

15 MAY 2014

HELMAND FOLLOW UP XXXXI:

POPPY HARVEST SEASON IS HERE AGAIN

WHAT NEXT WITH OUR FAILED COUNTER NARCOTICS PROJECTS??

**Richard B. Scott
Helmand Analyst**

This year's opium poppy crop in Helmand is being harvested. The U.S. and British military occupation forces in Helmand are perhaps in their final year, closing down bases and reducing troop numbers. Opium poppy cultivation, sales and local addiction is increasing each year. DEA personnel have been reduced by half. And the media has again taken an interest in the issue. The various key people associated with our past failed counter narcotics programs continue to voice support but predict that it will take another decade or two to address the issue, assuming an effective non-corrupt Afghan government...a big assumption.

UNODC Executive Director Yury Fedotov (Russian) said in a foreword to their most recent annual report, "The figures make clear that efforts to address the root causes of (opium) cultivation and promote alternative development need to be stepped up"

Senator Dianne Feinstein, D-California and chair of the Senate caucus on international narcotics control recently stated, "As the Obama administration plans its military presence in the country, counter-narcotics must not be relegated to the back burner," (Newsweek 9 Jan 14)

Jean-Luc Lemahieu, outgoing head of UNODC Afghanistan, indicated that "If no appropriate action is taken, then Afghanistan runs the risk of becoming a fragmented criminal state, ruled by an illicit economy... Yet if one moves too fast, in the belief that fast-track immediate solutions are within reach, one may end up doing more harm than good...We need to be persistent. Political courage is required and supporting those who want to make a change...understanding that real solutions are feasible."(The Guardian 5 Jan 14)

While I tend to agree with the implied goals of the above statements, I wonder where they and their numerous organizations have been for the past 12+ years during the institutionalization of the drug trade in at least Helmand. Senator Feinstein must have been aware of the developments through USAID, DEA, INL and the numerous contractors who have been working there.... and spending the billions without effect. The US counter narcotics effort in Helmand has been a complete failure. The focus has apparently been on spending the over-budgeted funds rather than on results. So what's new??

The Kandahar Counter Narcotics Office Director, Gul Mohammad Shukran, is planning a repeat of the failed eradication program without first offering an alternative agricultural economy to the farmers. “We are planning to start our campaign against drug and poppy farms in Zharay, Maiwand, Panjway and Shahwalikot districts of Kandahar in the coming days. We want to storm the farms with the help of security organs very soon,” (Shanghai Daily 22 April 14) As in the past, this should increase bribes for the police in the “stormed” districts. Eradication should be done at planting time rather than near harvest time when it has become a high value crop, discussed below.

Perhaps the most comprehensive statement on the present state of the counter narcotics effort comes from John F. Spoko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 15 Jan 14, when he concludes to the Senate, “I am very worried about the growing threat that opium production poses to Afghanistan’s future. Poppy cultivation is expanding and the narcotics trade is undermining the overall U.S. mission to build a stable Afghanistan able to defend itself and prevent terrorist groups from establishing sanctuaries.”

“I am also very concerned that the United States has not made counternarcotics a top reconstruction priority in this critical year of transition. Neither the United States nor the Afghan government seems to have a clear, prioritized strategy to effectively combat the narcotics trade today much less after 2014.”

Various critics have pointed out that wheat cannot compete with poppy for income (which is correct) by comparing the price of a kg. of wheat with a kg. of opium but it takes considerable more crop land to produce a kg. of opium than wheat. (i.e., not a logical argument.) Similar comparisons have been made with the amount of hand labor needed for opium poppy (a labor intensive crop) with wheat. But few of the reconstruction/counter-narcotics projects have focused on the need to have an integrated effort that include:

- Keeping the very large agricultural labor force at work on a regular basis for pay. The most obvious focus for this would be on the largest modern irrigation system in the country (central Helmand) that requires continuous maintenance. Some of the short term quick impact hand labor efforts funded by the military did work on the irrigation systems but on short term bases. But large irrigation systems require CONTINUOUS MAINTENANCE and the large available hand labor force should be organized around such a program. (To my knowledge this has not be tried.) In the distant past, the 1970s when the system was at maximum production of cash crops, including wheat, cotton, corn and mung bean, most of this maintenance work was performed with heavy equipment by HACU, the construction unit centered in Chah-i-Anjir originally organized by Morrison Knutsen Construction (MKA) at the time of their departure in about 1958. But as demonstrated in at least two of the early alternative income/reconstruction projects in 1998 and 2002 (see my website for the final reports) most of this maintenance work can be done effectively and inexpensively by hand labor using picks and shovels. Keep the local people working!**

- **Supporting the production and marketing of the region's traditional cash crops like cotton which is a labor intensive cash crop, the farmers understand, prefer and continue to cultivate, and for which has a traditional central marketing point at the government cotton gin in Lashkar Gah that can set a reasonable (for the farmers) fixed price for the raw cotton, provide free cotton seed to insure top quality cotton for the international market, process the cotton into bales and find the best price on the international market...with some needed technical assistance. The gin was built by the British in about 1965 and performed all these functions until the Soviet invasion. Since 2002 the cotton gin and the cotton industry has received virtually no support from the international community. Although it would appear to be one of the most obvious alternative cash crops to opium poppy.**

It should be noted that since at least 2003 Helmand farmers have pressed for support for the cotton industry, including a cotton committee that went to Kabul to ask for higher prices for their cotton; rejected. And at least until the recent boom in opium production of the past couple of years, the farmers continued to plant some cotton and local businessmen invested in small cotton gins in competition with the government gin, and paid higher prices for raw cotton. There is/was a cotton market.

