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Helmand Follow Up XXX

More Mixed-signals for Central Helmand Farmers

And

A Review of the Basic Actions Needed for an Effective Coordinated

Reconstruction-Counter-Narcotics Program

**Richard B. Scott
Helmand Analyst**

Introduction: Our present counter-narcotics policy is one of the most important elements of our Afghan foreign policy, and it is the most confusing. Illegal opium poppy cultivation is the base of the national economy and central Helmand apparently produces more than half of this opium on the largest, modern irrigation system in the country, built with our help between 1946 and 1979. The opium trade is responsible for much of the local government corruption, loss of farmer trust in government and contributes to the support of the “Taliban” movement. At some point we must effectively address the counter-narcotics issue but in the context of a long-promised development/reconstruction program. Our present military-oriented actions in at least central Helmand are not addressing this most important problem.

Mixed Signals: For the past year the various policy statements and actions relating to a counter-narcotics program represent mixed signals to the cash-cropping, double-cropping farmers, the sharecroppers and the vary large body of resident and migratory farm laborers of Central Helmand. These statements and actions, emanating from representatives of the Afghan

central and local governments, the US government, NATO, the British and the US Marines are wide ranging, conflicting and ultimately confounding to all.

Here is some of what is known about recent attempts at an opium policy:

- The US State Department announced that the eradication programs had been a failure and a waste of money. Eradication funding was stopped and the focus shifted to interdiction of the opium after harvest. This resulted in the arrival of large numbers of DEA agents in the area.
- At one point the British military announced to the farmers that they were not there to eliminate their opium poppy crops. This received considerable commentary in the media.
- The US military has commonly noted that eradication efforts push farmers into the hands of the opposition and so it proposed to ignore the present bumper crop. Later the same military proposed a program to pay farmers for fields of near-mature opium poppies with the farmers taking the lead in the burning of the fields. The details of how such a program could be implemented by the Marines were not forthcoming in the media. The failed British experience in the spring of '02 (if anyone remembers) suggests such programs must be carefully planned, strictly controlled and carefully monitored for success.
- The governor has stressed eradication but at the same time has initiated a NATO-backed "food zone program" with the distribution of free or reduced price wheat seed and fertilizer. The media has noted various levels of corruption in this program over the past two years.
- Cash-for-work projects have apparently been initiated in parts of Nawa (Shamalan), Nad-i-Ali and Marja as part of the "winning friends" effort.
- Apparently, as this harvest season gets underway, this bumper crop of opium poppy will be ignored in some areas but in Marja the Marines have started paying farmers for plowed fields of whatever crop (not

just poppy). Farmers are receiving \$300 a jerib (about half-acre), free seed (for unspecified crops) and fertilizer. This program is termed “agricultural transition program”. And it was noted that the farmers involved in the program would not be allowed to return to poppy next year. (*Chisholm, Reuters, “Marines pay Afghan farmers to destroy opium”, 15 April 10*). This program will be very difficult to monitor.

- At the same time, there is a plan to turn away from at least Marja the very large migrant farm labor force beginning to arrive from outlying districts and provinces for harvest time. Apparently there will also be an attempt to confiscate the very small harvesting tools (both would fit in the palm of one hand and are also made locally) being brought in by the laborers. (*Chandrasekaran, Washington Post, “Marines try unorthodox tactics...”, 13 April 10*). This plan will be very difficult to implement.

If you were a farmer in central Helmand, wouldn't you be confused? All these statements, proposals and actions do not send a clear picture to the farmers of what the “authorities” (who ever they might be in whatever area) are actually going to do.

The farmers of central Helmand need a consistent policy, clearly stated, and followed by a farmer-friendly, long-term set of inter-related reconstruction/development and counter-narcotics actions. No reconstruction/development work should be initiated outside the context of a counter-narcotics dialogue. This frequently is a missing element in the farmer-authority dialogue, if the media reports are at all accurate. It is most important that these two elements always be presented to the farmers consistently in word and deed as an inter-related policy.

Coordinating Meetings: It seems likely (let us hope) that the various military and government organizations, agencies and branches conduct periodic coordinating meetings that would perhaps include the multitude of NGOs working in the province. Such meetings would keep everyone informed about what others are doing, to reduce levels of redundancy, and to give everyone a feeling of involvement. In 2002 this function was organized by the head of HVA for the organizations working on his irrigation system. Presently, the governor should be the organizer to insure that the Afghans know what is being done in the province for which they are responsible. But

it is likely the military, US and British that have the main voices in these meetings, if such meetings do in fact occur.

Media coverage implies that the present “winning friends” policy (while killing locals) being implemented in Helmand is a part of the “new policy” being dictated out of Washington and implemented in Helmand by the US Marines. This should not be. The Afghan farmers continue to see the foreign military occupational forces as exactly that, and to some degree a replacement for the past Soviet forces, supporting an unpopular and corrupt government. There is a great deal of skepticism, fear and doubt when facing individuals from a foreign military unit that say they are there to help. We must try to understand the perceptions of these farmers and attempt to organize our programs accordingly.

