

SUBJECT: DISASTER RELIEF IN SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN: A LARGE FOOD-FOR-WORK PROJECT FOCUSED ON THE REHABILITATION OF THE CENTRAL HELMAND IRRIGATION SYSTEM

SUMMARY: The international response to the drought in Afghanistan provides an opportunity to both deliver disaster relief and to accomplish much needed development/rehabilitation work on the central Helmand irrigation system. This would be accomplished with an extensive hand-labor food-for-work project. The project would address the most important drought related issues in the region and accomplish needed productive work:

1. The project would put thousands (up to 10,000) of drought victims to work (both farmers and nomads) earning a livelihood during this period of crop failures in much of the country.
2. The project would increase agriculture productivity in central Helmand with the rehabilitation of the irrigation system. With the drought, grain prices will increase, even in the context of the increased international grain supplies arriving in the country, motivating farmers to shift more land to wheat.
3. The rehabilitation of the central Helmand irrigation system would result in more double cropping (food production) during the hot season. The constricted flow of water through the system due to silting has reduced double cropping in this season when more water is needed due to higher evaporation rates. The main crops during this season are: corn (the preferred bread in this region), mung bean, melon, some vegetables, and the cash crops of peanut and cotton.
4. Although not a primary goal of this disaster relief/irrigation rehabilitation project, it would allow a continuing dialogue with farmers and the Taliban on the necessary relationship between development projects, international aid and opium poppy elimination as a cash crop. An agreement on the continued poppy ban between all parties would be a pre-requisite for this project.

The work would be implemented and monitored by a combination of international and Afghan NGO's with experience and contacts in the region and organized, coordinated and monitored by unaffiliated coordinator/monitors. It would require the support of the WFP for the wheat payments of the labor, and interested donors for the needed cash inputs for technical staff and equipment. The work force would be organized through the indigenous system of local water masters who know the irrigation system, its needs and the systems of village organization.

BACKGROUND: Central Helmand, with the Boghra canal and its tributaries, is the largest irrigation system in Afghanistan. It gets its water from the Helmand River that represents 40 percent of the total surface water of the country. Except for winter seasonal

periodic floods, the Helmand water comes from the central Afghanistan snow pack starting in the mountains behind Kabul. As long as there are winter snows at the higher altitudes and a snow pack, the people of central Helmand will produce bumper crops of wheat as they did during the drought of 1971-72.

But the central Helmand irrigation system has seen virtually no maintenance or repair work for the past 20 years with the exception of some 5 months work in 1998-99. There are years of work needed to return the system to anything approaching its original condition of 1979. Work is still needed on the Boghra canal, the primary water way. The untouched secondary canals like the Shamalan, the S-10.7 lateral and the multitude of others remain badly silted. Virtually all of the main and secondary drains require desilting. In areas where there is adequate water, water logging is an increasing problem resulting from the blocked drains.

Central Helmand has been and remains a major center for fall and winter through spring agriculture labor migration. At least for several decades (since the construction of the central Helmand irrigation system by the U.S. beginning in 1946) farm labor has been drawn from the foothill and mountainous regions to the north, e.g., Ghor, Oruzghan, etc. into central Helmand with its larger land holdings, double cropping and cash crops. The mountain regions depend on rain and korez water for their farms that have generally failed this drought stricken year. And central Helmand along the canal system is a primary wintering ground for Pashtun sheep herding nomads, many of whom lost their sheep herds to the drought this year. In short, it is a traditional center for the migration of people who are hardest hit by the drought. We should expect this farm labor movement to increase this winter work season with people who face crop failure this year. There is no way to predict how long the drought will last but programs, like this one, should be put in place to absorb this labor force and to address problems resulting from the drought.

This past April, when the results of the drought were already apparent to the people from the mountainous and foothill regions, the bazaars in central Helmand were flooded with farm labor looking for work. The chief water master for Nad-i-Ali commented that all you had to do was feed the migrants to get day labor, i.e., there was an over-supply of labor.

WHAT: The focus of the work for this project would be the rehabilitation and repair of the central Helmand irrigation system: the Boghra canal, its tributaries and the drainage system. Some highly visible, needed regional sub-projects, like the repair of the Chan-i-Anjir suspension footbridge would also be accomplished: projects needed by the people, good for public relations and with minor costs.

