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Helmand Follow Up XXIX

**Opium Poppy Planting Season Again:
Were We Ready?**

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The president did not mention the reconstruction/counter-narcotics element of his new-strategy for Afghanistan last month although it represents one of the most important elements of the strategy because it must address the key issues, at least in central Helmand, of:

- Putting the very large farm labor population to productive work outside the opium poppy industry,
- One primary source of the funding for the insurgency,
- The initial and primary source of local government and police corruption,
- Rural disenchantment with their ineffective and corrupt local and central governments,
- The initial and primary source of rural disenchantment with the community of international donors resulting from their failure to live up to the early promises of a “Marshal Plan” reconstruction effort,
- The growing numbers of young male and female addicts resulting from the flood of available opium combined with the frustrations of no viable present or future life,
- Farmer knowledge that opium poppy is an evil and un-Islamic but profitable crop that could be eliminated through an **integrated** agricultural support program that would help with known traditional

cash-crops' marketing and credit, things that we should have been focused on for the past 8 years.

As always, my comments are focused primarily on the districts of central Helmand that produce at least 50 percent of the world's opium on the largest irrigation system in the country mostly planned and constructed with US help between 1946 and 1979. And all reconstruction work must be combined with the counter-narcotics program by word and deed in this initial (8 years on) phase. We are well behind in this effort through misdirection, inaction and mistakes.

The president should have stressed this element of the strategy because it is more important to the farmers of this region than our military surge which will kill more people on both sides, and the civilian surge which clearly will involve a lot of "foreign experts" but may not address the key issues for central Helmand farmers because many of the foreign experts will not know what the key issues are for central Helmand farmers. In the media at least, the coming civilian surge may focus on building "...schools, particularly girls schools, clinics and roads..." rather than focusing first on elements more directly and immediately beneficial to this rural, cash-crop economy: again, support for their traditional cash-crops, their markets and an agricultural credit system. And most important for this area with a very large farm-labor population of farmers, share-croppers, day laborers and migratory laborers:

PUT THESE PEOPLE TO WORK ON LARGE REHABILITATION PROJECTS FOCUSED FIRST ON THEIR OWN IRRIGATION SYSTEMS USING PRIMARILY HAND-LABOR-FOR- PAY, PUTTING CASH IN THEIR POCKETS.

This is very important for our strategy and one of the keys to a successful counter-narcotics program. Our official statements tend to forward this idea but in the context of having the young "Taliban" renounce violence before they come to work. I propose that we just put as many people to work as possible without politicizing the process which could reduce participation and give the "Taliban" more propaganda. **Just put them all to work.**

During the recent visit of Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack to Helmand, the counter-narcotics program emphasis appears to be more in the direction of

substituting subsidized wheat for poppy although market support for other crops was mentioned. Wheat has always been a primary cash-crop in the central Helmand irrigation system since its establishment in the 50s. But in addition to wheat, the counter-narcotics program must also put a large part of the very large farm-labor force available in the region, both local and traditional migratory, to work on the infrastructure of the irrigation system. (Side note: from January into March is traditionally the cool season work period when the irrigation system is shut down for annual maintenance...when there is no water in the ditches and drains, when the wheat is dormant and irrigation water is not needed, and hand labor maintenance is most effective.)

There is also frequent mention in the media of tree crops and providing thousands of subsidized or free fruit trees for the region. While tree crops do provide some income in Helmand and the farmers (will) jump at the chance to get cheap or free good quality fruit trees, we must keep in mind that central Helmand is primarily a field crop region and our primary focus should be on direct and immediate benefits to the farmers: agriculture credit and support for their **present** markets, things that we should have also been doing for the past 8 years.

The opium poppy planting season has been completed, and for those that have not already seen it, the well written attached article by Aziz Ahmad Tassal of IWPR outlines the elements associated with farmers' decisions on what they will have cultivated this fall planting season...in the farmers' own words. It also outlines the local government hopes for what may be done to influence the farmers' decisions not to plant poppy this year. But what has been planted is yet an official unknown. (It would take about 15 minutes in the area to find out.) Virtually all the points made in Aziz's article have been repeated by Nad-i-Ali farmers over the past 8 years, recorded in this email series (see: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org) and generally ignored.

