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Alfredo Witschi-Cestari
U.N. Coordinator for Afghanistan
Islamabad, Pakistan

Dear Sir:

As a result of my recent visit to Lashkar Gah and the Helmand irrigation system where I had many discussions with farmers and officials alike, combined with my 8 years of experience in the area before the war, I concluded that a more focused, structured and coordinated development effort is required in the rehabilitation of the Helmand irrigation system (those areas irrigated from the Boghra Canal) if there is to be any hope of having an impact on the reduction and elimination of opium poppy production under present political conditions. I would like to share with you some of my ideas on this issue.

The opium poppy crop expansion in the Helmand region is of great interest to UNDCP and the other national and international narcotics agencies but it is also an issue that can be addressed by UNDP as a development issue...which it is. The rehabilitation of the Helmand irrigation system and opium poppy crop reduction are very closely inter-related problems, and poppy crop reduction will not precede the irrigation system rehabilitation.

The poppy crop development in Helmand is a response to an infrastructure and economic problem from the farmers point of view. (See my slightly more detailed explanation in the attached "OUTLINE PROPOSAL...") This has combined with a very active unofficial poppy crop extension activity funded by the buyers who commonly pay for at least part of the crop in advance. Because of the lack of funding for the region's traditional legal cash crop (cotton) extension activity, combined with a deteriorating irrigation system, opium poppy production is rapidly expanding. An integrated, if small, start-up development effort must focus on the geographic areas with the greatest potential for success (not traditional poppy growing areas like Sangin), the donors must closely coordinate their funding to insure focus, and the Afghan government organizations responsible for the operation and maintenance of the irrigation system (HVA/HCU) must be supported and brought into the required planning and implementation effort. At present, development funds are being spent in the region but tend not to be

focused. HVA/HCU are generally not being involved in the development efforts with funds being channeled through NGOs.

Funds from a variety of sources are being expended in the Helmand region in an attempt to address the infrastructure and the opium poppy problems. These funds need to be coordinated and focused if impact is desired. The U.N. or some other national organization could be the coordinating/organizing agency but the funding and actions need focus. There appears to be no plan or integrated strategy among the donors. This conclusion was drawn on the basis of what was observed in the field.

NGOs are being utilized to implement these scattered efforts...scattered perhaps because the NGOs appear to be the initiators of the frequently small sub-projects with limited focus geographically or in terms of strategic planning. NGOs tend to focus on targets of opportunity that donors are likely to support rather than on key parts of an over all plan. In several cases, NGOs are attempting to address major engineering/infrastructure issues with limited technical skills. There are examples of failed structures and patch-up infrastructure efforts through the area. Failed structures represent wasted development funds and do not give the farmers great confidence in the implementing agencies. There appears to be very limited if any coordination or communications between the NGOs functioning in the area., which is understandable. They are competitors for the limited funding available. If they would coordinate their activities and combine their available skills, they would have a better chance of success but the funding for a particular project would be divided.

There appears to be limited or no attempt to coordinate, work with, support or help re-develop the Afghan government organizations that in fact control water distribution through the system and do some limited maintenance on it. This pattern is perhaps a residual from the war years when the NGOs could not work with the "central government" in Kabul, and presently with the Taliban Movement which is generally not recognized and to some degree ignored. The Taliban need support and help. They know that they need support and help. By training and experience, the Taliban are neither administrators nor technicians. I found them to be very receptive to suggestions and very helpful with my visit. I do not believe they would be difficult to work with in implementing the proposed actions. They would likely be very easily involved in the over all activity. They must become involved in this development activity for it to be a success. They are aware of the relationship between the deterioration of the irrigation system and the increase in poppy production. Potential for flexibility? The Governor of Helmand very quickly approved my request through the president of HVA to do a complete photo reconnaissance of the Boghra Canal region, Nad-i-Ali, Marja, Chan-i-anjir, Shamalan, and related areas.

I had discussions with both Mr. A.M.W. Geddes of UNDCP and Mr. R. James McHugh of U.S. Narcotics Affairs about my conclusions and offered an outline of

a focused strategy that I strongly feel will work. I have enclosed a copy of this outline for your consideration. I have attempted not to repeat here some of the details of the strategy outlined in the attached proposal. I have also enclosed a variety of other correspondence and reports that reflect my long term interest in the area and my orientations. I would have liked to have discussed this and other related issues with you during my visit to the area. Nancy Dupree, a long term friend, had attempted to help me make the contact with you. We were unsuccessful in catching you in Islamabad. I visit Pakistan about two times a year on business and would hope to meet with you on my next trip.