WHO: The people from the drought related crop failure areas and the nomads need help in the form of disaster relief but not necessarily in the form of free feeding programs. Except in situations of immediate starvation, free food sets a poor precedent. There is already an established pattern of agriculture labor migration from the drought stricken areas into central Helmand that will likely explode this winter work season. An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 families of nomads are already there. Both groups worked during the

winter of 1998-99 on the MCI/HAFO irrigation rehabilitation project focused on the Boghra canal, up to 3,000 men working per day. The central Helmand farmers, the migrant labor, the nomads and the Taliban are now well aware of what can be accomplished by well managed hand labor. It is a matter of organization, management and payment.

Most of this rehabilitation work can be done with the hand labor noted above. It would keep people working that are noted for their industriousness with picks and shovels: up to two cubic meters of silt moved per man per day. They would be supervised through the indigenous system of water masters that are already responsible for water distribution and minor maintenance. This indigenous organization would be technically managed through a group of NGO engineers, some with engineering degrees from Kabul University, some with technical school diplomas in engineering. All that worked on the 1998-99 MCI/HAFO project were highly motivated and all had solid technical skills.

Some of the deep drains would be easier cleaned using the limited number of old draglines and backhoes in the HAVA heavy equipment yard. The heavy equipment excavation would be followed by hand labor for final touches. Most of this equipment is either from the U.S. in the 1950's (reconditioned in the 1970's) or from the USSR in the 1970's. It breaks down frequently but the old U.S. trained mechanics keep it running. HAVA rental costs for this equipment is minimal relative to anywhere else in the world. Other HAVA heavy equipment, e.g., bulldozers, loaders and dump trucks, all in marginal working condition, could be rented for other sorts of irrigation system repairs, e.g., breaks in irrigation channel and drain channel walls and embankments. And virtually all such work would require hand labor backup and follow up.

Helmand Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA) has an archive with virtually all the original construction designs and drawings for the central Helmand irrigation system, with a custodian who protected the files throughout the war. He could use a new blueprint copy machine and supplies but can reproduce copies using the sun. Copies from these files would be used in the field for reference for original technical specifications.

WHEN: The work on the irrigation system is best accomplished in winter when the irrigations system can be shut down, irrigation water not being needed at that time. The drainage work is best accomplished during the warmer months because the workers normally have to stand in shallow water. The heavy equipment work can be done at any time of year. This project can be working year around.

WOMEN: The women and children of the households of the workers would benefit from the project in the form of food security, a basic. The women would not be expected to participate in the heavy manual labor involved. The sexual division of labor in this rural society, as in most societies, does not generally expect heavy manual labor from its women. Their views would be solicited, if indirectly, on the location and nature of improvements of washing platforms along the canals and drains which presently tend to be rather crude cuts in the embankments.

POPPY: Although this project is focused primarily on keeping the regional people at work earning a livelihood on a productive enterprise in response to widespread crop failure in parts of the region, and increasing food production in central Helmand while much of the country faces food shortages, the politics and economics of poppy production cannot be ignored. A continuous dialogue must accompany all development and disaster relief activities in the region about the evils of poppy and the necessity to eliminate this cash crop from the region. The central Helmand farmers and the Taliban have been asking for help with the rehabilitation of the irrigation system for at least four years as a prerequisite for poppy elimination. They know the evils of poppy. They need other help as well with replacement cash crops that are already in place but this project is a major step and lever to solve the problem. Mullah Omer has been making pronouncements about poppy reduction and elimination. The poppy ban for this year seems to be holding. This project, with dialogue and pressure, could tip the scale.

SUMMARY: The goals of disaster relief for a large segment of southern Afghanistan can be accomplished through an extensive food-for-work project focused on the repair and rehabilitation of the central Helmand irrigation system. This project would provide food security and work for thousands of families on a continuous basis from the foothill and mountainous regions in and north of Helmand and for regional nomads, all of who have been hit by the drought. This work force represents a traditional pattern of farm labor migration into central Helmand that should be expected to explode this winter work season vis-à-vis crop failures in the region. The rehabilitation work would result in an increase in food grain production (food for other regions of the country) and set the stage for the elimination of poppy as a cash crop in the region. The people are there, the irrigation system is there, water is there, and the needed work is there. The proposed project would pull it all together with positive and rewarding results.

OCTOBER 2000

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