The farmers are well aware of the market conditions that effected poppy cultivation last year in this most important region: low price for opium resulting from several years of over production and high price for wheat resulting from drought conditions in other areas of the country. In central Helmand, these are smart, experienced double-cropping, cash-cropping farmers that understand and respond to the market. Some areas in the north of the country apparently had bumper crops of wheat this past harvest season for a change, resulting from good rains. How this is affecting the price of

wheat nationwide is yet an unknown but should be monitored. And there are again continuing worries about next year's wheat with the apparent reduced precipitation so far this winter.(IRIN, 18 Jan 10) But Helmand governor advisor Zmaryal's statement in the article that Helmand has "...always been a net importer of grain." is in error. Wheat has been a major cash-crop in Helmand since at least the introduction of Mexipak wheat in the early 70s. (Virtually all the foreign agricultural analysts over the past 60 years have commented on the mistake of planting wheat in such an expensive irrigation system.) And corn is one of the primary hot-season cash-crops in Helmand since cornbread is the preferred winter bread in the rural Pashtun areas.

The farmers are aware that opium is an "evil" crop that the consumption of which (at least) is un-Islamic, as Mullah Omer pointed out in 2000. And the rapidly growing addiction problem in even the rural areas of Helmand is a constant reminder. Local religious leaders may and very likely do discuss this issue with the people on a regular basis but in fact would have very little influence on what crops are planted. They are not Mullah Omer nor do they have a Taliban enforcement capability behind their statements.

The Governor's "Food Zone Program" was apparently underway again during the fall planting season in at least Nawa. ("US trying to wean farmers from opium", Washington Times, 10 Dec 09) The government distributed some 100 kgs. of wheat seed and six bags of fertilizer to perhaps 4,800 farmers in Nawa on credit apparently at lower than market prices. According to the McClatchy Newspapers, ("US turns to Afghan farmers to uproot insurgency" 12 Jan 10), some 80% of Helmand farmers or 125,000 farmers received wheat subsidies this year. Certainly the farmers will welcome such a program but we should also be monitoring the Lashkar Gah wheat bazaar to see how much of the wheat gets on the local market and what it does to the price of wheat. Some of the past wheat distribution/feeding programs in the area resulted in reduced wheat prices...not a desired effect if we want farmers to continue to plant wheat. And as can be expected, "...rumors are sweeping the farming community that there is favoritism and corruption...in the program..." (L.A.Times, 31 Dec.09) We must keep in mind that Helmand farmers have continued to cultivate some wheat along with poppy, more this past year, so they have wheat seed.

Again, we must focus on supporting the markets for their traditional cash-crops including wheat, corn, peanuts, cotton (there is a functioning cotton gin in Lashkar Gah built by the British around 1965), melons, watermelons,

vegetables, early vegetables, all of which they continue to cultivate and closely monitor the markets. And there is a period between the fall planting season and the early spring planting season for peanuts and cotton (March/April) when usable land is left fallow. Some short-term growing season vegetable crops could be identified to fill this void (like radishes) but again, the key is a ready and available market.

I have inserted Aziz's referenced article here in the middle of my communication because the two should be read together.

Efforts to Curb Afghanistan Helmand Opium Show Promise

by  [IWPR](http://www.iwpr.org) October 05, 2009

Poppy cultivation in Helmand province, Afghanistan's opium capital, fell by more than 30 per cent this year - but what will next year bring?

By Aziz Ahmad Tassal in Helmand (ARR No. 339, 01-Oct-09)

As the autumn planting season for poppy approaches, Afghan farmers are weighing their options. Last year, an aggressive campaign by the provincial government, coupled with a significant downturn in the price of opium, led many landowners to abandon their traditional, illegal crop for wheat.

Helmand, the undisputed opium capital of the world, showed an overall decrease of 33 per cent in poppy cultivation in 2009.

This year, Helmand governor Gulab Mangal has vowed to expand his so-called Food Zone programme, which distributes seeds, fertiliser and equipment to farmers in specific areas who grow wheat and other food crops rather than poppy.

