

10 December 2017

Helmand Follow Up XXXXIII

Another Opium High for Afghanistan

And Next Year's Crop is Planted

Richard B. Scott

Helmand Analyst

The media appears to have taken another renewed interest in Afghanistan and the increased opium production this past year (2017) with the most recent UNODC and the Afghan Ministry of counter-narcotics annual narcotics reports. While opium production increased some 43% in 2016, it increased a whopping 87% in 2017 with an apparent increase of 15% in yields and by some 63% increase in land planted. Needless to say, 87% is a major increase in this illegal crop. There is much speculation on how this has occurred by the fact that in the past few years the farmers' poppy fields have been plagued by disease and bad weather increasing farmers' debt, pushing them into planting more acreage. In addition, opium has spread big time through the northern provinces, many of which have been opium free in the past. For example, the provinces of Jowzjan and Balkh have increased some 691 and 481 percent in production this past year.

And as has been noted, the Food Zone Project in the central Helmand irrigation system pushed opium cultivation out of this area and into neighboring previously unfarmed/unirrigated desert areas where opium poppy cultivation is not prohibited. This move required drilling deep wells for irrigation as the region gets only some 4 inches of rain a year, hardly enough to grow weeds. The 15% increase in yields might be the result of the introduction of the reported new "Chinese seed" but there is little first-hand field reporting on the results these seeds, mostly hear-say.

While there has been research on these farmers' move into this desert area and the changes made from the costly diesel-powered water pumps to the cheaper solar powered pumps, little has been noted about how the farmers dealt with the infertile clay desert soils with virtually no organic content and the required on-farm drainage, problems dealt with through the years by the HAVA projects of irrigation, land development and settlement just across the main canal from where they had moved. These soils were noted to have layers of salt just below the surface reducing productivity, requiring good drainage and soil leaching. But it did produce a small salt industry for some enterprising small business men who excavated the salt/dirt mixture, dissolved it in water, let the dirt settle out, then boiled away the salt water producing a marketable salt. I observed and photographed this process in the 1970s in some of what are now the newly farmed desert areas. How have the farmers dealt with this problem in these newly settled desert areas?

In the media, everybody and his dog has written an article on Afghan opium production increases over the past two years. This report draws heavily on these media reports, the UNODC and the Afghan Ministry of Counter-narcotics reports, adding little new information except for some of the conclusions and questions.

Next year's winter season poppy crop has been planted and in a week or two would have been the time to eradicate that crop, soon after germination, if there were to be, in my view, an effective counter-

narcotics program, which there is not and has not been for some 10-12 years. This early proposed eradication would be more effective. It would give these cash crop, double cropping farmers the opportunity to re-plant a legal winter crop and not lose a complete crop season. It would be a farmer-friendly act. Eradication just before harvest time, which has been the pattern in the recent years' failed counter-narcotics efforts, represents a great farmer and sharecropper economic loss, establishes a situation ripe for bribery of the eradication teams, and/or violent resistance. Not farmer friendly.

Afghanistan has long been the world's main producer of opium sometimes estimated of producing some 80 to 95 percent of the world's opium, and one province alone, Helmand province estimated to produce some 30-40 percent of the WORLD'S OPIUM. While the U.S. narcotics agencies have long insisted that little of the Afghan opium and its by-product (heroin) come into the U.S., we are in the throes of a heroin epidemic with some 10,000 Americans being killed each year by heroin overdoses. Normally Mexico is blamed as the source of U.S. heroin. But since the U.S. is one of the primary consumers of heroin, along with Iran and Russia, and Afghanistan is the primary producer, we should probably question the statements on Afghan opium by-products not finding their way into the U.S. Apparently, there is a likely opium route into/thru Canada. An estimated 90-95% of the Canadian heroin is from Afghanistan. Unlike Mexico, the Canadians rarely get blamed for anything.

You would think that the U.S. government would take some serious interest and effective action on Afghan opium production since we have spent more than \$8.5 billion on clearly failed counter narcotics projects over the past 15 years, which has been clearly monitored and documented by SIGAR. But serious interest and effective action assumes that the people in-charge know what they are doing. The opium industry amounts to a sizable percentage of the Afghan economy and is clearly the primary cash crop in areas like Helmand. Opium is at the base of much of the Afghan government corruption (one of the most corrupt governments in the world since our invasion in 2001), and it is commonly noted for being one of the primary funding sources of the Taliban insurgency. And in passing, the Taliban government successfully banned the cultivation of opium just previous to our invasion and received no foreign help in the process. Apparently, they continue to punish addicts in some regions.

While we continue to fund and support and keep in power the corrupt and failed Afghan government, which has a Ministry of Counter Narcotics that reduced opium eradication last year (2016) by 91% to only 355 hec. in 7 provinces but increased eradication this year to 750 hec. (still next to nothing overall), how can we continue to sit by and watch gross increases in the illegal opium production?

Most of our troops have been pulled out of Afghanistan but even while they were there they did little or nothing to end the opium trade. Both we and the Brits, in Helmand at least, maintained a policy of non-interference with opium production saying that if we did act, it would turn the farmers against us in support of the Taliban, ignoring the fact that our very presence there as a foreign military occupational force (replacing the Soviets) that took out their government and turned many if not most of the farmers against us. The Taliban were not generally looked down on in the rural Pashtun communities because of their conservative values which were generally shared by the local population. They were criticized in double crop cash crop areas like Helmand because of their inability to understand and function on the international agricultural markets for crops like cotton, fruit and vegetables. They were mullahs not technocrats. They were not considered corrupt but poor at governing, and they understood that they did not know what to do in many cases. They asked for help from the "west" but were generally ignored.

