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From: Richard B. Scott
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Subject: Action on the Poppy Ban

I have studied your recent interview with Ray Suarez of P.B.S. with interest and some disappointment. With the new administration we have had the opportunity to establish a new working relationship with the Taliban based on positive, productive dialogue not provocation, threats and insults, but, apparently, we are following the previous policies.

Again, I request that we take this opportunity to recognize and support the opium poppy ban (the most outstanding international action the Taliban have taken) to establish a new, positive working relationship with the Taliban that will also allow us to address some of the problems of mutual interest, i.e. Bin Laden and women.

TALIBAN GOVERNMENT: I do not agree with your statement about the Taliban inability to govern. At the provincial level, in Helmand at least, they appear to be doing a reasonable job. They do respond well to local needs and political reality. As in the past, the governor's office is always crowded with farmers and others with local petitions and problems to be solved. This could be a scene out of the Arabian Nights or more recently, Helmand in the 1970's when I was there. In Pashtun society, everyone has the opportunity to air his grievances and/or to have a hearing. The governors door is always open - grassroots good government - by Pashtun standards.

Also while there, I witnessed the authorities taking out illegal water outlets (pipes and water pumps) off the Boghra canal, the largest irrigation system in the country, that had been in use for years. It would not have been allowed in the 1970's under our (U.S.A.) projects in the area and it was not allowed to continue under the Taliban. It was a mis-use of water and deprived the legitimate farmers on the system in this desert area of the much-needed water. The action took some land out of production that had been farmed for up to 10 years and was an unpopular but necessary action to take. It is an example of a hard political decision - but good government.

As government, the Taliban have their limitations. The men filling the key positions as governor and head of HAVA (irrigation system management), for example, have virtually no training for their jobs. They are not diplomats,

bureaucrats, technocrats, irrigation engineers or administrators. Most are Kandahari, Pashtun mullahs trying to do the jobs they have been given to the best of their abilities. The ones I have met are quite intelligent and dedicated to do a good job but admit that they do not have the trained skills to do their jobs. Since my contact with the Taliban in Helmand in 1997, they have consistently been asking for help - not just funding - but technical help and direction. They appear to know and understand their limitations. And the international community has fallen short in giving any help. My experience in working with the Taliban in Helmand on a daily basis during the winter of 1989-99 was that they listened, judged, and took action even if it meant some changes. They were not inflexible in the context of positive dialogue.

In this context, we are missing an opportunity to make some of the changes, to have some influence on developments in Afghanistan. We tend to very critical of the Taliban and their actions and decisions but have not taken the opportunity to influence them. Provocative actions, threats, and confrontation are not the way to influence the Taliban/Pashtuns. The dumping of "humanitarian aid" into the area at whatever rate is not the way to influence the Taliban/Pashtuns. But a close working relationship with positive, productive dialogue on a continuous basis is the needed method. The building of a trusting relationship is needed and it is missing in the contest of the present limited exchanges. We must work with them, not try to force them to think like us. They do not think like us.

On the international scene, the Taliban's ban of the production of opium poppy is perhaps one of the most significant anti-narcotics acts any country in the world has been able to accomplish. And this includes anything we have been able to do in U.S. narcotics control. This was done without the expenditure of millions of dollars for weaponry and enforcement but with words...a decree. Impossible but it happened. And the international community has just barely given this action recognition and a few meaningless nods.

POPPY: Scott Baldauf of the Christian Science Monitor (2 April 01) has just picked up on the significance of the poppy ban in the Nangahar area. Unfortunately he did not go to Helmand, the center of opium poppy production in Afghanistan. Perhaps the rest of the international media will pick up on the meaning of what has happened. The farmers need help to make this transition from opium poppy to other crops. Wheat is not an economical alternative to poppy.

We have an opportunity to respond to the opium poppy ban, as it deserves, and to use this opportunity to establish a close working relationship with the Taliban that will have broader implications of influence and change. But this response, this action is needed now, not six months from now. The farmers must understand that the world is aware of their sacrifice and is willing to help. And this action need not be an earth shaking response to solve all the opium poppy

farmers' needs, which is not possible on the short term, but at least a gesture of recognition and response to what the farmers have accomplished. The limited response would be subject to criticism because it would not meet all the farmers needs but it would be better than nothing - which seems to be the present situation.

The wheat crop that was planted instead of the opium poppy crop is maturing and will be harvested next month. Alternative crops like melon, cotton, and peanut will be going in some areas this month before the wheat comes off. The farmers will have left some of these fields fallow for early planting of the alternatives. But these crops and vegetables can also be planted after wheat harvest. In short, action is needed now.

I have outlined a response in past communications and in more detail to Mr. Richard Adams at State/INL/South Asia. A positive action can be in the form of good quality vegetable seed for sale/distribution at reasonable prices so that everyone can participate. Peanut and winter vegetable seed can also be included. I have offered to make the seed purchase from a reliable seed company out of California that we used in 1999. I can organize and manage the seed distribution project in the field and initiate the opening dialogue with the Taliban and the farmers in Helmand within this month. It is possible but the timing is crucial. All that is needed is a limited amount of funding.

Are we going to recognize and support the opium poppy ban with at least a gesture or let it pass? I would be happy to discuss this project with anyone interested in making a change in Afghan relations.

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