"The Food Zone programme encouraged people not to grow poppy," Mangal said. "It shows that seriousness, a regular plan and good management can have an effect. Poppy cultivation decreased by 33 per cent this year, and I am sure that by next year we will double that figure."

Advisor to the governor Salim Zmaryal was similarly upbeat about the Food Zone. "This project was based on popular demand," he told IWPR. "We raised public awareness by talking to religious leaders and soliciting their opinion about the illegality of poppy. We also conducted a campaign through the media. In addition, we distributed seeds, and got serious about implementing the law. We punished smugglers and confiscated the tools needed for harvesting. We seized and burned opium. All of these measures contributed to the decrease."

Funding for the programme was provided mainly by the United Kingdom, Zmaryal said. "The UK allocated 12.9 million US dollars for the Food Zone," he said. "But other countries helped as well. For instance, the United States will give us fruit saplings for 1,000 hectares of land. "The programme was so successful that Helmand exported 4,000 tonnes of wheat to other provinces this year, he added – all the more remarkable because Helmand had always been a net importer of grain.

The fight against opium poppy in Helmand has been a long and difficult one, with uneven results. Afghanistan's largest province, and one which suffers from a vigorous insurgency, Helmand alone produces half of the world's opium. Much of the land under cultivation is in areas controlled by the Taleban and other insurgent groups; still more is protected by corrupt police or government officials.

From 2004 to 2009, poppy cultivation more than tripled, reaching a peak in 2008 with over 103,000 hectares planted. This year, for the first time, that area has shrunk, according to a report issued in September by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, UNODC. In 2009, Helmand planted about 70,000 hectares – a fall of 33 per cent. Production of opium declined by 24 per cent to just over 4,000 tonnes in 2009 from nearly 5,400 in 2008.

While Afghan government officials are more than happy to claim the credit for the sharp decline, the UN points out that market factors also played a significant role. The price of opium has taken a nosedive due to overproduction in recent years. A kilogramme of fresh opium in 2009 fetches just 48 dollars, or a little over one-third of what it cost just two years ago.

Faced with the risks and headaches of poppy versus the shrinking rewards, many farmers simply decided to switch to wheat or other crops. "We are not going to cultivate poppy anymore," said Bismillah, a resident of Nad Ali. "It has made us poor. We don't have wheat or hay for our animals because we grew poppy."

Some people say they have benefited little from the Food Zone. "The government gave us nothing," said Abdul Bari, a resident of Chaimirza village in Nad Ali district. "We spoke with the government's representative, but he told us that we were too late in requesting assistance. So we grew poppy. We are just as strong as the government. We harvested our fields and nobody interfered. I collected 140 kg, and I will plant it again this year. It is like cash, I can sell it whenever I want to."

Abdul Bari may well qualify for assistance next year, however. The governor insisted that the Food Zone programme would be extended in the coming season. "Last year, we gave seeds and fertiliser to 32,000 farmers," Mangal said. "This year, we will expand that to 40,000 farmers."

Sher Agha, a farmer in Nawa district, thinks the Food Zone programme is a great idea, but nevertheless chose to stay with poppy. "I am not happy to grow poppy, but what else can I do?" he said. "Other crops do not bring in as much income. Opium might be cheap

at the moment, but the price will go up later. There is good money in opium. They gave us wheat last year, but we stuck with poppy. When the eradication team came to our village, we gave them 400,000 Pakistani rupees (about 4,800 dollars), and saved our crop. We are still thinking about what to do this year – we have not yet made a decision.”

The Food Zone programme is also under attack from those who complain of corruption in the allocation of resources. This is hardly surprising in Afghanistan, designated the fifth most corrupt country in the world according to the Transparency International’s annual index. Still, it is an important factor when weighing the support of the population for the government’s anti-poppy efforts.

“This multi-million dollar project is going into the pockets of a very small number of people,” said Abdul Ahad Helmandwal, a tribal leader in Helmand. “I am critical of it for many reasons. First, they promised to distribute high-quality fertiliser, which costs 700 rupees (8.50 dollars) per sack. Instead, they are giving out an inferior product, which you can buy in the market for 400 rupees.

