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Helmand Follow Up XXXVI

**Third Ministerial Conference of the Paris Pact Partners on Opiates in
Afghanistan,
The 55th Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs,
The Central Asian Counter-Narcotics Initiative, etc:**

More and More Talk and Planned Police Work

But How About the Farmers Who Cultivate Most of the Opium Poppy in Central Helmand ?

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In recent months there have been at least two major international counter-narcotics meetings with attention focused on Afghanistan attended by 50+ nations, numerous interested organizations and hundreds of people. These meetings must have cost at least hundreds of thousands of dollars each. But the primary focus was on how to improve policing of the narcotics traffic and not on the farmers and their agricultural economy who have consistently increased opium production over the past ten years. There were some interesting and accurate observations made during these conferences but nothing really new:

- UN Sec. Gen. Ki-Moon stated, “Drug trafficking and transnational organized crime undermine the health of fragile states (Afghanistan), (and) weaken the rule of law...Above all, the Afghan government must prioritize the issue of narcotics. ... We cannot expect stability when 15% of Afghanistan’s Gross Domestic Product comes from the drug trade.” (Vienna: Thursday 16 Feb 2012)

This would mean a crack down on corruption in local government, the courts and the police, something the central government, the foreign military occupational forces (NATO) and the UN have been unwilling or unable to attempt.

Until this happens, nothing much relative to opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan will/can change.

In January, UNODC noted that the revenue from opium production in Afghanistan increased by some 133%, and Ki-Moon noted a 7% increase in poppy cultivation and a 61% increase in production during the same period. And we must keep in mind that a very high percentage (perhaps 70+%) of opium cultivation in the country is in Helmand Province with the largest modern irrigation system which was mostly built with US support between 1946-79, and a population of smart, productive, double-cropping, cash-cropping farmers who have stated that

they would prefer to cultivate legitimate cash crops. But the opium poppy crop has a very reliable market, high prices and a built in credit system, things the traditional legitimate cash crops do not have and we have been unable to provide over the past ten years.

- Ki-Moon noted... "An initiative in Helmand province - a carrot-and-stick approach to stopping poppy growing which involved giving out food seeds and fertilizer - was a good example of government efforts, but more can be done."

More has to be done if any change is to be expected. This "initiative" has basically been a failure and Helmand remains the center of opium poppy cultivation in the country.

Given the contents of the Paris Pact "Declaration", the primary focus was mostly on increased policing activities:

- Strengthening and implementing regional initiatives to combat illicit traffic of opiates.
- Detecting and blocking financial flows linked to the illicit traffic.
- Preventing the diversion of precursor chemicals used in opiates processing.
- drug abuse and dependence through a comprehensive approach.

Under the first, there was mention of "...socio-economic measures, such as alternative livelihoods.." but in the context of "Strengthening the capacity of the..(government)..in combating illicit opium poppy cultivation, and illicit opiates production, including through law enforcement and socio-economic measures.." This will never happen.

To combat "illicit opium poppy cultivation" these cash crop farmers must move back into some of their traditional legal cash crops, like wheat, cotton, peanuts, melons, early vegetables, corn, mung bean, etc. The local government and the donors must support the markets and if necessary, subsidize the prices for these crops and provide an agricultural credit system. All of which the opium poppy industry provides.

At the 55th Session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs on 12 March, The Russian Federal Drug Control Director, Vikdor Ivanov stated:

- "A standard example is the distribution of bags full of wheat by the US and NATO troops in exchange for promises not to grow opium poppy... However, in most cases Afghan farmers gladly take the wheat and continue cultivating opium poppy, which brings them superprofits."

"This means that the alternative development status has failed," Ivanov said.

And more recently, (2 April, Ariana News, "Distribution of generators begin in Helmand"), we have initiated a project in Nad-i-Ali of giving or subsidizing the cost of electric generators, one for each 3-4 households, to some 2,000 farmers who promise not to plant poppy any longer. We might expect the same results as with the wheat noted above. And who will monitor the results? As a side note, many of the more successful farmers in Nad-i-Ali, those profiting from opium poppy, were beginning to buy household generators off the local market in the late 1990s.

