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James Wedburg, Assistant Program Officer

R. B. Scott, Program Analyst

Herds, Pastures, and Nomads in the Lashkar Gah Area

INTRODUCTION

USAID as well as the ROA is frequently in need of accurate information of all sorts on which to make realistic decisions on projects, programs, and plans. Reliable information, however, is rarely available. This is especially true of information on the patterns of life of the people as they directly relate to projects. The purpose of this memo is to outline as clearly as possible, given a limited amount of time to collect the information, the socio-cultural context of nomadic sheepherding in the Helmand Valley, specifically in the region of Lashkar Gah. This memo does not pretend to be conclusive, but a beginning. This region is a major wintering-over area for numerous tribes and sub-tribes, and has become more important for these groups in recent years vis-a-vis drought conditions that have reduced available natural desert pastures forcing the herders to take refuge in the artificial environment associated with the canals and drains of the massive irrigation system.

Considering the major role the nomads play in the total livestock picture of the Helmand Valley, and so the economy, it can be concluded that, in terms of funded projects and government action, more attention should be paid to their conditions. The first step in this process is the collection of information. The information to be reported in this paper was mostly collected during late winter and spring, 1972, but was supplemented by further information collected during the fall and winter of 1972-73. It was collected during relatively short field visits to various camps, wells, and pasture sites in the area and illustrates the sort of information that can be collected (and its uses), with a minimum of effort and time. No major obstacles were met in the collection of the information. Hopefully, some of this information may help pin-point some potential problem areas associated with the recent drought conditions. A large portion of this paper was written in November 1972 but was never put in final form.

Location: To get a picture of the context of nomad sheepherding activities in this area, it is necessary to understand the range of choice of camping areas available to these seasonal residents -- the subject of this paper.

On Government Land: One of these choices is to camp and pasture on government land, frequently but not always areas planted in trees, where the nomads may or may not pay the government for grazing and camping rights. An official statement was not sought for such arrangements. These areas offer grazing along the numerous drains and canals as well as on grasses produced by irrigation system seepage, and the watering of the tree planted areas. Groups were questioned in an area between Nad-i-All and Marja. Some stated that they paid 10 afs. per head per season for grazing rights. Other groups said they paid by the camp unit. The actual arrangements were not clear but apparently there has been a greater demand for such camp-grazing sites over the past 3-4 years due to the gradual loss of natural desert pastures in the drought. Several of the groups questioned stated that their traditional camping areas were on desert wells in the region to which they planned to return after 1972's extraordinary rainfall. Several other groups indicated that they, for the first time were coming into the Helmand for winter camping. Their usual winter areas were as distant as Farah and southern Herat. Whether the drought produced permanent changes in some groups' migratory patterns is unknown.

There were some hints that this recent shifting of camping patterns was affecting the health of the herds; this being aside from the losses resulting from the lack of pasturage. It has long been noted that herds grazed in the marshes, and along the system of canals and drains, are infected with liver fluke. There was an outbreak of Black's disease in 1971-72 in the Darweshan area. Virtually every camp group questioned indicated some level of infection with liver fluke. Among the groups that had only recently moved in from traditional desert grazing areas, there were statements that before this move there had been no such infection. With the return of the herds to these traditional desert pastures, many made this return during the fall of 1972, they will carry the liver fluke with them, the infection being permanent. Whether the conditions are right to generate a Black's disease outbreak is not known, i. e., the presence of the vectors necessary for the disease cycle. There is a potential, however, and could be realized between the return of the nomads into the region beginning in early September, and the beginning of the cold weather in November-December. A relatively close monitoring of the situation should be maintained during these warm months, especially with the desert camped groups who may not be in a position to report on outbreaks of disease due to physical isolation or social distance between themselves and government agents.