for the central Helmand irrigation rehabilitation projects in '98, '02 and '04. This should be the system around which any new irrigation rehabilitation work is organized. It is quick and effective.

One of the starting points is to **stop killing people** in Nawa, Marja and Nad-i-Ali, "insurgents" or farmers and their families. We can assume that the "insurgents" include some "Taliban" from outside the area, local people, many of whom were the mujahidin of the past or their sons and grandsons, and a few "foreigners" that tend to get more than their share of media attention. But with each air attack and intensive ground "operation" (as that through much of December in Nad-i-Ali) that kills local people, the number of local "Taliban" recruits will increase (regardless of their political orientations) and the foreign military occupational forces (us) will be increasingly equated with the Soviets. Assuming that the official military statements were true relative to the air strikes of 5 December 08, that the troops called in the air strikes to allow a retreat from the area of Nad-i-Ali, we can

assume that the area was under the control of the “Taliban”. After the December joint military “operation”, the security situation is not clear but apparently the “Taliban” have been cleared from the area or at least retreated to their homes. Many could also be put to work.

A key point to keep in mind is that **this region is mostly made up of a long term settled population of cash crop, double cropping farmers and a very large agricultural labor force some of which is migratory.** In addition, there are thousands of sheep herding nomads that winter camp in and around this perhaps the nation’s number one cash cropping region, now including opium poppy cultivation, and the largest irrigation system in the country. As a result of our long term support of development in the region, it was perhaps the most pro-American region in the country and we still have many supporters. These were some of the nation’s most innovative and successful cash crop, double cropping farmers who for the past 10 years have been asking for help with their cotton market, along with their other traditional cash crops, and rehabilitation of their long neglected infrastructure and irrigation system in order to get out of opium poppy cultivation...which has generally been ignored or inadequately addressed through misdirection and mistakes. But insecurity and illegal/immoral crops do not fit well with the lifestyles and orientations of these traditional cash crop farmers. Most consider opium poppy an “evil” crop with a reliable market. We should be attempting to put these people back to work and support their traditional cash crops. “The problem is in the implementation.”

**One View of the Past in Central Helmand:** We and local government in Helmand lost the support and confidence of the local rural population, most of the people, some years ago. We also lost the support and confidence of the local government after most hand-labor projects shut down in mid-'05. Governor Sher Mohammad went out on a limb in '02 and '04 with negotiated promises of large-scale hand-labor irrigation reconstruction work in exchange for not cultivating opium poppy, to which the central Helmand farmers agreed. As a result, for the crop year '02-'03, opium poppy cultivation was reduced by some 85% in Nad-i-Ali (some 11,500 hectares of irrigated land) according to the UN Narcotics Survey. The project had employed some 3-5,000 men during its short life. The project was shut down for a year just prior to the '03 fall (opium poppy) planting season because of funding problems. Opium poppy cultivation returned. The project was re-started in the fall of '04 with similar positive results. But this project was pressured to expand too rapidly into marginal areas with minimum monitoring and supervision, and limited security. The magnitude of the project attracted attention. This project was shut down in mid-May '05 after some 12 Afghan staff members were shot. Soon after this, Governor Sher Mohammad requested help from the UN and the US in writing to re-start project activities in attempt to live up to some of his negotiating promises and to meet some of the local farm population’s expectations. But help was not to come. Opium poppy cultivation returned to record setting levels up to the present time. Local government got deeply involved in the drug trade and corruption is rampant. There has been a continuous turn over of governors...3-4 since Sher Mohammad. Attempts at

opium poppy eradication at harvest time failed with farmers paying off government eradication teams not to destroy their crops.

**Summary and Conclusions:** Our reconstruction/opium poppy control program over the past 7 years has generally failed in central Helmand through misdirection and mistakes. We have generally taken a policing mentality in addressing this issue rather than one of development and crop replacement. We have not listened to what the farmers have been saying/requesting for the past 10 years for help in getting out of opium cultivation. This has allowed (supported) the re-emergence of the Taliban movement. The Taliban government was appreciated in this region in the late '90s because it brought security. The Taliban values and orientations that were so disagreeable to Kabulis were shared by most of the local rural population here. But it became clear that Taliban had no understanding about the development of a cash crop economy and confidence in the government was lost. They were *mullahs*. And we refused to enter into a constructive dialogue with them or offer a helping hand.

We should attempt to develop an effective, long term integrated “reconstruction” program that we promised at the Berlin Conference in 2002 and failed to deliver. As Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Fields recently said: “... reconstruction efforts are fragmented and that existing strategies lack coherence.” (A.P. 30 Jan 09) He was being kind. We must stop supporting the re-emergence of the Taliban movement, the return of opium poppy cultivation and government corruption through inaction and mistakes. **We should do the obvious. Do what these farmers have been requesting for the past 10 years to get out of opium poppy cultivation.**

I have frequently proposed this approach in this series of email memos since '03. It proved to be initially effective on the short term on two occasions but, again, was bungled through misdirection and mistakes. This complex problem must be addressed with an integrated program as outlined, not by military force and police action alone. It is not simply a narcotics control problem. It should be primarily a development program. The military people continue to say the right things about development, dialogue and negotiations but continue to act as if force is the answer. With Pashtuns, force is not the answer. Put the development work back in the hands of the development organizations but in the hands of **developers who will listen to the target population of farmers** in central Helmand. There is no “silver bullet” to change this already out of control situation. The series of interrelated actions/projects outlined is needed, if it is not already too late. But it is never too late to try.

Rural Afghanistan is not some homogeneous mass of subsistence farmers. What is needed and can work in central Helmand will not be appropriate for other regions like Badakshan, Hazarajat or even northern Helmand. My proposals are focused on the problems in cash-crop central Helmand and mostly come from years of discussions with the farmers in that region.

With the change of administration and turnover of ambassadors, perhaps we can accomplish something coordinated and effective in central Helmand.

I would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this memo with anyone with an interest in central Helmand farmers, the reduction of opium poppy cultivation and, hopefully, a reduction in the increased hostilities in the region. These issues are all inter-related. I would be happy to help plan, organize and deploy any of the suggested actions outlined here. Please feel free to forward this message to anyone you think might be interested. All past e-mail memos and papers on the same subject are available on request.

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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, 2004