The fact that we united with the Northern Alliance (mostly the Afghan minorities) to take out a basically Pashtun Taliban government (originating out of Kandahar) did not help in places like Pashtun Helmand, which now seems to be the center of the Taliban movement. The start-up Afghan government was basically Northern Alliance with a nominal Pashtun president, to a great extent ignoring the dominant Pashtuns (some 40% of the population) that had united and ruled the country since the 1740s. And even today the government is headed by an ineffective split leadership structure with Ghani (a Pashtun) as president and Abdullah (considered a Tajik long associated with the Northern Alliance) as “Chief Executive”? But as some Afghan acquaintances have noted, “Afghanistan cannot be ruled by two kings”. And worse, one of the vice-presidents is an Uzbek, Dostum, who fought with the Soviets in places like Kandahar where war crimes were committed. And he and his Jowzjani troops later joined the Northern Alliance against the Taliban.

The move to bring Hikmatyar back into the government was probably a move in the right direction. Hikmatyar was the head of perhaps the most effective of the seven political parties of mujahidin that fought and drove out the Soviets. He held the office of Prime Minister under two of the failed Afghan governments before the Taliban. Hikmatyar is noted for his involvement in the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal killing thousands in Kabul alone and the elimination of his political enemies. He and his organization were designated as a terrorist group in 2003 after he initiated fighting against the Karzai government and the U.S. occupational troops. Given the effectiveness of his political organization in the past, it is likely better to have him involved in the present government than as an active enemy although he has always been xenophobic in his relations with foreign governments involved in Afghan affairs, including the U.S. even when we were supporting him against the Soviets.

Next year’s opium crop is planted. And we have yet to field an effective counter narcotics program. Last year’s AREU report by Mansfield and Fishstein. “Time to Move on Developing an Informed Development Response to Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan (October 2016)” clearly details what needs to be done and why. While we seem to have the ability to clearly monitor and analyze the opium industry in Afghanistan, we continue to fail to effectively address the problem with an effective integrated program on the ground which begins with the farmers and an effective agricultural economy minus the opium cash crop, as I have been outlining in this series of email memos since 2003.

(scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org) Most of the farmers see opium as an evil cash crop, as they see more and more of their youth and women becoming addicted to opium and heroin. But they also see opium poppy as a reliable cash crop with a good, effective market with good prices, easy access and an informal but reliable ag. credit system. And it is a crop that puts lots of people to work with planting, weeding and harvesting, a labor-intensive crop. Our failed counter-narcotics programs have been unable to compete with this now well institutionalized opium industry. We had an opportunity in 2001 to eliminate opium poppy as a key cash crop soon after Mullah Omar of the Taliban government had declared it un-Islamic and greatly reduced its cultivation. But we failed and allowed a very corrupt government (including the police and army), which we put in place and continue to support, to become key actors in the opium trade, along with the Taliban.

So, when are we and/or the local government going to start doing the right things to get Afghanistan out of the opium trade? Some have suggested that the Afghan opium should be declared a legal crop and put on the legal international market. But the experience in Turkey where opium has long been a legal cash crop, suggests that the policing opium as a legal crop is a difficult process even where the government is much more organized and honest than the chaos of modern Afghanistan, and as long as

there is a well-established international illegal market willing to pay high prices. Some others have suggested that our failure to address the opium issue is the result of self-interest, that some organizations like the CIA and/or our military also profit from the opium industry. Let us hope not!

With all due respect (i.e. None) our failed attempts at counter-narcotics in Afghanistan has to be the result of complete incompetence of the involved organizations, corruption, the inability to work with the farmers, an inflexible police/punishment orientation or elements of all of the above.

This coming year's opium crop is planted and the combination of the very corrupt Afghan government and the Taliban in support of the now well institutionalized opium industry, it is likely we will have another record year of opium production. Other than some police actions and eradication, which is not likely, it is too late to field an effective counter-narcotics program this year.

With the planned re-introduction of our military into the country, there will be some uncertainty in the minds of the farmers as to its possible effects on the opium industry. The farmers will be watching. Will our military remain passive, as in the past, vis-à-vis this massive increase in opium production or will they become active participants in an effective counter-narcotics program? Presently the policy seems to be to bomb the heroin processing labs and try to catch some of the smugglers moving heroin to the neighboring countries. But with the local government and the Taliban supporting the well-established industry, these actions, as in the past, will not have much effect.

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 the reduction in the increased hostilities in the region, which may be a prerequisite to an effective program. All these issues are inter-related. I would be happy to help plan and organize the actions I have been proposing for the past 15+ years: a broad scoped integrated program. Take a look at my often-repeated proposed counter-narcotics program in my website, as suggested by some of the farmers in Nad-i-Ali where it briefly worked in 2002, reducing opium cultivation by 85% in that one crop year before funds were cut and opium returned the following year. (Nad-i-Ali is a district of some 30,000 acres of irrigated land mostly developed and settled between 1950-79.)

LET US DO SOMETHING EFFECTIVE FOR A CHANGE! WE HAVE ALREADY WASTED SOME \$8.5 BILLION ON FAILED EFFORTS. LET US TRY SOMETHING THAT WAS SUGGESTED BY THE FARMERS...IF IT IS NOT TOO LATE.

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/Afghanistan, Project Manager, Helmand Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, 1998-99.

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

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

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