- **Initiating a public information program from the government (which must not be corrupt and involved in the opium trade) to convince the farmers to get out of opium production with promises and actions in support of legitimate cash crops with good prices, long term alternative income projects working on their own irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it, for pay. And threats of opium poppy eradication for those who continue to cultivate. The key is that all promises and threats must be put into action before or soon after the poppy planting season in the fall.**
- **Initiating an uncorrupt and effective eradication program soon after planting season for those who do not listen and plant poppy. As previously noted, poppy fields can be identified at planting time because at least in Helmand the poppy fields' configuration differ from wheat fields, the other fall planted crop. This allows the farmers time to replant with wheat or wait for the March-April planting of cotton or peanuts. The eradication efforts initiated by the government since 2002 have delayed eradication until near harvest time as a punishment. The farmers and their sharecroppers have invested much time and money in the crop by this time making bribing the eradication teams a necessity.**

The Russians continue to criticize the US inability to curb the Afghan drug trade after 12+ years and \$7.5 billion spent in the process. They insist that an

effective eradication program is the answer. But it must be remembered that opium poppy moved into the central Helmand irrigation system during the Soviet occupation and eradication alone is not farmer friendly.

The counter narcotics integrated program I have been proposing for the past 12 years must be farmer friendly to be effective, not just eradication. We had an effective start in Nad-i-Ali in 2002 before funding was cut. (see my website for the final report on this effort.)

With the planned withdrawal of the international military forces and the reduction of spending on “reconstruction” is it too late to attempt an effective integrated counternarcotics program in this region that produces so much of Afghanistan’s opium? Perhaps. But it is never too late to try. With the coming of a new government and hopefully a turn over of key personnel at the provincial level, it may be possible. Wheat prices are hitting highs on the international market and the farmers must be uncertain about what the new government might do with the illegal opium industry. There was a drop in opium poppy cultivation in the Helmand hill country for one crop season when the strict nationalist Daoud came to power apparently based on uncertainty.

I propose that USAID/INL/DEA and the remainder of the military forces (only as a potential threat) plan and fund a comprehensive integrated project to be initiated this summer focused on just one of the central Helmand districts like Nad-i-Ali with an experienced Helmand Afghan NGO as key initiators and monitors. The police should focus on taking out the key organizers and buyers of the local drug trade at least in this district, which has not been happening. There are few secrets in these rural communities so these key individuals should be easily identified.

It is my understanding that the British have been the primary military occupational force in Nad-i-Ali since 2006 and it is unclear how many of these troops will remain after the present drawdown. Certainly numbers of farmers and their families have been killed during this period which will have won no friends. This plus the large expansion of deep well irrigated poppy plots to the north and west of Nad-i-Ali on the desert side of the Boghra canal will complicate initiating the proposed project. This expansion was the result of the pressure exerted on poppy growers by the “food zone” project inside Nad-i-Ali. Apparently the “food zone” project was relatively successful within the district resulting in few observable fields of poppy this season. If correct, the farmers would be more amenable to the proposed project. As previously noted, these farmers are not bad people but are some of most successful cash crop farmers in the country that remain very aware of the various agricultural markets and respond accordingly.

I agree that a counter narcotics program should be planned and initiated in the very near future and the best time to initiate such a program is in the summer before opium poppy planting season, beginning with the information program. First talk, warn and promise, assuming there will be a follow up to accomplish what is

promised...and this would include announcing a higher price to be paid by the government cotton gin for raw cotton during the information program, a higher price than that paid by the local gins that would give the farmers a good profit, keeping in mind that the project is in competition with a well established opium poppy industry. The US subsidizes the US cotton industry. Why not subsidize the relatively small Helmand cotton industry as a needed counter narcotics action??

All of these elements should have been supported in 2002 instead of cutting funding of the successful start up in Nad-i-Ali followed by massive ineffective spending. And with proper supervision, it would not have cost \$7.5 billion. (Again, see my website.)

I agree that counter narcotics should be given “top reconstruction priority in this critical key year of transition” and must not be “relegated to the back burner”. And yes “we need to be persistent” but we need to do it right or not at all, and stop wasting money on things the farmers consider irrelevant.

Will it happen? Not likely. After twelve plus years, the national and international counter narcotics agencies have proven their inability or unwillingness to do the obvious to address the politically, economically and culturally very important opium poppy issue. Talk is cheap and easy. Much depends on what happens with the coming choice of the new Afghan president and what happens with the resulting local governments.

And again after 15+ years of participating in, observing, reading about and writing about what has and has not been happening in Helmand relative to opium poppy, and offering to help plan, organize and field an effective counter narcotics program in Helmand, I remain frustrated by the accumulated insanity and double talk. When are we going to start doing something right in Helmand relative to the opium poppy industry?? Is it too late??

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 or in my website noted below. And I appreciate any and all feedback.

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

Scott’s Helmand and USAID 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, 2004-05.

END