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**Helmand Follow Up XXXIII**

**The Failed Reconstruction/Development Program in Helmand**

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**“Do what is right, let the consequences follow.”**

**Sir Richard F. Burton, 1860**

The recent informative article by Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "U.S. military dismayed by delays in 3 key development projects in Afghanistan", (Wash. Post, 28 April 2011), is a must-read for anyone interested in what is happening in the Helmand region of Afghanistan where we had a near continuous presence between 1946-1979 and helped build the largest irrigation system in the country that presently produces some 70% of the country's opium. This article again spells out many of the problems our failed reconstruction/development program in Afghanistan has not addressed in the critical provinces of Kandahar and Helmand over the past 9 years. I will expand on some of these issues which I have outlined in the past. (see [www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org](http://www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org)) They are not new or surprising problems and have always demanded change, which we seem unable to do.

We need to begin doing the right things in our strategy or program in Helmand and stop living with the results of our past and continuing mistakes. But with the relatively rapid turnover of staff, both civilian and military, there is a problem of institutional memory. The farmers of Helmand have given up on our promised reconstruction/development Marshal Plan and continue to cultivate opium poppy as their primary cash crop with its reliable market, good prices and informal credit system. As the referenced article points out, the farmers accept the political gifts of free seed, tractors, etc. etc. but they are unrelated to the real local economy, which is now poppy.

Budget cuts by congress should be no problem with this over-populated, over-budgeted, over-stressed and "flawed" strategy, assuming someone can

pull all the parts together and focus on the real problems related to the farmers' economy, markets for the legal cash crops that the farmers continue to cultivate (like cotton), an ag. credit system ...and opium poppy, which we continue to more or less ignore except in the media.

As noted there is an over-abundance of experts from several countries, including representatives of several military forces and numerous US and British agencies and departments. Add to this the various contractors and sub-contractors from various countries. And virtually all are on short-term assignments. It is my understanding that the Helmand PRT has more than 100 people! Too many people trying to do too many, some times irrelevant, things, trying to spend too much money in too short of time. Irrelevant to most of the people, the farmers...like the new court house.

As a side note, the early planting season for cotton is over and we are into the wheat/poppy harvest season...and to my knowledge, nothing was done to attempt to get the farmers to grow more cotton for the international market which was at an all time high this past year. And I have seen nothing on the planned USAID funded study of Afghan cotton to see if these farmers who have been cultivating cotton as one of the main cash crops since the mid-1970s could grow more cotton and if there is a market...or some such. The answer to both questions is a simple yes...with a little help from us.

The different organizations in the region have different goals and apparently different strategies. There is "...an ongoing conflict within the agency (USAID) between short-term programs and longer-range development work." (This assumes the people fielding the projects understand the difference.) And this conflict will not be only within this one agency but also between the various agencies, organizations and countries. For example, "The military implications (of the cash-for-work projects) aren't the top priority" for USAID. And "Several agency officials also believe that the current program's emphasis on day-labor projects is unsustainable and needs to end." And these are people looking at/working with the largest irrigation system in the country that requires long-term and continuous maintenance most of which can be done by hand labor? In the 1970s, HAVA, HCU and us had difficulty keeping up with these maintenance needs at a time when the system and organizations were functioning well, and most of the maintenance work (cleaning the miles of primary canals and drains, and maintaining the system of roads) was done by machine. These are "short-term programs" only when the funding is cut in support of this available

large labor force of local farmers and migrants, as it was in 2003 for a year to change contractors...which also became short term in 2005 when several Afghan staff got shot in the context of putting too many people to work in too many places too quickly with limited security.

Some of the training programs for example, "... once envisioned as a \$125 million project over 18 months..." could be more easily cut than the cash-for-work projects without the same repercussions for the thousands of farmers who could be put to work maintaining their own irrigation systems for some \$5 (or more) a day. \$125 million represents a lot of \$5 per man work days. For these farmers, these cash-for-work projects are the top priority for supplementary income and for maintaining the irrigation systems upon which they all depend.

