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Helmand Follow Up XXXV

**More Opium Poppy in Helmand This Year
Reflects the Failure of Our Counter-Narcotics Program.**

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<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2011/10/11/afghanistan-opium-production-set-to-rise-61-un.html>

<http://www.google.com/url?sa=X&q=http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/02/world/asia/in-afghanistan-a-troubling-resurgence-of-the-poppy-crop>.

Another year has passed in which we have been unable to do anything effective to reduce opium poppy cultivation at least in Helmand where much of the poppy grows. (See the map in the RAWA report above.) The minor fluctuations in cultivation over the past 3/5 years have apparently been the result of factors independent of any of our actions but difficult to acknowledge by our administrators. Even as we plan our withdrawal, we should attempt to do something effective.

In my view, there have been no “Vigorous (effective) efforts to get farmers to grow something else...”. But millions continue to be spent on things that are irrelevant or that alone do not work.

Things that affected opium production:

There was an opium poppy plant disease in 2010 that greatly reduced production in Helmand.

There were a few years just before this when the farmers over-produced opium and glutted the market driving prices down, and a market correcting shift to other crops. Helmand cash-crop farmers have watched the markets carefully for about half a century and can and do react quickly. Central Helmand farmers are not subsistence farmers and have not been for decades.

There has been a drought in the rain-fed agriculture areas in the north which should drive wheat prices up but the free/cheap wheat seed program in Helmand (Helmand Food Zone Programme) would likely drive wheat prices down in that area as some of this seed makes its way back into the local market. And with 150,000 participants, it would be impossible to monitor. (An understatement.) The Minister of Agriculture recently predicted a good wheat crop this year which is not supported by other sources.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sns-rt-afghanistan-agriculture-interviewl6e8c301x-20120106,0,5560123.story>

There continues to be a lack of trust and respect for local government and police who are also involved in the drug trade. And as an Afghan friend noted by email: "Reduction and returning of poppy crop is directly proportional to the confused policies of the international community and Afghan government. They failed to implement rule of law, they failed to provide basic services to the people and more than 50% of the population still living below poverty line.

Corruption at all levels of national and international is the source for insecurity and all kind of crimes and oppression imposed on innocent people. Violation of basic human rights by powerful people is another aspect of this system."

There is a complete loss of the expectations of support for the ag. economy and reconstruction promised by the international community some 10 years ago.

And there continues to be a lack of support of the markets for some/any of the alternative traditional cash-crops like cotton. There continues to be a search for the "silver bullet" crop...something new that sounds good in Washington.

And you can be sure that the farmers see the international community, including the military, as allowing the opium trade to flourish by looking the other way and with local government help and corruption...if they are not directly involved in the trade themselves. <http://www.straight.com/forward/emailref?path=node/571351>

Opium, on the other hand has a good and reliable market run by reliable individuals (mostly free enterprise not by the Taliban as frequently noted), a quick and easy marketing system with payment for opium at harvest time and a credit system. Given all the details, it should be no wonder why the opium trade flourishes: free enterprise (capitalism) at its best with virtually no competition or legal restrictions. According to many farmers, however, it requires too much hand labor (costly) and is an "evil" crop especially now as more and more of their young people get addicted. But it is a living.

The Helmand opium poppy crop for 2012 has been planted, it has germinated and the farmers should be ending the process of thinning and weeding the narrow irrigation paddies...small groups of squatting men easily identifiable.

This is the time of year when we **should** be supporting an eradication program, following a well advertised set of warnings not to plant by the governor in print, radio, TV and certainly by word of mouth. If there has been such an information program, the government must follow up with **unbribable** action...which is not the norm. Being prime targets, the Afghan eradication teams would need NATO (us) security support which will not happen. (We must not upset the farmers.?) Given the past and the present, this is wishful thinking. If combined with other related counter-narcotics actions like support for the markets of other traditional cash-crops (e.g., cotton), it could result in the needed **integrated program** that I have been outlining to many of the present readers for the last 10-12 years. The warnings before planting time and the very early eradication could

(have) result(ed) in a semi-farmer-friendly program that could reduce opium poppy cultivation without upsetting the farmers. The farmers who did not listen to the warnings not to plant poppy and got their crop eradicated would still have time to re-plant with wheat (and use some of that free wheat seed) or wait for the early planting season for cotton or peanuts in March/April. Or, how about some winter vegetables with marketing help? Helmand cauliflower, for example, is outstanding.