I propose a planning/coordinating office be established in the old HVA building in Lashkar Gah. It is damaged but still in use and has plenty of un-used office space. The proposed activities and actions cannot effectively be planned, initiated, implemented or monitored from Kandahar. The responsibilities of this office, working in close collaboration with the HVA/HCU officials and staff, would be as outlined below and in the accompanying proposal document:

- Develop a strategic plan for the initial phases of the Helmand irrigation system rehabilitation and poppy eradication program in collaboration with the various donors. This more detailed plan would be based on information to be gathered by this office. It is important to establish a presence in the area in close collaboration with the Taliban administrators and staff. This planning exercise in which they would be very much involved, would also be a training exercise for them.
- Act as a clearing house and approval unit for proposed development actions, ag extension/crop substitution activities, including cotton gin support actions relating to seed distribution, fertilizer loans, incentives and monitoring. This would be the coordinating effort among donors, NGOs and HVA/HCU insuring focus of the development effort.
- Act as research and evaluation unit for all developments and activities relating to the irrigation system and crops. Closely field monitor all funded activities with an eye to re-direct or eliminate project actions as required. It must be assumed that some planned and apparently feasible development actions will not work in the field and require early re-direction or termination. There is no substitute for close field monitoring of a development effort.
- Act as coordinating unit of all NGO development activities in the region insuring that donor-funded actions are focused for maximum impact, and that NGO personnel are coordinated in support of the designated activities to make best use of all available skills. This coordinating unit would not be limited to coordination through initiating group meetings and discussions but would require power to control actions and funding.

- Act as initiating unit to recruit technicians temporarily when needed skills are not available locally. It is clear that additional technical support skills are required in the region. At some point, this would also include training units brought into the area to up-grade local skill levels.
- Act to insure that HVA/HCU and other field staff maintain a continuing dialogue with the farmers of the region about opium poppy production and the development activities. It will be this staff that will organize and develop farmer agreements on opium poppy reduction before some of the activities begin. The continuing dialogue is very important to remind farmers of the agreements and to get the local reactions to the development actions and to solicit suggestions. It will be the farmers that stop cultivating opium poppy.

Working in close collaboration with HVA/HCU officials and staff assumes staff presence. Some past staff members are present in Lashkar Gah, some can be drawn back from neighboring regions and countries, some will have to be recruited. In all cases, their present symbolic salaries will require being supplemented. (HVA officials/employees were said to receive a symbolic salary of between 150 to 500 Pak. Rupees per month)

This would not involve great sums of money but it would require some...a living wage.

The Taliban must be brought into this proposed activity. If they are key actors in the activities, success is likely. If they are not key actors in the activity, as with the present development actions, success in achieving the goals is most unlikely. The impression I got from the limited contacts with Taliban during this field visit was that they would be willing to play a major role in the development and poppy eradication activities...through negotiation not enforcement.

As a side note, while visiting the HVA building in Lashkar Gah, I checked the archives room that houses all the original construction drawings and plans of the irrigation system...all in perfect condition in their filing cabinets. The original custodian remains on duty caring for this treasure of original work. The room is kept locked at times when the custodian is not on duty. He is very proud and protective of his responsibility through the years. He will be in need of blueprint supplies if development work is initiated in the region. The original drawings should never be allowed to leave the building.

But the archive room for documentation, just down the hall, was a different case. The door was not locked and was standing open... no custodian. All the window glass had been blown out by explosions. Dust covered hanging files, tables and floor. Air photos from what looked like the air survey we completed in 1973 were scattered on the floor. Just outside the door was a report written in 1947 by a Morrison-Knutson, Inc. technician. It was not clear if or how much of the original documentation remains in the room but it was considerable and in need of

preservation. If at all possible, perhaps a UN representative stationed in Kandahar could initiate action to clean and seal this room and perhaps put the drawings/plans archivist in charge of the key. He could do with a salary supplement as well. The Helmand irrigation development is perhaps the best documented set of projects in all of Afghanistan. The HVA archives are of great value for looking into the past...some things not to be repeated.

Hopefully, you will find this letter and accompanying documents both helpful and thought provoking. I would be very interested in your reactions to this proposal, still more or less in outline. As you might note, my interest in the Helmand region, its people and the U.S. past investment in the area is long term and continuing. I would be happy to follow up on suggestions.

Sincerely,

Richard B. Scott

cc: A.M.W. Geddes, UNDCP/Islamabad
R. J McHugh, USNA/Islamabad