

19 Jan 99

To: Mark Pont, MCI/Quetta

From: Dick Scott, MCI/Lashkar Gah

Subject: ~~Make Hay While the Sun Shines or The Flood of Poppies~~  
in Spring 1999

I have previously noted the increase of poppy cultivation in the Nad-i-Ali area, perhaps as much as sixty percent of the cropped area. More limited visits in the Marja area suggest that poppy cultivation in that area may be limited to some ten percent of the cropped area. A visit to Aynak on 18 Jan 99 and previous visits to north Shamalan suggest that poppy cultivation there is at about 50 to 60 percent where it was limited to some 25-30 percent last year. It would appear that poppy cultivation has increased to perhaps double over last year, Marja excepted. Keep in mind that all figures represent estimates of observed fields.

In discussions with a number of farmers, some I have known for some 25 years, suggest that opium production has in fact increased greatly since last year, and the over-riding reason is the increase in the price of raw opium. Economics. They cannot pass up the opportunity to cultivate a crop that has doubled in value in one year. Since March of last year the price of raw opium has increase from some 4 to 6 million Afs.per mon (roughly 4.5 kgs.) to some 10 to 13 million Afs. at the present, depending on who you ask. The price will no doubt go higher by harvest time in April-May. This situation has apparently drawn farmers into opium production that had not previously produced opium, and other farmers to expand the amount of land in poppy.

To correct a previous statement on the timing of this increase in raw opium price, it did not occur at the time of Mullah Omer's statement on poppy eradication for international recognition in October 98 but it has been a gradual increase over the past year and has apparently followed the gradual decrease in the value of the Af. I do not have a reliable source for statistics here and depend on local memory for these statements. But if the memories are roughly correct, the price of raw opium has followed the devaluation of the Af. In short, the farmers do not watch the exchange rates. For them the increase in the value for raw opium (double) is real, although they must also see the rising prices of the commodities they buy, eg. sugar, cloth, tea, etc. In fact, the cost of raw opium for the international buyers appears to be roughly the same from a year ago. And the apparent doubling of the price paid to the farmers for raw opium has resulted in the increase in poppy cultivation.

If the limited observations in Marja reflect the real situation, according to one source, the reason is the poor drainage and the

high water table. Poppies do not like to be over-watered. Apparently opium production was poor in some areas of Marja last year due to this condition. It was said that most poppy will be observed along the roads this year that are primarily located along canal/drain service roads where drainage is better. This statement will have to be verified by more visits to the area. Almost any generalization will be wrong under some conditions.

I previously noted that poppy fields could be identified by their configuration of irrigation blocks or paddies, even when the farmers, commonly working in groups, are not in the fields weeding during this season. Wheat fields, the other main seasonal crop through the winter, are normally planted in paddies some 10 to 20 feet wide while the poppy paddies are considerably narrower, some 4 to 6 feet wide. This difference in field configuration is clear and obvious. Further it reflects the difference in irrigation practices for the two crops. More water is used in the irrigation of the wheat fields than the poppy fields, not simply because of the difference in size of the paddies but because of the time it takes for the water to spread over the different size areas. Again, poppy prefers less water than wheat and field configuration allows this to happen with flood irrigation.