But the coming late season eradication of the poppy crop promised by the Governor will certainly upset the farmers if it is effectively done. More likely it will set up a situation, as in the past, of bribery of the eradication teams not to plow the fields of those who can afford to pay. If the teams actually become effective, they will be shot.

During this critical time of year, districts like Nad-i-Ali, Nawa and Marja have been turned over recently to the Afghan security forces. These are perhaps the most well developed and productive agricultural (including opium poppy) central Helmand districts with the largest irrigation system in the country which we helped to build between 1946-79. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g--Gf4tRGPG0ZKd4fMcCYpcR0Dhg?docId=CNG.900b2262f0a804d872b4ca9eb669605a.841>

But we should not expect the Afghan army to be any more effective in addressing the opium trade than our own forces have been. Apparently many of the Afghans in these units in Helmand are from the north, eg. Tajiks, so are “foreigners” for the locals. On the contrary, I would expect opium cultivation to increase again next year as a result, assuming the price of opium remains high. Initially the farmers were uncertain as to what the NATO forces would do about opium cultivation given the consistent U.S. and NATO nations’ statements and policies against the narcotics trade. But our pattern of sending the wrong signals to the farmers, our off and on support for reconstruction, our fear that we might upset the farmers if we were involved in the (badly timed) eradication effort, and our wasting of millions on frequently irrelevant (irrelevant to the farmers) projects has guaranteed the continuing, if not increase, opium industry.

And at the same time the U.S. military is putting in a solar panel electric system in/for Nawa (Khalaj) bazaar. Like the new court house in Lashkar Gah and the cobblestone road out to an ex-tourist site, this use of development funds sounds good in Washington and is appreciated by the merchants in Khalaj, but is irrelevant to the poppy farmers in Nawa and the rest of central Helmand.

<http://www.dvidshub.net/news/81939/solar-energy-project-provides-new-opportunities-shop-owners-southern-afghanistan>

Recommendations:

1. Being mid-winter with the crops either dormant or growing, it is time to start planning a counter-narcotics program for **next** year’s fall planting season. It clearly takes time to do something effective.
2. Assuming some poppy fields will be eradicated this season, apparently underway, we should publicize our support for the cotton gin and Helmand cotton industry as

outlined in Helmand Follow Up XXXIV by announcing an increase in the price to be paid for cotton by the gin, if not also establishing a credit system associated with the gin. Cotton planting season begins in March/April, i.e., the eradicated fields can be planted in cotton.

3. The details for an integrated program have been outlined numerous times in this series of email memos since 03, lastly in Helmand Follow Up XXXIII. They need not be repeated again here. But it begins with an effective information program that the farmers can believe and quickly followed by a variety of positive actions.

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 and can be found in my website: scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org.

Much of what I have written here has been repeated in other communications beginning in 1997 but it must be repeated until it results in some effective actions and a positive integrated reconstruction/counter-narcotics farmer friendly program. As a long-term Afghan friend has frequently pointed out, (Paraphrase, approximately) "You cannot resolve this issue by emails and conflict. It needs a knowledgeable team of both Afghans and foreigners working together with HAVA and all its records to take action." Others have suggested that nothing will change until the central and local governments and police are changed.

Finally, the consistent level of opium poppy cultivation in central Helmand over the past 10 years should suggest that our reconstruction and counter-narcotics program has failed and that we need to attempt to do something different and effective: a broad scoped integrated program. This series of email memos outlines what is needed based on experience from the past (the 02-03 winter crop year) and what the farmers have been requesting since 1997. We must attempt to start doing the obvious, **if it is not too late**: a farmer-friendly integrated reconstruction economic development counter-narcotics program.

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Scott's Helmand and USAID Experience:

(Most of the 1960s were spent working on projects in Turkey.)

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.