Farmer Views: The mixed signals being sent by the various organizations and agencies, both Afghan and foreign, civilian and military, only proves to the farmers of central Helmand various degrees of the following:

- there is disagreement among the groups as to who is in charge
- there is uncertainty as to what is needed
- there is uncertainty about what is politically relevant
- that the various groups do not understand what is needed
- there is confusion/disagreement between the police-minded organizations and the reconstruction/development-minded people as to how to address the issue

Can we afford to have these farmers and other local people to be in this frame of mind about our presence? Our so-called policy is locally understood as weakness and confusion. Pashtuns are expert at negotiation and pin-pointing weaknesses in the opposition. To overcome this problem all the involved agencies must develop a single, clear and effective policy. All agencies must work in close collaboration and coordination. This does not appear to be happening.

The farmers of central Helmand are well off when compared with many other areas of Afghanistan. Note the numbers of farmer owned automobiles, tractors, households with their own generators and these days the numbers of cell phones. In 2004, satellite phones were not uncommon. Even the Taliban PTT office in Lashkar Gah had one for public use in the late 1990s. The

farmers need reliable, continuous institutional support which has been generally ignored by the international community of donors since the fall of the “Taliban”. The farmers need a farmer friendly integrated reconstruction/development, counter-narcotics program that combines employing for pay this very large rural farm labor force to work on their own irrigation systems and the infrastructure that supports it, provide an effective agricultural credit program, and support the markets for their traditional cash-crops like wheat, cotton, peanuts, vegetables, melons, etc. They do not need bribes (free seed) to cultivate the right crops. They need marketing support, something that RAMP should have been focused on early in the decade. The farmers monitor the markets carefully and frequently, and exchange information and ideas on what is happening.

If there is a good and reliable market for a cash crop (like the narcotics traffickers have developed for opium) central Helmand farmers can, will and probably already do cultivate it.

Eradication: As a repeated side note, all eradication actions, planned and initiated, have been aimed at the opium poppy crop at harvest time when the farmers and sharecroppers have so much invested in the crop. A more farmer-friendly effort would be with a strong government information program during the summer warning farmers not to plant poppy; immediately institute a cash-for-work project employing thousands of the farm-labor force working on local irrigation systems; followed up with eradication soon after planting/germination. These actions would demonstrate clearly the relationship between work that puts cash into their pockets with the reduction and elimination of opium poppy as a cash-crop. Eradication early in the crop season will allow the farmers that ignore the previous warnings against poppy to re-plant other cash crops, i.e., wheat or winter vegetables. The farmers of central Helmand are aware of this relationship between rewarding projects and the elimination of opium poppy. It has been explained to them on at least three long term occasions (projects) between 1998 and 2005. (See my final reports on these projects in: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org.) As the governor understands, eradication has a role in the counter-narcotics equation - but not at harvest time. **Given the different configuration of irrigation paddies for wheat vs. opium poppy in at least central Helmand, opium poppy fields are easily identified as soon as the fields are prepared for planting.**

Summary: A farmer friendly integrated program of development, reconstruction and counter-narcotics elements is possible and much needed to improve the situation in central Helmand. The military should not be the controlling authority for such a program. The military should return to their initial goal of bringing security to the area. No development/reconstruction work should be initiated without elimination of opium poppy cultivation as an element. And there should be no counter-narcotics actions without a direct relationship and continuous dialogue with the farmers about continuous development/reconstruction efforts. All counter-narcotics actions must be preceded by planned development/reconstruction activities. These farmers have experienced 8+ years of more or less continuous failed or empty promises of economic support by their own government and by the international community of donors. The farmers' views of the present reconstruction efforts are one of doubt and skepticism reinforced by the recent violence of our foreign military occupational force.

Timing is the key to Success: The best time to address the counter-narcotics issue is before the fall planting season, not at poppy crop maturation. Since it requires time to achieve a coordinated effort among a variety of organizations to develop an effective program, **now is the time to start planning the program to be initiated before next fall's opium poppy planting season. Fall 2010.**

We must stop sending mixed signals to these central Helmand farmers who have been our collaborative friends for well over a half century. This can only be done with an effective, comprehensive, integrated counter-narcotics program as outlined.

And as we develop our counter-narcotics program to initiate by next fall's planting season, we should keep in mind the following quote:

**"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.**

I have outlined this approach of a comprehensive, integrated reconstruction/development program and a continuous dialogue with the farmers in this series of email memos on numerous occasions since 2003 and again below.

Proposal Outline: The following points should be included in any effective, comprehensive, integrated counter-narcotics program. Single elements from this listing will not do the job. An expansion and detailed discussion of this proposal can be found in Helmand Follow Up XXVII, 1 Feb 09, available on request or in: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org

- Put the large farm labor force to work well before the planting season,
- Use hand labor
- Implement projects that bring immediate and direct economic benefits to the **farm** people
- Work on the irrigation system upon which they all depend
- Focus on one central Helmand district to start
- Let the Afghans, local government, do it (with close collaboration and monitoring)
- The US military must not take the spotlight for development work. They should focus on security
- Contract an experienced Helmand-focused Afghan NGO for reconstruction organization and implementation: 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.

As always, I would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this memo with anyone interested in central Helmand farmers, the reduction of opium poppy cultivation and/or a reduction in the increased hostilities in the region. These issues are 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.

Richard B. Scott
2598 W. Hwy. 34
Drake, CO 80515
Tel: (970)586-8485
Email: scott@scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org
Website: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org

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