The Marines are right about the importance of cash-for-work projects. They are relatively inexpensive. They have immediate impact on the irrigation systems and the local economy. And they get the attention of the people we want to help: the rural population (most of the people). And, true, many of the workers are no doubt also farmers/Taliban who will earn some money on these "short term" projects...but as noted, they need not be "short term". These projects should be long-term and continuous. Put people to work.

As a side note to Kandahar Gov. Tooryalai Wesa's comment on the cash-for-work projects "...killing the culture...", the focus must be on projects that the farmers normally do not do themselves. A focus on the maintenance activities of the Helmand irrigation system is not one of these. By the original agreements between government and farmers in this system, the farmers are responsible for the maintenance of their ditches once the water leaves the main canals and is controlled and distributed by the locally chosen water master (mirab) who also has the responsibility to organize the farmer work force on his ditch to make repairs without pay. The maintenance of the hundreds of miles of primary canals, drains and structures are the responsibility of the government, HAVA/HCU...with whom I hope we are working, supporting and developing. Are we?

This relates to Karl A. Wittfogel's 1957 classic study Oriental Despotism on the relationship between the (Chinese) central authority (government) and the ability/need to organize a large enough labor force to build, maintain and operate enormous irrigation systems (and other public works) upon which the same people (farmers) depended.

In short, the funding for at least the Helmand reconstruction/development counter-narcotics program (if there is one) could be easily reduced to reasonable “realistic” levels, have greater impact on the local population, involve no political agricultural gifts, and perhaps gain some respect of these (now skeptical) very effective cash-crop farmers. These are some of the most effective cash-crop farmers in the country and have been for some four decades. They are not political dummies and they cannot be bought with gifts that they in fact do not need. I am wondering if the three Massy-Ferguson dealers still function in Lashkar Gah, if the extensive wheat and peanut bazaars still export their produce. Or has the opium trade mostly driven out the traditional cash-crop trade?

Below is a listing of points to keep in mind when attempting to initiate an effective reconstruction/development counter-narcotics program which should be at the base of any counter-insurgency program in this region. They are all related. This list can be found in two previous Helmand Follow Up memos.

- Put the large farm labor force to work on the central Helmand irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it well before the planting season,
- Use hand labor but only as many as can be effectively supervised,
- Implement projects that bring immediate and direct economic benefits to the **farm** people,
- Work continuously on rehabilitating and maintaining the irrigation system upon which they all depend to start,
- Focus on one central Helmand district to start and do not expand beyond what can be **effectively managed**,
- Let the Afghans, local government, do it (with close collaboration and monitoring) working with HAVA, HCU and other responsible government organizations, regardless of difficulty, but training and technical assistance is important,
- The US military must not take the spotlight for development work. They should focus on low-key security, and training,
- Contract an experienced Helmand-focused Afghan NGO for reconstruction organization and implementation that can work with HAVA and HCU (they speak the same “language”),

- Support and develop the markets for their traditional cash crops like wheat, cotton, melons, peanuts, etc.,
- Initiate an agricultural credit system by starting with cotton and the cotton gin, as in the past,
- Support, train, closely monitor **and pay** the local police,
- Give plenty of fair warning not to plant poppy before planting season, then eradicate opium poppies just after planting season, **not at harvest time**,
- Begin talking with our enemies,
- Stop killing our friends
- Maintain a clear separation between military operations and development actions, and stop political gift giving of seed and machinery to the farmers, (they do not need it and it wins no friends)
- Be flexible but do the obvious and right things. Understand what and who you are dealing with: **rural Afghanistan**.
- Ignore the bureaucratic needs to spend too much money too fast with too many people. Do the right things so we can live with the consequences.

And 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. All 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.

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**Scott 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, 1998-99.

USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002.

USAID/DAI, Officer-in-Charge, Helmand Drainage Rehabilitation Project, 2002-03.

USAID/Chemonics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004.