

28 December 1998

To: Mark Pont, MCI/Quetta

From: Dick Scott, MCI/Lashkar Gah

Subject: ~~28 DEC 98 Meeting with Helmand Governor~~

We had a private meeting with the governor of Helmand province, Mullah Abdul Bahri, at about 10:30 this morning for about 45 minutes at a time his office was packed with people and others were waiting in two locations outside his office. He is clearly a very busy individual who attempts to meet the local expectations of his office, i.e., he listens to and attempts to solve local problems at all levels. As with many Taliban at this level of government, he was young (perhaps 40), interested, involved and energetic. He is apparently less politically oriented than the head of HAVA. To date no one has noted that I am an American in the context of an America that is at least critical of the Taliban.

He apparently did not meet with James McHugh in the spring but was involved with the fighting in the north at that time where he received a wound in the hand. Perhaps his deputy met with McHugh but he was unaware of the farmer agreement to reduce poppy production in exchange for Boghra rehabilitation work. He was surprised that these farmer discussions and the agreement occurred without government knowledge and participation. He suggested that in the future, the government should be involved in such agreements. Since he was not involved, he would not take any action on non-compliance. It is up to us and the farmers. He made no mention of the Mullah Omer statement on poppies for recognition.

He stressed the point that when foreign organizations work in a region, they should be in contact with the government, a point also made by Mullah Hasan of Kandahar last April. I suggested that it was a pattern that had developed in the past when there was no government. He noted that they, the Taliban, were people of action, not of the media, discussion and diplomacy. Under the Taliban, such an agreement with the farmers was possible. And if they agree, they do act. He noted that if they see real change and development, they will act against the poppy, even if they are already in bloom. He said that they had destroyed 3 heroin factories in the recent past and they could get others but he saw some justification for compensation for the destroyed property.

In the discussion of cotton as the replacement for poppy, he also noted the need for help in the international marketing of the processed crop. He said sales tended to be to Pakistani merchants, for example, but that the price paid was low and not

up to international standards. He said that cotton was a substitute for poppy but that the Taliban, given present marketing, could not pay the farmers enough for their cotton. He said, with the farmers, poppy is the crop for economic survival not for wealth. He understood the need for a credit system for fertilizer to go with the cotton. He pointed out that fertilizer was still being produced in the factory at Mazar but that because of the war, they could not move it. The road via Herat is very long and bad, and air shipment is too expensive.

Returning to the topic of foreign involvement in Afghan development, he noted that the pattern tended to be for groups and organizations to come for assessments of the situation and leave. They then return a year or two later and expect immediate action. He noted that things don't work that way. He said that the Taliban were looking for development actions to which they could and would respond. This included development actions (income producing) for poppy.