“In addition, some members of the staff of the governor’s office and district officials from Nad Ali have a share in this process. They have stocked hundreds of sacks of fertiliser for themselves. This is just the same as four years ago, when there was a project to pay farmers not to grow poppy. Most of the money went to people inside the process, who had never grown one jerib of poppy, but received thousands of dollars. This process is also corrupt.”

Surgul, a farmer in Nad Ali, agrees. “At the beginning we thought they were giving us wheat and fertiliser for free,” he said. “Now they are asking us for money – 700 afghani (14 dollars) per kg. We don’t have even seven afghani. We have to buy our food from the shops on credit. There is no money in the districts. People are poor. This programme is giving wheat and fertiliser to people with close relations to the governor’s office, or it goes to the staff of the local government.” Mangal insisted that his office maintained a firm grip on resources, and that corruption and bribery had been controlled. His deputy, Abdul Satar Mirzakwal, attributed the griping to enemies of Afghanistan.

“We are fighting terrorism,” he said. “Helmand is a province riddled with terrorists. Drug smugglers and those who benefit from poppy do not want this [Food Zone] programme to be successful; they just want to sabotage it. We are not spending a penny on this programme – all the money is coming from the United Kingdom. The PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) is responsible for all the expenses. This is a good opportunity for people. Today the world is trying to get rid of poppy.”

Meanwhile, the government is trying to crack down on farmers who do grow poppy. “We want to meet with the district governors soon so that they take this issue seriously,” Mangal said. “They should tell the people that anyone who cultivates poppy will be arrested and imprisoned and his equipment will also be taken from him. “The person arrested will not be released until his fields have been planted with something other than poppy.”

Another positive development in the fight against poppy, according to residents, has been the increased US military presence in Helmand. In the past, those living in Taleban-controlled areas were able to cultivate poppy in relative peace; but following Operation Khanjar, a US-led offensive in July of this year that cleared the Taleban out of several southern districts, some farmers may choose not to risk growing the illegal crop.

“We may not be able to grow poppy at all this year, since the government is back in control of Nawa,” said Mohammad Jan, a farmer in Kharabay village in Nawa district. “If we grow it, they will destroy it. Last year, one of our relatives lost his poppy fields just at harvest time, when he had begun to scrape the poppies. It was very difficult for him – at that time of year, poppy is more precious than one’s own son. I am going to grow wheat this year. It would not be fair to accept government assistance and still grow poppy.”

The practice of eradicating poppy in the spring, when farmers have invested time and money in bringing the crop to maturity, has riled many landowners.

“In Afghanistan, you have to force people, or they will never listen to you,” said another resident of Nawa, Noor Mohammad. “The government should first arrest and imprison me. They should tell me in prison to stop growing poppy. They do not do this. Instead, they come and destroy my fields when I have already gone through the hard times. They tell me poppy is illegal. The government should help me. If it does not, I will never listen, not even to the president.”

Aziz Ahmad Tassal is an IWPR-trained reporter in Helmand.

As previously noted numerous times, single focused actions on the counter-narcotics issue do not work, not eradication, not new “magic” cash-crops, not large scale construction projects that do not directly relate to the needs of the rural population (most of the people), not agriculture fairs, not cheap wheat seed, etc. And poppy cultivation is at the base of most of the economic and security problems in this region. What is needed is a very broad scoped integrated reconstruction/counter-narcotics agricultural support program focused first on the immediate and direct needs of this knowledgeable, mechanized, double-cropping, cash-cropping region of farmers and farm labor. (These are not backward, primitive, ignorant subsistence farmers as the media sometimes suggests.) All reconstruction work must be focused in word and deed on the counter-narcotics issue. And after 8 years of delay and disillusionment, we must take effective action **NOW**.

But I must add that I do not think that our recent and coming military surge will help or solve the problems of Central Helmand. Most of these problems

could have been/can be solved through an integrated, timely, effective and focused agriculture/reconstruction program, if it is not too late but not through military action.

Hopefully much of what is being outlined in this communication is already known and being acted on by the recent “civilian surge” people. And again, as always, 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 and in the previous email memos in this series. (see: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org)

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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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