But as I have frequently pointed out over the past 10-12 years, the international community tends to focus on one element of the opium poppy industry at a time, like eradication, free wheat seed, police work, interdiction, etc. etc. rather than putting together an effective integrated counter-narcotics program that addresses most of the key elements at the same time...and this must include support for the markets for the legal cash crops that the farmers continue to cultivate. And when the single-element project fails, we switch to some other single element...which will also fail. Yes, eradication has a place in the program but not alone and not un-monitored. Eradication is presently going on in Helmand by Afghan forces and will have similar results as in the past: a situation of farmers paying off the eradication teams. Eradication of any cash crop nearing maturity is a mistake. It has too much value for the farmers and their share-croppers toward the end of the growing season. In Helmand, eradicate the poppy crop **soon after germination** so the farmers can re-plant with legitimate crops...like wheat and COTTON.

And as I have also frequently pointed out, the starting point is at the source: with the farmers who cultivate opium poppy and their cash crop, double crop economy. The center of opium poppy cultivation remains in Helmand province. We have failed to effectively support the rebuilding/expansion of a legitimate agriculture economy in this politically most important region of the country. The free wheat seed project alone is not the answer although wheat has been one of the most important cash crops in Helmand since the high yielding varieties of wheat were introduced in the early 1970s. Helmand can and has produced bumper crops of wheat since that time even during the frequent periods of drought in the rain-fed areas in the north, thanks to the Helmand River, the large modern irrigation system and the smart innovative farmers, many of whom are descendents of settled sheep-herding nomads.

And we continue to ignore some of the obvious needed actions like support for the Helmand cotton industry which has been functioning since the mid-1960s when the British built the present cotton gin in Lashkar Gah with all US made equipment. It still functions. The farmers continue to grow cotton but at reduced rates in competition with opium poppy and what they consider low prices for their raw cotton and an unreliable market, all of which has been documented in past Helmand Follow Up memos. The farmers of central Helmand have been asking for help with cotton prices as one of the prerequisites for getting out of opium poppy cultivation since at least 1997. In the past, the cotton gin had its own credit system where the farmers would get a loan for fertilizer when they came in to pick up their free cotton seed, to be paid off when they brought their cotton to the gin at harvest time. This ended with the Soviet invasion.

For a change, why not try doing what the farmers have been requesting for a long time to at least reduce opium production in this region which is the country's center of opium production. The farmers would prefer to cultivate legitimate cash crops as opposed to opium which they consider an evil crop but with a reliable market. With the increasing levels of addiction among the rural population, men and women, in this province, most of the people, there would be an even greater incentive to switch, given a viable alternative.

But this would mean spending greater sums in support of some of the traditional cash crops, their markets, like cotton, and a credit system in key areas like Helmand rather than on these

huge expensive conferences in places like Vienna that result in a lot of talk about subjects that have been talked about over the past 50 years without positive results: better international police cooperation.

Focus on helping Helmand farmers to get out of the opium trade by supporting the markets for their traditional cash crops.

In recent months I had heard that the British in Helmand, the leaders in the PRT with its 100+ staff, were doing something with cotton, at least with a training program for training these long term cotton farmers how to grow cotton. They began to row/ridge plant cotton with fertilizer in the early 1970s with the help of a Texas agriculture extension agent on loan to USAID. Only in Nawa (Shamalan) had the farmers continued to broadcast plant cotton and corn together into the mid-2000s as a hot season crop, the corn being cut at an early stage as fodder for their cows. This results in a very low cotton yield.

In a series of recent exchanges with DFID personnel in both Helmand and London, I learned that:

“In recent years, the PRT has done a number of studies on the cotton sector in Helmand. Building on this research and various activities in the sector, the cotton ‘value chain’ is one of several the PRT and local stakeholders are examining to identify appropriate and locally led interventions to create jobs and sustainable economic growth. Work on this, whilst underway, is at an early stage. Once possible interventions have been designed and costed, and a suitable local lead identified and in place, the PRT will seek to draw upon the resources of the represented donors to support associated activities.” (personal communication via email from DFID London, 9 Feb 12)

i.e., This means no action has been taken in support of the obvious and still functioning cotton industry.

SUMMARY:

We continue to fund at great cost international counter-narcotics conferences and other irrelevant projects, irrelevant to the farmers of central Helmand, and continue to ignore and do nothing effective to reduce or eliminate opium poppy cultivation in this key agricultural region of central Helmand. When??

HELLO?

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 and again, the ever increasing 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 **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 focused on supporting the legal cash crop economy.

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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, 2004-05.